The Invention of Race

An evidence-based historical essay exploring how race was constructed over time.



NO.1

Race Is a Human-Made System

Anthropologist Dr. Audrey Smedley in “Race” and the Construction of Human Identity (1998) argues that **people have not always organized humanity through fixed racial categories.**

What changed was the development of a “racial worldview” turned physical differences into assumptions about character, ability, and worth.

Race did not just describe difference. It ranked it.



Dr. Audrey Smedley
1930-2020

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NO.2

BUT RACE-MAKING BEGAN BEFORE MODERN "RACE"

The story does not begin neatly in the 1700s.

In The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages (2018), Geraldine Heng uses the term **"race-making"** to describe **the process of turning selected human differences into supposedly fundamental group identities.**

In medieval Europe, religion, ancestry, bloodlines, genealogy, physical appearance, and culture could be used to mark entire populations as fundamentally different.

Heng's argument challenges the idea that racial thinking appeared only with Atlantic slavery or Enlightenment science.

For her, the invention of race is "always a reinvention."



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NO.3

BLACKNESS **WAS NOT ABSENT** FROM MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Dr. Cord J. Whitaker, in “The Invention of Race and the Status of Blackness” (2022), argues against Heng (slide 3), stating ***Western historical narratives have often treated Black people as if they had no meaningful presence in premodern Europe.***

Whitaker points to **scholarship and bioarchaeological evidence showing African and other non-white ancestry in medieval Britain, directly challenging the idea that Blackness suddenly entered European history with modern colonialism.**

Blackness existed both symbolically and through actual Black people.

Simply his argument concludes: **Erasing Black presence also shapes how we understand race.**





NO.4

Colonialism Expanded the "Racial Worldview"

European expansion into Africa and the Americas dramatically changed the scale and power of racial classification.

Colonial societies had to explain an enormous contradiction:
How could Europeans speak increasingly about liberty, property, Christianity, and civilization while conquering Indigenous peoples, seizing land, and enslaving Africans?

Smedley argues that the racial worldview helped make these inequalities appear natural.

Physical appearance and ancestry became increasingly connected to ideas about intelligence, morality, civilization, freedom, labor, and human worth.

It became a system for explaining why some people supposedly belonged above others.





NO.5

Pseudoscience Gave Race False Authority

In 1735, Carl Linnaeus classified humanity into broad continental groups.

Later racial thinkers went further, using scientific racism and pseudoscience (fake science) to claim that racial differences were biological, inherited, and measurable.

A human-made hierarchy was falsely presented as nature.



Carl Linnaeus
1707-1778

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NO.6

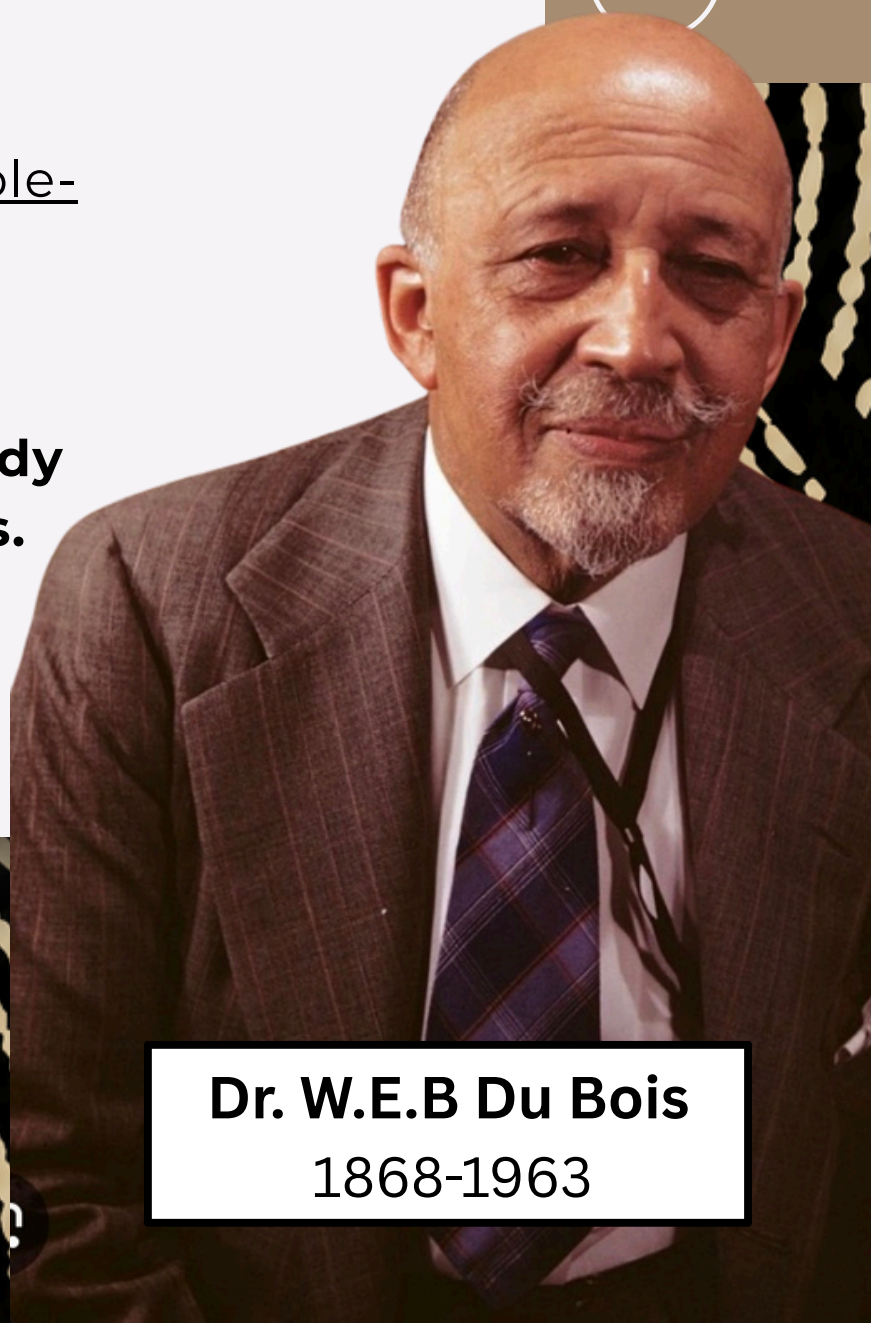
DU BOIS: THE COLOR LINE, THE VEIL, AND DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

By 1903, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois was examining what happened after racial categories had become embedded in American society.

Du Bois called the boundary separating Black Americans from white society the “Veil.”

Living behind the Veil produces “double-consciousness”: **the experience of knowing yourself while also being forced to see yourself through the judgment of a society that has already assigned meaning to your Blackness.**

Race shaped both opportunity and identity.



Dr. W.E.B Du Bois
1868-1963

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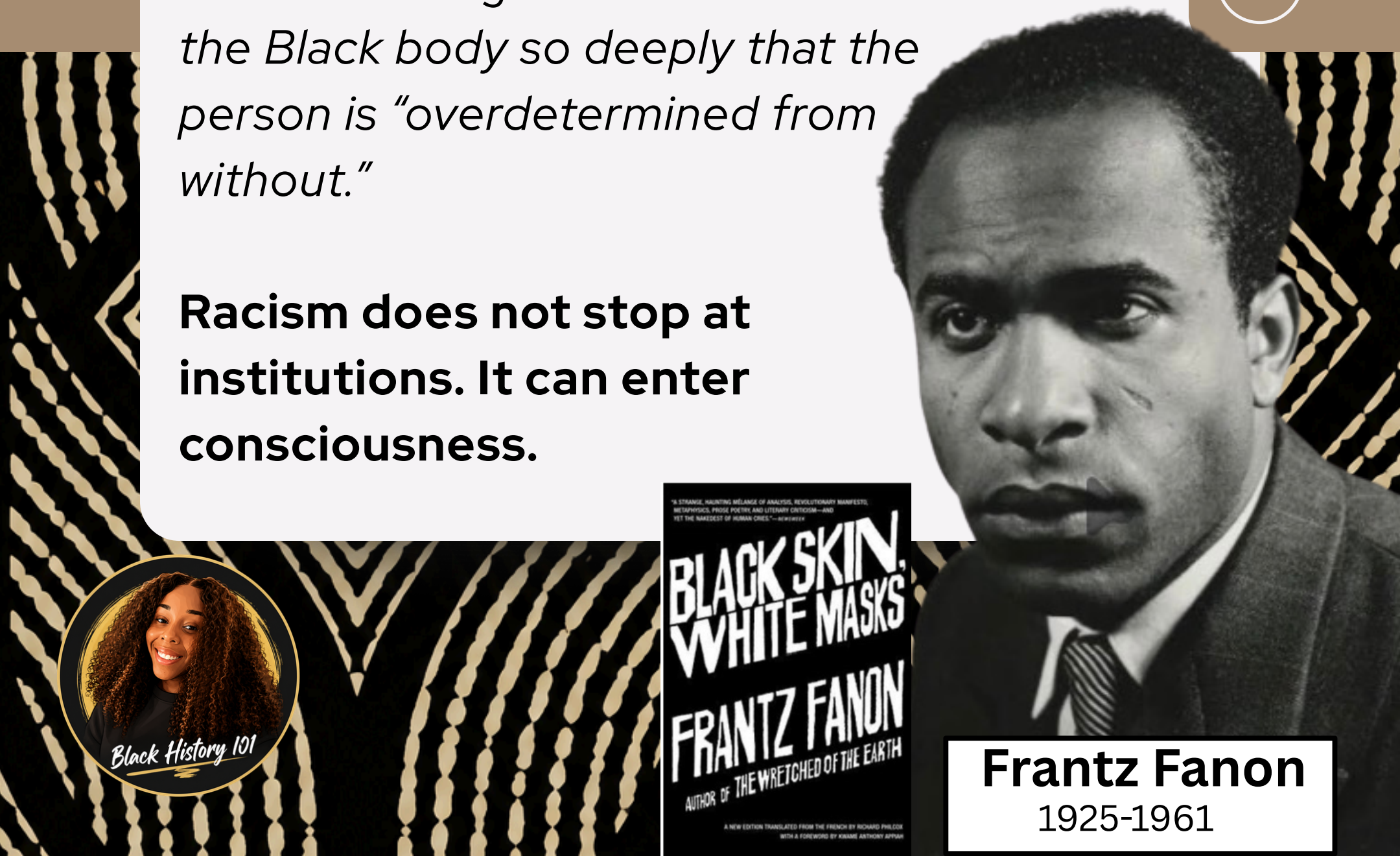
NO.7

Fanon: The Epidermalization of Inferiority

In Black Skin, White Masks (1952), Frantz Fanon described the "epidermalization of inferiority."

Racial meaning becomes attached to the Black body so deeply that the person is "overdetermined from without."

Racism does not stop at institutions. It can enter consciousness.



NO.8

Race Was Made, Then Made Powerful

Race developed and changed across centuries through race-making, colonialism, slavery, law, classification, pseudoscience, scientific racism, and political power.

Race is socially constructed, but that does not make it imaginary.

There are systems powerful enough to shape freedom, citizenship, wealth, identity, belonging, and how people understand themselves.



NO.9

Sources Used

Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903.

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