The Unmarked Default: How Western Religion Wrote Dominator Hierarchy Into the Source Code of Reality

The "unmarked default" in the Western world is whiteness. Whiteness requires no qualifier be added. When you Google "women" or "men," the results look a bit more diverse now because Google tweaked its algorithm after years of criticism for serving up overwhelmingly white faces, and the current image grid performs diversity with the enthusiasm of a corporate training video. Progress, supposedly.

Still, when you open a magazine, turn on the news, or look at any major advertising campaign, the runways, the covers, the anchor desks, the faces selling us cars and watches and perfume are still overwhelmingly white. Google learned to curate a better image, but the culture it indexes didn't change nearly as much.

When we search "actors," we see some Black faces now too. But when you keep scrolling, where are the Asian actors? Where are the South Asian actors? Ke Huy Quan and Michelle Yeoh both have Oscars, but they're nowhere in sight. The algorithm can only reflect what the industry reinforces, and Hollywood has spent a century reinforcing a world where whiteness needs no announcement.

Whiteness is only the most visible output of a deeper program, though. Beneath it runs code that decided whose bodies could be owned, whose land could be taken, and who gets to strip-mine the planet.

This isn't accidental, it's a feature of a much older operating system, one that wrote hierarchy into the structure of the sacred itself: God over creation, man over nature, man over

woman, chosen over unchosen, civilized over savage. Whiteness is a late iteration of this program, but the source code is ancient.

I didn't learn about race from a textbook. I learned it by immersion and by contradiction.

I grew up a white kid in what people politely called a "low-income neighborhood," and what everyone who lived there called the ghetto. From birth through high school, my closest friends were of color. I slept over at their houses, ate at their tables, played the same video games, listened to the same music, and laughed at the same jokes. I experienced Black, Mexican, and Filipino culture not as an observer but as a friend and guest. These weren't "diverse friendships" in the sanitized way that phrase gets used now. They were my only close friendships.

Then I'd come home.

Home was a white household suffocating under addiction, abuse, and the kind of casual racism that uses the "n-word" regularly and always as a slur. My family didn't think of themselves as racist, though they were. Their racism was room temperature. It was the default.

So I grew up bilingual in a sense, fluent in two Americas that shared geography but almost nothing else. And that dual fluency made me hypersensitive to something most white people never have to notice: the way whiteness operates as an invisible norm, structuring reality while pretending to be neutral.

I've spent my life since then as a kind of cultural archaeologist, digging through the sediment of human thought: Socrates to Dewey, the *Tao Te Ching* to Korean Zen, Ken Wilber's integral theory to Leonard Shlain's work on how the alphabet itself rewired human consciousness toward patriarchy.

A fish doesn't know what water is until it's experienced another environment. Leaving America and living and working in several countries, combined with my studies of history, mythology, psychology, and anthropology, introduced several different environments for me to gain the distance necessary to view civilization from a wider perspective.

Everywhere I dig beneath Western civilization specifically, I keep hitting the same bedrock: a mythological source code that positioned certain humans as the default model and everyone else as variations, deviations, and afterthoughts.

In 1967, Lynn White Jr., a history professor at UCLA, published an essay in *Science* magazine called "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." It became one of the most cited articles in environmental history, and its argument remains incendiary.

White's thesis got straight to the root: the ecological crisis isn't a technological problem. It's a religious one. He focused on Christianity, but the underlying logic extends further. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all operate from the same myth: humanity as separate from and superior to nature, granted divine dominion over every living thing.

"Christianity," White wrote, "is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (White 4). The Genesis story, for instance, established a cosmos designed explicitly for human benefit: God created light and darkness, earth and sea, plants and animals, and finally Adam, to whom he granted naming rights over every creature, establishing hierarchy through language itself. Eve came later, almost as an afterthought, to keep man from loneliness. Woman, the myth states, was brought forth from a man's body, not the other way around. Nature existed to serve, men existed to rule, and the template was set.

White traced how this worldview dismantled the older pagan animism that had once protected the natural world. In antiquity, every tree had its spirit, every spring its guardian, and every hill its *genius loci*. Before you cut down a tree or dammed a brook, you had to reckon with the sacred presence dwelling there. Christianity systematically destroyed these beliefs, desacralizing nature, draining the divine from the material world, and concentrating all spiritual significance in the human, specifically in the human's relationship to a transcendent God.

"By destroying pagan animism," White observed, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 4).

The environmental crisis, in this reading, is the logical output of a program running exactly as designed.

But here's what White didn't fully explore: the same source code that placed humans above nature also placed certain humans above others.

The hierarchy didn't stop at the species line. It continued inward, fracturing humanity itself into those who more fully embodied the "divine" image and those considered primitive, existing closer to nature itself. The same theological logic that granted man dominion over nature granted certain men dominion over other men and over all women.

Consider the architecture of Genesis more carefully. God creates Adam in his own image. Eve is created from Adam; derivative, secondary, an auxiliary to the main project. This detail is foundational code. Paul builds on it explicitly in his letters: "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man" (1 Cor. 11:3). The hierarchy is cosmic, divinely ordained, woven into the structure of creation itself.

And when European Christians encountered peoples who didn't share their faith, their technology, or their phenotype, this same logic provided ready-made categories. These people weren't fully human in the way Europeans were human. They were considered "savages." They were closer to nature, and Christians already knew what nature was for. It existed to be dominated, used, and exploited. The Doctrine of Discovery, which provided the legal and theological justification for European colonization across the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific, was set out by popes and was an application of Christian thought, not a departure from it.

Whiteness didn't emerge from nowhere. It was constructed, and the blueprints were theological.

Watch enough Hollywood films and you'll see this architecture in action, even now, even in movies that consider themselves progressive.

Take *Forrest Gump*, still considered one of the great American films three decades after its release. Forrest's world is overwhelmingly white: his mother, his love interest Jenny, his shrimping business, his hometown, his destiny. The one significant Black character is Bubba, his Army friend, whose dream of the shrimping business Forrest inherits and fulfills after Bubba dies. The friendship was genuine. But Bubba exists to serve the white Forrest's character development and economic success. Even in death, Bubba's dream exists to enrich the white protagonist's story.

This is the pattern: Black characters can orbit the white protagonist, can offer wisdom or sacrifice or comic relief, and can populate the edges of the frame. But the main character's primary relationships remain white. The story being told is understood as *the* story, not *a* story,

certainly not one perspective among many. It is the default narrative, with everyone else as a supporting player.

The Help tells a story about Black maids through the eyes of a white journalist. *Green Book* tells a story about a Black pianist's experience of racism in the Jim Crow South through the eyes of his white driver. *The Blind Side* tells a story about a Black football player through the eyes of the white family who saved him. Even when Black experience is the nominal subject, white perspective remains the unmarked camera angle, the default consciousness through which we're invited to see.

And the pattern holds beyond historical dramas. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, the most dominant mythological project of our era, perpetuates the unmarked default. Count the films led by white protagonists versus anyone else. *Black Panther* was treated as a cultural event precisely because it was an exception. A blockbuster with a massive budget centering on Black characters, Black aesthetics, and Black imagination still registers as a departure from the norm rather than one option among equals.

The Lord of the Rings is one of the most beloved trilogies in cinematic history. There's not one single non-white face, except for the orcs and the Easterlings and Haradrim, who fought for the evil Sauron. Just dark-skinned evil beings fighting against the white heroes. This is a mythical land with completely made up creatures. There is absolutely no reason why every single main character needs to be white. It's a tragedy that people of color were kept out of participating and leading in the creation of this most beloved series of films.

In *The Matrix,* Morpheus, one of the greatest characters in cinematic history, was a peripheral character for a white hero. S*tar Wars* had Lando as a peripheral character among

white heroes. This is why it was significant when Black actors moved out of the niche blaxploitation genre and into the mainstream with actors like Denzel Washington and Will Smith leading major franchises as heroes. Still, we only get a mainstream film with Black heroes leading the charge once in a blue moon, even today. Characters of color are almost always satellites orbiting white protagonists.

The default remains. The source code is still running.

The unmarked default operates most powerfully where it's least visible. That's the nature of defaults. They disappear into the background, becoming the invisible standard against which everything else is measured.

This is why Google image searches reflected what they did for so long, and why the fix required deliberate intervention. The algorithm wasn't racist in any intentional sense; it was pattern-matching against the vast corpus of existing images, texts, and links that already encode whiteness as the norm. When millions of web pages use "beautiful woman" to describe white women without qualification, and "Black beautiful woman" or "Asian beautiful woman" only when race is being foregrounded as a specific attribute, the search engine learns that whiteness is the unmarked case. It learns that whiteness is what "woman" means until told otherwise.

The same logic shapes AI image generators, which notoriously default to white faces when given racially unspecified prompts. It shapes spell-checkers that flag African American names as errors. It shapes voice recognition systems that struggle with non-white accents. Every new technology we build inherits the biases of the data it's trained on, which means it inherits centuries of accumulated assumption about who counts as the default human.

The arbitrary limits and hierarchies of the past are now automated.

Leonard Shlain, in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, argued that the very technologies of literacy and linear thinking restructured human consciousness in ways that privileged masculine over feminine, abstract over embodied, and domination over partnership. The shift from image-based to alphabet-based cultures correlated, he pointed out, with the rise of patriarchy, the suppression of goddess worship, the subjugation of women, and the emergence of the monotheistic male-centric religions that would shape Western civilization (Shlain).

The Torah, the Bible, and the Quran installed a new operating system for human culture, one that encoded hierarchy into the structure of the sacred itself. God is one, God is male, God grants dominion to man over nature and over women, and to certain men over others. These assumptions became so foundational that they stopped being assumptions at all. They became the invisible architecture of reality, the structural armature upon which every Western and colonized culture has been built ever since.

This is what I mean by source code. Not conscious ideology, but the deeper layer of inherited myth that shapes what we can even imagine as normal, natural, or possible. Most people walking around today don't consciously believe that white people are the default humans or that nature exists to be exploited or that women are derivative of men. But they don't have to consciously believe it. The code is still running. It's in the structure of our stories, our search results, and our gut-level sense of what a "regular person" looks like.

And you can't patch this with representation initiatives or diversity trainings, any more than you can fix a corrupted operating system by changing the wallpaper. You have to go deeper. You have to look at the source code itself and ask whether it's worth saving.

I don't think it is.

Any religion or ideology still running on this ancient architecture, any system that encodes human supremacy over nature, male supremacy over female, or one race's unmarked centrality over all others, needs to be recognized for what it is: malware. It comes with beautiful cathedrals, profound poetry, and millions of sincere adherents. It's still malware, nonetheless.

Here's one way to recognize it: malware doesn't survive on its merits alone. These mythologies have persisted not because they're self-evidently true, but because they've been enforced through the threat of eternal damnation, the promise of infinite torture for the crime of disbelief. Strip away the hellfire, and how many would still be running this software?

The structure is familiar: the logic of an abuser who keeps his partner trapped not through love but through fear, not through truth but through the threat of what happens if she leaves. Any system that requires terror to maintain itself has already confessed its own illegitimacy.

Delete it. Write new source code. History only repeats what the code tells it to. Change the code, change what history repeats.

The target here isn't spirituality or meaning or the human need for transcendence. The target is these particular stories, these specific inheritance chains that have brought us accelerating climate collapse, centuries of slavery and colonialism, and a world where you still have to add an adjective to be seen.

Lynn White, for all his critique, ended his essay by proposing Saint Francis of Assisi as a patron saint for ecologists, a man who tried to depose humanity from its monarchy over creation and establish a democracy of all creatures (White 5). It was a hopeful gesture, an attempt to find resources for renewal within the tradition itself.

I'm less optimistic. I think the tradition is the problem. I think we need new stories, new source code, new mythological foundations that don't begin with dominion and hierarchy and the unmarked default of one kind of human. Stories that start from multiplicity, from ecology, from the recognition that there is no default, only difference, only diversity, only the endless variety of being alive.

The unmarked default was always a lie, a local story pretending to be universal truth. The sooner we name it, the sooner we can begin writing something better.

We need a picture of the cosmos that starts not with dominion, but with belonging. Not with hierarchy, but with kinship. A picture where selfhood and the living world are the same thing, where the ego we've inherited, the one built on these lies, gets replaced by a definition of self that doesn't require dominion to feel whole.

That's the source code we need now. And writing it will take nerve, because the old program punishes dissent. It always has. But every person who questions gives the next person permission to question too. The bravest people in any era are the ones who step over the line of what's acceptable so others can see that the crossing is survivable.

The backlash will come. It always does. But every child born into this world deserves a story that includes them from the first page. That world is worth whatever it costs to build.

Works Cited

The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version. National Council of the Churches of Christ,

    1989.

Shlain, Leonard. *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*.

    Viking, 1998.

White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Science, vol. 155, no.

    3767, 10 Mar. 1967, pp. 1203-1207. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1720120.