

PAULA S. ROTHENBERG

WHITE Privilege

Essential Readings on the
Other Side of Racism

FIFTH EDITION

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PAULA S. ROTHENBERG

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WORTH
PUBLISHERS

A Macmillan Education Imprint
New York

Publisher: Rachel Losh

Associate Publisher: Jessica Bayne

Senior Associate Editor: Sarah Berger

Editorial Assistant: Kimberly Morgan

Executive Marketing Manager: Katherine Nurre

Marketing Assistant: Allison Greco

Cover and Interior Designer: Vicki Tomaselli

Permissions Research: Felicia Ruocco

Project Editor: Edgar Doolan

Production Manager: Sarah Segal

Composition: Northeastern Graphic, Inc.

Printing and Binding: R R Donnelly

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015937165

ISBN-13: 978-1-4292-4220-2

ISBN-10: 1-4292-4220-5

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing

Worth Publishers

41 Madison Avenue

New York, NY 10010

www.macmillanhighered.com

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Preface

At the time of this writing, we are witnessing a tremendous surge of energy to shift our national conversation about issues of race and racial justice. In response to a series of incidents involving young black men losing their lives at the hands of police officers, tens of thousands of people across the United States have taken to the streets, proclaiming “Black Lives Matter.” How ironic that we live in a society in which this simple idea—that the lives of black people have worth—needs to be stated at the same time that many people claim that racism is a thing of the past. Many writers and commentators talk about the current period as a post-racial time, but the statistics in this volume, along with the headlines in the daily papers and the TV news reports, tell a different story. As the essays in this book demonstrate, although more blatant forms of racism may have abated in some aspects of our society, its impact and its hold on this nation have not changed significantly. I believe that we must teach and talk about the many ways that privilege is built into our society and come to terms with why its manufactured invisibility is so effective and its consequences so lethal.

Like the earlier editions of this book, the fifth edition brings together key essays and articles that seek to make whiteness visible so that we can analyze the nature of white privilege and use that knowledge to combat racism and related forms of inequality. As in the preceding editions, this volume continues to include well-known essays and book excerpts from writers like Peggy McIntosh, Richard Dyer, bell hooks, Beverly Tatum, and George Lipsitz, as well as important contributions from Robert Jensen, Harlon Dalton, Tim Wise, and many others. While retaining most but not all of the articles from the last edition, I have added eight new pieces, expanded one piece, and updated another to enrich—or complicate—our understanding of these issues.

For example, in Part One, Derald Wing Sue contributes to our discussion about the invisibility of whiteness through his articulation of the different dimensions of whiteness—individual, cultural, and institutional—and their relationship to racism. William David Hart’s essay offers many useful concepts, such as colorblind racism, virtual probation, and whitopian imagination, which give us analytical tools through which to understand the semiotics of the black body.

Erika Lee’s essay in Part Two offers a historical grounding in policies and practices that institutionalize race-based exclusions of immigrants. And Angelo N. Ancheta offers a contemporary look at the racial positioning of Asian-Americans to complicate the dominant racial binary that poses white as contrasted to black.

In Part Three, *The Power of Privilege*, we have added four new pieces. In the first, Alex Shams uses his own identity as a light-skinned biracial Iranian-American as a starting point to explore the term “people of color.” The term,

he suggests, is a way to recognize the commonalities among people who do not have white privilege without losing the diversity of experiences among these groups. He discusses the racial position of simultaneously passing as white and being targeted by racial profiling. Robin DiAngelo discusses her upbringing as a poor person to demonstrate how her white privilege was sustained even in the absence of class privilege. While Lawrence Otis Graham's piece illustrates the inverse: he shares how his experience of class privilege, and the economic resources he has been able to afford his sons, does not protect them from anti-black racism or racial profiling. Finally, Michael Eric Dyson asks us to examine the shooting of Michael Brown—an unarmed teenager killed by a white police officer and the ensuing social protest in Ferguson, Missouri, and beyond—within the context of Obama's presidency. Dyson looks at how the myth of racial progress and "respectability politics" circulate during times of visible racial conflict.

In addition to these new essays, this edition includes an expanded excerpt of bell hooks' selection, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" and an excerpt from the latest version of Paul Kivel's "Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice."

To all the faculty and students, too numerous to name, who have taken the time to contact me and to share their stories, please know how much I appreciate and value your experience. To all the conference participants I have spoken to and with, in an ongoing effort to make sense out of whiteness and white privilege, please know how much I have learned from you and how much I appreciate your thoughtful engagement with this topic.

As with any book, this volume owes its existence to intentional and unintentional contributions on the part of many people. I am grateful to the many people around the country who over the years have come to hear me talk about privilege and who have shared with me their commitment to social justice. The work of many scholars and educators has been very important to me, and many of them, though certainly not all, are represented in the list of suggestions for further reading that appears at the end of this volume. Finally, I am grateful to the people on the front lines who serve as allies in the struggle for a more just and equitable world.

I want to express my deep gratitude to my editor, Sarah Berger, whose sensitivity, perseverance, and commitment made this book possible. I cannot thank her enough. I am also deeply indebted to Soniya Munshi for her research, writing, and revisions to this edition. She did a remarkable job putting all this together. Other members of the Worth team who I'd like to thank include Edgar Doolan, Sarah Segal, Felicia Ruocco, Hillary Newman, Kimberly Morgan-Smith, Vicki Tomaselli, Lisa Kinne, and Kate Nurre.

Finally, my thanks to my partner, Greg Mantsios, and our children, Alexi Mantsios and Andrea Mantsios, and to their partners, Caroline Donohue and Luis Armando Ocaranz Ordaz, for their insights, observations—and most of all their extraordinary support through thick and thin.

About the Author

Paula Rothenberg writes, lectures, and consults on a variety of topics, including multicultural curriculum transformation, issues of inequality, equity, and privilege, globalizing the curriculum, and white privilege. From 1989 to 2006, she served as Director of The New Jersey Project on Inclusive Scholarship, Curriculum, and Teaching, and Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at The William Paterson University of New Jersey. She is the author of *Invisible Privilege: A Memoir About Race, Class, and Gender* (University Press of Kansas), and, with Worth Publishers, *Race, Class, and Gender*, Ninth Edition, *Beyond Borders: Thinking Critically About Global Issues*, and *What's The Problem? A Brief Guide to Thinking Critically*. Paula Rothenberg is also coeditor of a number of other anthologies, including *Creating an Inclusive College Curriculum: A Teaching Sourcebook from the New Jersey Project* and *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men*. Her articles and essays appear in journals and anthologies across the disciplines and have been widely reprinted.

Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence. The denial of white as a racial identity, the denial that whiteness has a history, allows the quiet, the blankness, to stand as the norm.

Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940*

White people's lack of consciousness about their racial identities has grave consequences in that it not only denies white people the experience of seeing themselves as benefiting from racism, but in doing so, frees them from taking responsibility for eradicating it.

Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*

Given America's history, why should anyone be surprised to find white privilege so woven into the unexamined institutional practices, habits of mind, and received truths that Americans can barely see it?

Michael K. Brown, et al., *Whitewashing Race*

Race is a social concept, not a scientific one.

Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*

Introduction

Why talk about “whiteness” and white privilege? On the one hand, these topics make some people uncomfortable by seeming to take them to task for privileges they never noticed they had and, on the other, these topics appear to divert attention from racism and its effects, making white people the center of attention once again. But rather than providing reasons to avoid talking about whiteness and white privilege, these concerns actually underscore our need to do so. Discomfort of this kind is a sure sign that we need to continue the conversation. If education is about learning to see the world in new ways, it is bound, at times, to leave us feeling confused or angry or challenged. And this is a good thing. Instead of seeking to avoid such feelings, we should probably welcome a degree of discomfort in our lives and feel short-changed if it is not present.

As for the concern that looking at whiteness and white privilege will deflect our attention from racism, this could not be further from the truth. White privilege is the other side of racism. Unless we name it, we are in danger of wallowing in guilt or moral outrage with no idea of how to move beyond these feelings. It is often easier to deplore racism and its effects than to take responsibility for the privileges some of us receive as a result of it. By choosing to look at white privilege, we gain an understanding of who benefits from racism, and how they do so. Once we understand how white privilege operates, we can begin to take steps to dismantle it on both a personal and an institutional level.

The project of interrogating whiteness and identifying white privilege will have a different meaning for us depending upon our own racial/ethnic

background. While some of us who are white may be uncomfortable with the conversation and seek ways to deny responsibility for benefiting from white privilege, others may feel guilty and become overwhelmed with a sense of responsibility for enjoying an unearned advantage. Some of us who are not white may feel that we have long been aware of the power of whiteness to shape culture and values, and may feel we have intimate knowledge of how white privilege operates. Others who are not white may feel a sense of confusion when confronted with the claim that whiteness provides the norm or standard by which most other things are judged. Wherever we are and whatever experiences, doubts, and expectations we bring to this project, we are likely to find that the very diversity of our backgrounds and the specific relationship we have to the questions being raised and studied will turn out to be important and valuable aspects of a shared learning experience. Whiteness and white privilege will look different and have different meanings for everyone reading these essays; by sharing our perspectives, each of us is likely to become aware of aspects of our society and forms of social interaction that were previously hidden from us.

The articles in Part One of this book are designed to help make whiteness visible. For the most part, these authors agree that whiteness has often gone unnamed and unexamined because it has been uncritically and unthinkingly adopted as the norm throughout society. When people of color are asked to reflect on their childhood and to try to remember when and how they learned about race, they usually have very specific memories of when and how they “discovered” or were taught that they were “African American,” “Korean,” “Caribbean,” “Chinese,” “Puerto Rican,” “Latina,” etc. The stories sometimes include painful memories of being invited to a classmate’s home to play, only to find that the color of their skin suddenly made them unwelcome there. Or they involve memories of playing with white dolls that looked nothing like them, or incidents in the school playground or on the ball field where they were told in no uncertain terms that they did not belong. When white people are asked a similar question, they often draw a blank. Many cannot remember a time when they first “noticed” that they were white because whiteness was, for them, unremarkable. It was always everywhere. They learned to remark on “difference” by noticing who was not like them. From an early age, race, for white people, is about everyone else. While having black skin or almond-shaped eyes or coarse and curly hair are clearly signs of “difference” according to mainstream U.S. culture, having yellow hair or green eyes or white skin is often not viewed in this way by the people who possess them. That is because it is always whiteness that is centered and assumed. Difference is understood in relation to it. From this assumed but unnoticed perspective, white people are not “different” from, say, Native Americans; it is always the Native American (or other person of color) who is different. According to this unexamined point of view, to be white, as many authors have pointed out, is simply to be “human.”

As Harlon Dalton and others have observed, this culturally encouraged invisibility has been an essential part of the power of whiteness. It has allowed

some white people to create a world in their own image and a system of values that reinforces the power and privilege of those who are white. At the same time, because of its invisibility, it has helped foster the illusion that those who succeed do so because of their superior intelligence, their hard work, or their determination, rather than, at least in part, their privilege. The power of whiteness is that it gives certain people an advantage without ever acknowledging that this is the case. As Sue and others write, whiteness operates at different levels of our society: as a norm that structures relationships between individuals; cultural messages that we receive through media and other sources; and through institutional policies and practices. That whiteness is simultaneously invisible and everywhere, in part, is what gives it its power. To better understand contemporary racial dynamics, we must examine the connections among the histories of white supremacy, slavery, and other forms of chronic violence to which black people have been subjected. The ways in which the past informs the present can become obscured by the mythical face of narratives about racial progress, according to William David Hart. Hence the title of Part One: “Whiteness: The Power of Invisibility.”

Many books and articles have argued that whiteness is itself a social construct. By this, they suggest that the very meaning of whiteness is part of an elaborately constructed mosaic of social and cultural meanings. Each of us is born with a particular collection of physical attributes, but it is society that teaches us which ones to value and which ones to reject. To suggest that whiteness is socially constructed is simply to notice that who counts as white and what it means to be white changes over time and from place to place. For example, as several articles in Part Two point out, at one time in the not-too-distant past of the United States, Italians, Greeks, Jews, the Irish, and other “white” ethnic groups were not considered to be white. Over time and through an identifiable process described in these essays, the category of “white” was reshaped to include them. Through her discussion of policies that shaped Asian immigration, Lee’s essay shows us how immigration and questions of citizenship and belonging in the United States are tied to understandings of race and proximity to whiteness. Other essays look at the implications of these histories in the contemporary period, and how some groups, such as Hispanics and Asians, occupy the complex space of not being white but maintain some racial privilege by virtue of not being black. This section teaches us that racialization, or the way in which society attributes racial or ethnic identities to a group, is an evolving process. The changing meanings of whiteness and who was allowed to claim it are at the heart of the claim that whiteness is a social construct.

Like whiteness, white privilege has often been invisible to those who benefit from it most. The articles in Part Three go into great detail examining and enumerating the kinds of benefits that white people have received and continue to receive in U.S. society. Pointing to seemingly trivial, everyday, taken-for-granted privileges, such as the ability to go into a store and look at merchandise without being followed or viewed with suspicion, the privilege of never being asked to speak on behalf of all people in your racial group when

you offer an opinion, and the right to drive about freely in suburban neighborhoods and on U.S. highways, or even in your own neighborhood, without worrying that the color of your skin will make you vulnerable to unwarranted harassment by law enforcers, these authors ask us to understand the power of white privilege. Michael Eric Dyson's essay takes a specific example, the death of Michael Brown, as a starting point to examine the ways that racial privilege operates and how racial dynamics are perceived in the U.S. today.

Some of those of us who are white have a hard time accepting the idea that white privilege is a powerful force in society because we do not *feel* privileged. This is true because white privilege is not the same for all people with white-looking skin. Being white *and* wealthy usually brings with it more privileges and opportunities than simply having white skin—and looking white, having money, *and* being male compounds race and class privilege with gender or male privilege as well. For people whose class position or gender or both place them at a disadvantage, the deprivations and inequities imposed by class and/or male privilege may be so overwhelming that they mask the privileges some of us receive simply by virtue of being white. Other white people have a hard time accepting the idea of white privilege because they have been benefiting from it for so long that they can no longer distinguish between their privilege and their sense of who they are. People who are used to riding in the front of the bus and who have never ridden anywhere else don't think of their place on the bus as a privilege; for them, it is simply "the way things have always been." Because so much of their privilege is simply coextensive with their life, they do not notice their privilege any more than they notice their whiteness. This means that writers who seek to make both whiteness and the privileges it carries with it visible, face a difficult task. The articles in Part Three go to great lengths to specify the kinds of privileges that white people enjoy in this society, often quite apart from their intentions or their conscious choices. Essays in this section show us how white privilege can serve as protection from other forms of oppression, such as poverty and, on the flip side, how other forms of privilege, such as class privilege, do not lead to an escape from racism. Furthermore, this section explores the commonalities as well as the variability in experiences of racial oppression.

But, let us assume that I am a white person, and after reading the articles in this book I am persuaded that there is such a thing as white privilege and that I benefit from it. Why might I want to rid myself of that privilege rather than continue to enjoy it and pass it along to my children? The answer has to do with simple notions of fairness and justice. Most people would feel little sense of pride or accomplishment in winning a race they started with an unfair advantage or winning a game when the deck was stacked in their favor. The satisfaction of such "victories" is short-lived at best. Once I begin to recognize how much of my success is a consequence of unfair advantage, I cannot help but begin to seek ways to make amends. This does not mean that I am not smart, nor does it mean that I have not worked hard—I have worked very hard in my life to accomplish my goals—but it does mean that I recognize that there are others equally smart who worked equally hard and who have a great deal

less to show for it, simply because they are not white. Speaking very personally, this is a situation that I find intolerable. As a parent, I want the best for my children, but not at the expense of some other mother's child. As a person, I want to be successful and happy in my life, but my ability to enjoy my own success is limited when I realize that the racism from which I profit has destroyed the lives of many people of talent, even of genius.

Beyond questions of justice are matters of self-interest. History tells us that in the end, an unjust and inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities leads to terrible violence. Increasingly, wealthy white people in America find themselves living in gated communities as they seek ways to protect their lives and their property, and people of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and every economic class complain of feeling unsafe on the streets and in their homes. A society that distributes educational opportunities, housing, health care, food, even kindness, based on the color of people's skin and other arbitrary variables cannot guarantee the safety or security of its people. In this sense, all of us, both the victims and the beneficiaries of racism, pay a terrible price.

But if white people often benefit from their privilege quite apart from any deliberate decision to do so, what can those of us who are white and who do not wish to continue to make use of this unfair advantage over others do? The articles in Part Four provide the beginning of an answer to this question. Because white privilege is institutionalized in the United States, that is, because it is woven into the fabric of society, some might argue that it is virtually impossible for whites *not* to reap the benefits of this privilege. If this is true, then the challenge for those of us who are white is to find ways to use that privilege to combat racism and the system of privilege as a whole. If, for example, white privilege makes it easier for white people to get a hearing in some situations, then those of us who are white can use that opportunity to speak out against racism and other social inequities. We can protest incidents of racist harassment or intolerance on our campuses and challenge admissions policies that favor those who are white and well-to-do over those who are not. We can go to school board hearings and argue against public school budgets and policies that perpetuate white privilege. We can appear at town council meetings and speak out against zoning policies that perpetuate segregation while "protecting" white property values. We can speak out against racial profiling and police brutality. Closer to home, we can refuse to laugh at racist jokes and we can challenge our friends, neighbors, and colleagues when they, often thoughtlessly, parrot positions that reinforce the unfair advantages that white people enjoy in a myriad of venues. The first step toward dismantling the system of privilege that operates in this society is to name it and the second is for those of us who can to use our privileges to speak out against the system of privilege as a whole.

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Part

1

Whiteness: The Power of Invisibility

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The Matter of Whiteness

Richard Dyer

Racial¹ imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidised and sold, in what terms they are validated—these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. The myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at every point informed by judgements about people's capacities and worth, judgements based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgements. Race is not the only factor governing these things and people of goodwill everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play. And since race in itself—insofar as it is anything in itself—refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.

There has been an enormous amount of analysis of racial imagery in the past decades, ranging from studies of images of, say, blacks or American Indians in the media to the deconstruction of the fetish of the racial Other in the texts of colonialism and post-colonialism. Yet until recently a notable absence from such work has been the study of images of white people. Indeed, to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people. Yet race is not only attributable to people who are not white, nor is imagery of non-white people the only racial imagery.

This essay is about the racial imagery of white people—not the images of other races in white cultural production, but the latter's imagery of white people themselves. This is not done merely to fill a gap in the analytic literature, but because there is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery. As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.

There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race.² But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world.

The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West. We (whites) will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbours, colleagues, customers or clients, and it may be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know. An old-style white comedian will often start a joke: 'There's this bloke walking down the street and he meets this black geezer', never thinking to race the bloke as well as the geezer. Synopses in listings of films on TV, where wordage is tight, none the less squander words with things like: 'Comedy in which a cop and his black sidekick investigate a robbery', 'Skinhead Johnny and his Asian lover Omar set up a laundrette', 'Feature film from a promising Native American director' and so on. Since all white people in the West do this all the time, it would be invidious to quote actual examples, and so I shall confine myself to one from my own writing. In an article on lesbian and gay stereotypes (Dyer 1993), I discuss the fact that there can be variations on a type such as the queen or dyke. In the illustrations that accompany this point, I compare a 'fashion queen' from the film *Irene* with a 'black queen' from *Car Wash*—the former, white image is not raced, whereas all the variation of the latter is reduced to his race. Moreover, this is the only non-white image referred to in the article, which does not however point out that all the other images discussed are white. In this, as in the other white examples in this paragraph, the fashion queen is, racially speaking, taken as being just human.

This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture. Some of the sharpest criticism of it has been aimed at those who would think themselves the least racist or white supremacist. bell hooks, for instance, has noted how amazed and angry white liberals become when attention is drawn to their whiteness, when they are seen by non-white people as white.

Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness',

even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think.

(hooks 1992: 167)

Similarly, Hazel Carby discusses the use of black texts in white classrooms, under the sign of multiculturalism, in a way that winds up focusing 'on the complexity of response in the (white) reader/student's construction of self in relation to a (black) perceived "other"'. We should, she argues, recognise that 'everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialised subject' and thus that we should consider whiteness as well as blackness, in order 'to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference' (Carby 1992: 193).

The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity. When I said above that I wasn't merely seeking to fill a gap in the analysis of racial imagery, I reproduced the idea that there is no discussion of white people. In fact for most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general. Research—into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software—repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard.³ Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race.

We are often told that we are living now in a world of multiple identities, of hybridity, of decentredness and fragmentation. The old illusory unified identities of class, gender, race, sexuality are breaking up; someone may be black *and* gay *and* middle class *and* female; we may be bi-, poly- or non-sexual, of mixed race, indeterminate gender and heaven knows what class. Yet we have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant. The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming—and sometimes sincerely aiming—to speak for humanity. Against the flowering of myriad postmodern voices, we must also see the countervailing tendency towards a homogenisation of world culture, in the continued dominance of US news dissemination, popular TV programmes and Hollywood movies. Postmodern multiculturalism may have genuinely opened up a space for the voices of the other, challenging the authority of the white West (cf. Owens 1983), but it may also simultaneously function as a side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them.⁴ We may be on our way to genuine hybridity, multiplicity without (white) hegemony, and it may be where we want to get to—but we aren't there yet, and we won't get there until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule. This is why studying whiteness matters.

It is studying whiteness *qua* whiteness. Attention is sometimes paid to 'white ethnicity' (e.g. Alba 1990), but this always means an identity based on cultural origins such as British, Italian or Polish, or Catholic or Jewish, or Polish-American, Irish-American, Catholic-American and so on. These however are variations on white ethnicity (though some are more securely white than others), and the examination of them tends to lead away from a consideration of whiteness itself. John Ibson (1981), in a discussion of research on white US ethnicity, concludes that being, say, Polish, Catholic or Irish may not be as important to white Americans as some might wish. But being white is.

* * *

This then is why it is important to come to see whiteness. For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it. As I suggested in my opening paragraphs, the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power. White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail. Most of this is not done deliberately and maliciously; there are enormous variations of power amongst white people, to do with class, gender and other factors; goodwill is not unheard of in white people's engagement with others. White power nonetheless reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange.

* * *

Notes

1. I use the terms 'race' and 'racial' in this opening section in the most common though problematic sense, referring to supposedly visibly differentiable, supposedly discrete social groupings.

2. In their discussion of the extraordinarily successful TV sitcom about a middle-class, African-American family, *The Cosby Show*, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis note the way that viewers repeatedly recognise the characters' blackness but also feel that 'you just think of them as people'; in other words that they don't only speak for their race. Jhally and Lewis argue that this is achieved by the way the family conforms to 'the everyday, generic world of white television' (1992: 100), an essentially middle-class world. The family is 'ordinary' *despite* being black; because it is upwardly mobile, it can be accepted as 'ordinary', in a way that marginalises most actual African-Americans. If the realities of African-American experience were included, then the characters would not be perceived as 'just people'.

3. See, for instance, Bogle 1973, Hartmann and Husband 1974, Troyna 1981, MacDonald 1983, Wilson and Gutiérrez 1985, van Dijk 1987, Jhally and Lewis 1992 (58ff.), Ross 1995. The research findings are generally cast the other way round, in terms of non-white under-representation, textual marginalisation and positioning as deviant or a problem. Recent research in the US does suggest that African-Americans (but not other racially marginalised groups) have become more represented in the media, even in excess of their proportion of the population. However, this number still falls off if one focuses on central characters.

4. *The Crying Game* (GB 1992) seems to me to be an example of this. It explores, with fascination and generosity, the hybrid and fluid nature of identity: gender, race, national belonging, sexuality. Yet all of this revolves around a bemused but ultimately unchallenged straight white man—it reinscribes the position of those at the intersection of heterosexuality, maleness, and whiteness as that of the one group which does not need to be hybrid and fluid.

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Failing to See

| Harlon Dalton

Most White people, in my experience, tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know that they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native American. Whiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning.¹

For a significant chunk, the inability to “get” race, and to understand why it figures so prominently in the lives of most people of color, stems from a deep affliction—the curse of rugged individualism. All of us, to some degree, suffer from this peculiarly American delusion that we are individuals first and foremost, captains of our own ships, solely responsible for our own fates. When taken to extremes, this ideal is antagonistic to the very idea of community. Even families cease to be vibrant social organisms; instead they are viewed as mere incubators and support systems for the individuals who happen to be born into them.

For those who embrace the rugged individualist ideal with a vengeance and who have no countervailing experience of community, the idea that a person’s sense of self could be tied to that of a group is well-nigh incomprehensible. Collective concerns can only be interpreted as “groupthink”; collective responsibility as some strange foreign ideology. I frankly despair of being able to reach such people. Fortunately, most Americans, whatever their professed ideals, know from personal experience what community feels like. They are meaningfully connected to something smaller than the nation and larger than themselves.

For some, the tie is to a particular region of the country. I have a former colleague, for example, whose West Texas accent seemed to get stronger the

longer he remained away from home. For others, the connection is to a religious community, or to a profession, or to a community defined by shared ideals or aspirations, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. Perhaps most significantly, many Americans eagerly lay claim to their ethnic heritage. It is, for them, a rich source of comfort, pride, and self-understanding. It provides shape and texture to their lives.

So-called White ethnics are not alone in this respect. Hyphenated Americans of all colors draw great strength from their ethnic roots, and take pride in those characteristics that make their ethnic group distinctive. Ethnicity is as significant a social force for Vietnamese-Americans living in Virginia and Chinese-Americans living in the borough of Queens as it is for Irish-Americans in South Boston and Polish-Americans in Chicago. Chicanos, Salvadorans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans readily distinguish among one another even though their Anglo neighbors can't (or don't bother trying to) tell them apart. West Indians and U.S.-born African-Americans are as distinct from one another as steel drums are from saxophones. Lakota Sioux are not Navajo are not Pequot are not Crow.

On the other hand, from what I have observed, people who trace their ethnic roots to Europe tend to think quite differently about race than do people who hail from the rest of the world. Most non-White ethnics recognize that, at least in the American context, they have a race as well as an ethnicity. They understand full well that the quality of their lives is affected by these two social categories in distinct ways. White ethnics, on the other hand, are much less likely to think of themselves in racial terms. Like Whites who don't identify strongly with any ethnic group, they tend to take race for granted or to view it as somehow irrelevant.

At the same time, many White ethnics rely on their experience of ethnicity to draw conclusions about the operation of race in America. Drawing parallels makes sense to them because they regard White ethnicity and non-White race as being more or less equivalent. However, as the average Korean-American or Haitian immigrant can attest, despite their surface similarities, race and ethnicity are very different creatures.

Ethnicity is the bearer of culture. It describes that aspect of our heritage that provides us with a mother tongue and that shapes our values, our worldview, our family structure, our rituals, the foods we eat, our mating behavior, our music—in short, much of our daily lives. We embody our ethnicity without regard for the presence or absence of other ethnic groups. Of course, ethnic groups influence one another in myriad ways, and more than occasionally come into conflict. But they do not need each other to exist.

In contrast, races exist only in relation to one another. Whiteness is meaningless in the absence of Blackness; the same holds in reverse. Moreover, race itself would be meaningless if it were not a fault line along which power, prestige, and respect are distributed. Thus, during the war in Vietnam the North Vietnamese did not distinguish between Black Americans and White ones, since both seemed equally powerful with an M-16 in their hands. While ethnicity determines culture, race determines social position. Although the members

of a given ethnic group may, for a time, find themselves on the bottom by virtue of their recent arrival, their lack of language or job skills, or even because of rank discrimination, that position usually is not long-term. *Race* and hierarchy, however, are indelibly wed.

Despite this distinction, much confusion is generated by the fact that for most American Blacks (excluding, for example, recent immigrants from the Caribbean), race and ethnicity are inextricably intertwined. The particulars of our African cultural heritage were largely, though not completely, destroyed by slavery. Part of what made the television miniseries *Roots* such a powerful experience for so many of us was that the protagonist was able to trace his heritage not only to a genetic African continent but to a particular country, particular village, and particular tribe. We long for that kind of deep-rootedness, but mostly we have to make do. From the remnants of our various African cultures, the rhythms of our daily existence, and the customs of our new home, especially the rural South and the urban inner city, we developed a uniquely African-American culture, with its own music, speech patterns, religious practices, and all the rest.

The emergence in the 1980s of the term "African-American" was meant to supply a label for our ethnicity that is distinct from the one used for race. Most people, however, continue to use the term "Black" to refer to both. "White," on the other hand, refers only to race. It has no particular cultural content. In ethnic terms, a random White person wandering through New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art could as easily be Irish-American, an immigrant from Greece, a Lithuanian transplant, or a Texan on vacation.

Why do most White people not see themselves as having a race? In part, race obliviousness is the natural consequence of being in the driver's seat. We are all much more likely to disregard attributes that seldom produce a ripple than we are those that subject us to discomfort. For example, a Reform Jewish family living in, say, Nacogdoches, Texas, will be more acutely aware of its religious/ethnic heritage than will the Baptist family next door. On the other hand, if that same family moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, its Jewishness would probably be worn more comfortably. For most Whites, race—or more precisely, their own race—is simply part of the unseen, unproblematic background.

Whatever the reason, the inability or unwillingness of many White people to think of themselves in racial terms has decidedly negative consequences. For one thing, it produces huge blind spots. It leaves them baffled by the amount of energy many Blacks pour into questions of racial identity. It makes it difficult for them to understand why many (but by no means all) Blacks have a sense of group consciousness that influences the choices they make as individuals. It blinds Whites to the fact that their lives are shaped by race just as much as are the lives of people of color. How they view life's possibilities; whom they regard as heroes; the extent to which they feel the country is theirs; the extent to which that belief is echoed back to them; all this and more is in part a function of their race.

This obliviousness also makes it difficult for many Whites to comprehend why Blacks interact with them on the basis of past dealings with other Whites,

and why Blacks sometimes expect them to make up for the sins of their fathers, and of their neighbors as well. Curiously enough, many of the same folk wouldn't think twice about responding to young Black males as a type rather than as individuals.

Far and away the most troublesome consequence of race obliviousness is the failure of many to recognize the privileges our society confers on them because they have white skin.² White skin privilege is a birthright, a set of advantages one receives simply by being born with features that society values especially highly.

* * *

Notes

1. Wellman, David T. (1993). *Portraits of White Racism*, 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 194–95.

2. *Ibid.*, 136–37, 163, 186–87.

The Invisible Whiteness of Being

Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, and Racism

Derald Wing Sue

Racism hides in the background of Whiteness and is protected through a conspiracy of silence that aids in making it invisible (D. W. Sue, 2005). As long as it is an unacknowledged secret, it allows White people to accept the unearned advantages of their skin color while allowing them to deny responsibility for how it disadvantages other groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans; Harris, 1993; Tatum, 2002). Because of its everyday occurrences and because its normative features are insidiously manifested in our institutions and culture, Whiteness becomes transparent when White people are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, average, or ideal (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). The result is that both white supremacy and racism become culturally conditioned into the lives of White people, albeit without their informed consent, and institutionalized in the very organizations that control their lives (Jones, 1997; Ridley, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Individual Racism and the Invisibility of Whiteness

The White couple had obviously returned from a formal function, as the man was dressed in a tuxedo and the woman in a long flowing evening gown. Both had checked into the hotel earlier that day and were returning from an evening out. It was 3:30 A.M. as they waited in the lobby for the elevator. When the elevator doors opened, both took a step forward, and then stopped. Inside, to the right stood a Black man in jeans holding what looked like a tool box. On seeing the Black man, the woman unconsciously placed her

hand over the diamond necklace she was wearing. Without hesitation, the couple stepped back, and the White man said loudly to his companion, "Let's wait for our friends." The doors to the elevator closed and the couple waited a few seconds before pushing the button to call for another car.

Incidents such as this occur frequently among well-intentioned White people who would never consciously give voice to the fears and biases they possess. A strong case can be made that these fears and biases are not even accessible on the conscious level to many White Americans (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). In this case, the White couple reacted in a way that communicated their stereotypes and preconceived notions of Black Americans (the Black man is a potential criminal and not to be trusted).

People of Color, every day, are subjected to such biases, fears, and behaviors that have detrimental impact on them. White people who automatically cross the street when they see a group of Latino youngsters approach them; sales clerks who require a greater number of personal identification when a Black customer attempts to cash a check; the well-intentioned White school counselor who severely restricts the career choices of Asian American students by counseling them into the physical sciences (because "you people are good at that"); and police officers who stop Black motorists much more often than White motorists are examples of the operation of individual racism.

Elsewhere, I have made the assertion that no one born and raised in the United States is immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears (D. W. Sue, 2003). In other words, due to the socialization process outlined earlier, all people are exposed to a racial curriculum that imbues in them biases, prejudices, and misinformation related to race. Furthermore, if these racist components exist in everyone, well-intentioned persons may also engage in prejudicial behaviors consistent with their biases. It means that people may unknowingly stereotype groups different from them and engage in discrimination. While this statement is very difficult to prove, sufficient evidence exists to support the fact that an overwhelming number of White Americans possess racist attitudes and behaviors (Dovidio et al., 2002; Pettigrew, 1981; President's Initiative on Race, 1998).

If we define individual racism as any attitude or action whether intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious, overt or covert that subordinates a person or group because of phenotypical traits most strongly manifested in skin color, and if Whiteness is considered the normative and superior standard by which such judgments are made, it becomes clear that most Whites cannot help but be tainted by racism. Note that the definition includes the words *intentional and unintentional*, *conscious and unconscious* and *overt and covert*. Deliberate, conscious and overt racism is most characteristic of White supremacists. These are individuals who intentionally inflict harm knowingly on persons of color and they may even engage in overt hate crimes. Fortunately, few White people would fall into this category. Unfortunately, it is not an exaggeration to assert that most White people have engaged in unintentional and unconscious racism (Dovidio et al., 2002).

The masking of racism in Whiteness is aided through certain socialization processes where Whites are consciously taught the principles of democracy—inclusion, fairness, respect for the rights of all, and most important, equality. The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the U.S. Constitution are used to ingrain in people's conscious minds basic democratic principles that are reinforced in schools and in what governmental leaders consciously express (President's Initiative on Race, 1998). More subtle and less visible, however, are the metacommunications people receive that contradict democratic ideals and reinforce their beliefs in White superiority and minority inferiority. On the one hand, White Americans are taught to believe in democracy and most consciously experience themselves as moral and decent human beings. On the other hand, the subtle and unconscious socialization process that instills in them racial biases is invisible to their conscious psyche. To acknowledge that they have biases, prejudices, and have engaged in racial oppression (albeit unknowingly) violates their self-image and identity as good and moral persons (Ridley, 2005; D. W. Sue, 2005).

Herein lies the Herculean struggle that many White people must win if they are to become allies in the battle against the perpetuation of racism. If they are unwilling to explore their own Whiteness and racism, if they continue to deny that they have biases and prejudices, and if they continue to allow the status quo to be undisturbed, they knowingly or unknowingly have entered into a conspiracy of silence that protects the conditioned meaning of Whiteness (D. W. Sue, 2004). Furthermore, White privilege reinforces the avoidance of looking at how racism oppresses and harms People of Color because it seduces them with the benefits of being White. On one hand, racism systematically denies equal access and opportunities to People of Color and, on the other hand, it unfairly allows another group (Whites) to enjoy those opportunities and privileges (Ridley, 2005). The latter result is what is called "White privilege" (McIntosh, 2002). White privilege has been defined as:

the unearned advantages and benefits that accrues to White folks by virtue of a system normed on the experiences, values, and perceptions of their group. White privilege automatically confers dominance to one group, while subordinating groups of color in a descending relational hierarchy; it owes its existence to White supremacy; it is premised on the mistaken notion of individual meritocracy and deservedness (e.g., hard work and family values) rather than favoritism; it is deeply embedded in the structural, systemic, and culture workings of U.S. society; and it operates within an invisible veil of unspoken and protected secrecy. (D. W. Sue, 2003, p. 137)

From this definition, it is clear that the seductive quality of White privilege keeps Whites feeling good about themselves and reinforces their self-esteem, identity, and existence. Further, it reinforces the belief that their achievements in life are the result of individual effort and the benefits (advantages) they receive are well deserved. It is harder for them to entertain the notion that their advantages are unfairly obtained by virtue of skin color or that their

achievements may be based more on favoritism rather than individual effort and that their self-esteem is linked to White supremacy. Allowing Whiteness to be invisible helps them deny that they benefit from the oppression of others and that they are not responsible for the racial inequities that exist in society. In essence, self-deception and living a false reality (illusion) are rewarded.

Institutional Racism and the Invisibility of Whiteness

The White management team was considering two candidates for promotion to vice president in charge of production. John Chang and Paul Johnson both had MBA degrees and were well respected and liked by coworkers. Paul, however, was the more outgoing, sociable, and “take charge” in relating to people. During team meetings he appeared actively engaged, would not hesitate to express his thoughts and opinions, and seemed to love the limelight. John was seemingly more introspective, relatively quiet and shy in demeanor, and seemed uncomfortable being the center of attention. While the management team felt John to be exceptionally bright and capable, they believed he was not management material and lacked leadership potential. Some described him as inhibited and more a follower than leader. Using their performance appraisal standards, they indicated that the job called for someone who was assertive, forceful, and who could direct projects and delegate tasks. According to these standards, Paul Johnson was the obvious choice.

The decision to promote Paul Johnson was justified on a set of criteria that described what was desired from the vice president in charge of production and on a performance appraisal system that evaluated how the White and Asian American candidates performed on the work site. In essence, it could be argued that the evaluation and selection process were applied equally to both employees and the outcome was fair. If we look more closely at the criteria used for promotion and at the behaviors of both candidates, questions can be raised about the operation of potential systemic discrimination.

First, the behaviors of both candidates may be strongly influenced by cultural factors. Among many Asians and Asian Americans, subtlety and indirectness are highly prized forms of problem solving (S. Sue, D. W. Sue, Zane, & Wong, 1985). One of the dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans is that they make poor leaders, are passive and inhibited, do not relate well to people, and lack creativity in job performance (D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). Such evaluative statements fail to acknowledge how culturally determined behaviors that differ from that valued in the wider society are given negative labels. Second, it's important for us to question whether the performance appraisal system is actually fair (i.e., it predicts successful leadership and increased productivity). Would it make any difference in the evaluation of both candidates to discover that (a) leadership among Asian and Asian Americans may differ from those of White norms and (b) that the criteria used for promotion (e.g., assertiveness) did not predict leadership potential for the Asian American candidate? Among many Asian Americans, leadership is defined as working behind the scenes and building group consensus among team members to increase productivity (D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). Would it make any

difference to the management team to learn that John Chang's work team is the most productive one in the company and that members consider him to be central to their success? In this case, is the performance appraisal system of the company fair, or is it culture bound and thus reinforces a glass ceiling for Asian Americans who wish to rise to higher management positions? Can it be characterized as a form of institutional racism that remains hidden and embedded in company policy?

Institutional racism is any institutional policy, practice, and structure in governments, businesses, unions, schools, places of worship, courts, and law enforcement agencies that unfairly subordinate persons of color while allowing Whites to profit from such actions. Examples include housing patterns, segregated schools, discriminatory employment and promotion policies, racial profiling, inequities in health care, segregated churches, and educational curricula that ignore/distort the history of minorities. Whiteness is systematically embedded in all institutional facets of our society (Lipsitz, 2002). It is often disguised in the form of equal treatment or standard operating procedures (SOPS) that are applied equally to everyone and thus, cannot be accused of being discriminatory (D. W. Sue, 2001).

For example, bank lending practices often consider the creditworthiness of home loans based on location. African Americans residing in Harlem who may wish to borrow against equity in their homes are less likely to obtain loans than a White person residing in New York's Midtown area. While the policy used to determine the size of a loan or if one will even be approved is the same for both parties, it inevitably discriminates against Blacks in Harlem. Yet, banking institutions may claim that their SOPS are applied equally to all groups and individuals, thus no racial discrimination occurs.

When the policies, procedures, laws, and structures of society impede equal access and opportunity or even create unfair disparities in our society against persons of color, we have clear evidence of institutional racism. School tracking systems that unfairly perpetuate inequities; educational testing that is normed and standardized on a White population resulting in culturally biased test instruments; hiring policies and practices that utilize an "old boy's network"; biased curricula, textbooks, and materials that affirm the identity of one group while denigrating others; and inferior education based on the wealth of the school district all exemplify institutional racism. It takes great commitment and courage to attempt to change policies so firmly embedded in the SOPS of organizations and institutions. In many cases, change can only come about through political action and the law.

An example of such action was in the case of *Serrano v. Priest* (Keiter, 1971), where the California Supreme Court ruled that the quality of education for children could not depend on the wealth of a school district and that the method used in property taxation of communities and the formula used for distribution of educational dollars by California violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. The reasoning used by the court was that it unfairly discriminated against People of Color and the

poor by denying them the right to quality public education (Morales & Shear, 2004). The decision has implications far beyond California as most states in the nation continue to engage in identical racial practices. Likewise, is it possible that certain practices in our society also increase disparities in health care, access to mental health services, and basic human rights (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001)? If so, do they also not deny equal protection to those groups that are marginalized by policies and practices of our society?

Whiteness shields the operation of institutional racism by couching it in the language of equal treatment, standard operating procedures, and the equal application of criteria or policy to all groups regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. Unfortunately, the hidden dimensions of policies and practices arise from White normative standards that are quite transparent and invisible. When applied broadly, it has the effect of creating inequitable outcomes to the disadvantage of People of Color, preferential treatment for Whites, and what has been called “non-random victimization” (Ridley, 2005). What our society must realize is that equal treatment can be “discriminatory” (inequitable outcomes) and that differential treatment may not be preferential at all. People of Color may not be asking so much for equal treatment, but fair treatment; fair treatment dictates differential policies and practices consistent with the goals of social justice (equal access and opportunity).

In summary, it goes without saying that the existence of systemic racial barriers (policies and practices) often mirrors the nature of race relations in the United States. Higher status positions in organizations continue to be White dominated, while lower status positions are occupied by People of Color. Performance appraisal systems, management systems, chain of command systems, communication systems, and so forth all mask hidden White standards that disadvantage certain groups and advantage others.

Cultural Racism and the Invisibility of Whiteness

The young Latino student stood in front of his classroom minutes before the school bell was to ring. He spoke rapidly to his brother in Spanish, as they both laughed and joked to one another. The White teacher came out of the classroom to shut the door and to begin her class. When she overheard the two speaking Spanish, she approached them and admonished them to go to their classes. Then she bent over, and in a stern tone of voice stated: “If you people want to succeed in America, you must learn to speak in English. You will fail in school and life unless you learn good English and stop talking in Spanish. Besides, it’s rude to speak a language others don’t understand.”

This reaction from the White teacher to hearing a language other than English spoken continues to occur in one form or another in our schools and in our society in general. One wonders why the teacher reacted so negatively to the students speaking Spanish and one wonders why hearing another language is so disturbing. After all, isn’t being bilingual an asset in our society? Unfortunately, while the teacher may be expressing annoyance and individual

bias toward another language, she is also manifesting cultural racism—the belief that one group’s cultural heritage is superior to another. In this case, English is superior to Spanish.

The actors involved in the manifestations of Whiteness and White supremacy tend to be at three levels: (1) the individual level—dominant group members (White Americans) discriminating against a target group (persons of color); (2) the institutional level—structures, policies, and practices that unfairly treat persons of color; and (3) the cultural level—imposition of White European American cultural heritage on other groups while negating or destroying the cultural heritage of minority groups.

We have already discussed the first two manifestations, but it is the cultural level (like the earlier example) that provides the overarching umbrella of White racism that gives rise to the other two. Cultural racism has been defined in the following ways:

Cultural racism comprises the cumulative effects of a racialized worldview, based on belief in essential racial differences that favor the dominant racial group over others. These effects are suffused throughout the culture via institutional structures, ideological beliefs, and personal everyday actions of people in the culture, and these effects are passed on from generation to generations. (Jones, 1997, p. 472)

Cultural racism is the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group’s, cultural heritage over another group’s (arts, crafts, language, traditions, beliefs, and values) and its imposition on racial/ethnic minority groups. (D. W. Sue, 2003, p. 33)

These two definitions suggest that (a) cultural racism, from a White U.S. perspective, is self-perpetuating because White-supremacist notions are passed from generation to generation; (b) that cultural racism weaves a White worldview that attributes positive qualities to Whites and negative traits to People of Color; and (c) that this racial ideology is manifested in not only individuals but also institutions that affect their lives. These two definitions directly address the issue of ethnocentrism, which is characteristic of most societies where all groups tend to elevate their own ethnic heritage. It may be an overstatement, but it appears normal and natural that most groups express a preference for their own habits, values, and styles of life. The defining feature of cultural racism, however, is the power of one group to impose that worldview on another. In this case, power is the ability to act on the needs, desires, and beliefs of White Americans to control and define the existence of persons of color.

The distorted racial reality of Whiteness allows for the systematic mistreatment and victimization of persons of color in this society. It also allows White Americans to receive unearned benefits and privileges via White privilege. As discussed earlier, the racial reality of White America is a biased and bigoted one that ignores or distorts the history of People of Color, glorifies one group over another, and instills frightening and/or stereotypic racial images of minorities on the general populace (Guthrie, 1998; Jones, 1997). The

United States is a schizophrenic society in that people have been taught that this nation was founded on basic democratic ideals of equality, justice, and inclusion. Why, we may ask, is racism such a problem in our nation? The answer lies in the fact that racism is also part of U.S. culture and probably always will be (Jones, 1997). We are continuously taught undemocratic principles and shameful values of cultural superiority and racist values, beliefs, and practices.

In some ways, cultural racism allows us to understand that everyone whether “red, yellow, black, or white” are victims of a vast socialization process that instills the biases and prejudices of society in us. Although it may be difficult for People of Color to accept, Whites are also victims. I think it safe to say that no one was born wanting to be a bigot or racist. As children, White Americans had no choice in the type of culture they were born into and they had minimal choice other than to take their place in the racial hierarchy that they occupy: that of the oppressor. For White Americans to realize that they have also been victimized in the socialization process, however, does not excuse them from the responsibility to now take action against the unjust forces of racism.

Making the “Invisible” Visible

If we are to overcome, or at least minimize the forces of racism, we must make Whiteness visible. As long as Whiteness remains invisible and is equated with normality and superiority, People of Color will continue to suffer from its oppressive qualities. The challenge before us is how to deconstruct Whiteness at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels. For example, when teachers admonish their Black students to leave their “cultural baggage” outside of the classroom, when Whites assert that they never owned slaves and should not be blamed for the actions of their ancestors, and when the “melting pot” is held up as an ideal, few may be able to see how the hidden forces of Whiteness have determined the reality of the actors involved in these three examples. In the first example, the teacher does not realize that he or she brings his or her Whiteness into the classroom every day. As a result, it is the Whiteness standard unknowingly used by the teacher. In the second case, the statement may be true, but what Whites don’t realize is that they still benefit from the past injustices of their forebears. In other words, the land they took from Native Americans and Japanese Americans, the vast fortunes earned from slavery and the current socioeconomic structures of society are based on the inequities of the past. Whites are the ones who benefit from these arrangements. Last, the melting pot is a myth that promises unconditional acceptance once full assimilation and acculturation occur. For early White ethnic immigrants, this has proven to be somewhat of a reality. What is unseen, however, is that despite how Western or White a person of color becomes in attitudes and values, many doors in society will continue to be closed to him or her. The melting pot is a myth because it assumes (a) a receptive society for persons of color and (b) an equal status relationship between all groups. In that respect, it offers a catch-22 for People of Color.

They are told that it is desirable to assimilate and acculturate, but, even when they do, they are denied full access to the benefits of society because they are not White.

Whiteness is very visible to many People of Color. Whiteness, however, continues to be primarily invisible to White Americans. The ultimate hope for change lies in having Whites (a) actively make "Whiteness" visible, (b) explore themselves as racial/cultural beings, (c) take responsibility for defining Whiteness in a nondefensive and nonracist manner, and (d) take antiracist actions aimed at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Hardiman, 1982, Helms, 1995). To do this, however, White Americans will have to be willing to look at themselves honestly, to confront the truth about themselves and the world, and to liberate themselves from the invisible cultural conditioning of a racialized society.

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Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination

bell hooks

My thinking about representations of whiteness in the black imagination has been stimulated by classroom discussions about the way in which the absence of recognition is a strategy that facilitates making a group the Other. In these classrooms there have been heated debates among students when white students respond with disbelief, shock, and rage, as they listen to black students talk about whiteness, when they are compelled to hear observations, stereotypes, etc., that are offered as “data” gleaned from close scrutiny and study. Usually, white students respond with naive amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where “whiteness” is the privileged signifier. Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical “ethnographic” gaze is itself an expression of racism. Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of “sameness,” even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think. Many of them are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful. Even though the majority of these students politically consider themselves liberals and anti-racist, they too unwittingly invest in the sense of whiteness as mystery.

In white supremacist society, white people can “safely” imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted,

and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze. As fantastic as it may seem, racist white people find it easy to imagine that black people cannot see them if within their desire they do not want to be seen by the dark Other. One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants. An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. These looking relations were reinforced as whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible. Growing up in a Kentucky household where black servants lived in the same dwelling with the white family who employed them, newspaper heiress Sallie Bingham recalls, in her autobiography *Passion and Prejudice*, "Blacks, I realized, were simply invisible to most white people, except as a pair of hands offering a drink on a silver tray." Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility.

Even though legal racial apartheid no longer is a norm in the United States, the habits that uphold and maintain institutionalized white supremacy linger. Since most white people do not have to "see" black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard nor to observe black people to be safe, they can live as though black people are invisible, and they can imagine that they are also invisible to blacks. Some white people may even imagine there is no representation of whiteness in the black imagination, especially one that is based on concrete observation or mythic conjecture. They think they are seen by black folks only as they want to appear. Ideologically, the rhetoric of white supremacy supplies a fantasy of whiteness. Described in Richard Dyer's essay "White," this fantasy makes whiteness synonymous with goodness:

Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. . . . Thus it is said (even in liberal textbooks) that there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger, and that this explains racism (whereas one might well argue about the safety of the cover of darkness, and the danger of exposure to the light); again, and with more justice, people point to the Judaeo-Christian use of white and black to symbolize good and evil, as carried still in such

expressions as “a black mark,” “white magic,” “to blacken the character” and so on.

Socialized to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening, many white people assume this is the way black people conceptualize whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness.

Collectively, black people remain rather silent about representations of whiteness in the black imagination. As in the old days of racial segregation where black folks learned to “wear the mask,” many of us pretend to be comfortable in the face of whiteness only to turn our backs and give expression to intense levels of discomfort. Especially talked about is the representation of whiteness as terrorizing. Without evoking a simplistic, essentialist “us and them” dichotomy that suggests black folks merely invert stereotypical racist interpretations, so that black becomes synonymous with goodness and white with evil, I want to focus on that representation of whiteness that is not formed in reaction to stereotypes but emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs and shapes the way black folks “see” whiteness. Stereotypes black folks maintain about white folks, are not the only representations of whiteness in the black imagination. They emerge primarily as responses to white stereotypes of blackness. Speaking about white stereotypes of blackness as engendering a trickle-down process, where there is the projection on an Other of all that we deny about ourselves, Lorraine Hansberry in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (1969) identifies particular stereotypes about white people that are commonly cited in black communities and urges us not to “celebrate this madness in any direction”:

Is it not “known” in the ghetto that white people, as an entity, are “dirty” (especially white women—who never seem to do their own cleaning); inherently “cruel” (the cold, fierce roots of Europe; who else could put all those people into ovens *scientifically*); “smart” (you really have to hand it to the m.f.’s); and anything *but* cold and passionless (because look who has had to live with little else than their passions in the guise of love and hatred all these centuries)? And so on.

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken—are not allowed.

Looking past stereotypes to consider various representations of whiteness in the black imagination, I appeal to memory, to my earliest recollections of ways these issues were raised in black life. Returning to memories of growing up in

the social circumstances created by racial apartheid, to all-black spaces on the edges of town, I reinhabit a location where black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing. White people were regarded as terrorists, especially those who dared to enter that segregated space of blackness. As a child, I did not know any white people. They were strangers, rarely seen in our neighborhoods. The “official” white men who came across the tracks were there to sell products, Bibles and insurance. They terrorized by economic exploitation. What did I see in the gazes of those white men who crossed our thresholds that made me afraid, that made black children unable to speak? Did they understand at all how strange their whiteness appeared in our living rooms, how threatening? Did they journey across the tracks with the same “adventurous” spirit that other white men carried to Africa, Asia, to those mysterious places they would one day call the “third world”? Did they come to our houses to meet the Other face-to-face and enact the colonizer role, dominating us on our own turf? Their presence terrified me. Whatever their mission, they looked too much like the unofficial white men who came to enact rituals of terror and torture. As a child, I did not know how to tell them apart, how to ask the “real white people to please stand up.”

* * *

In the absence of the reality of whiteness, I learned as a child that to be “safe,” it was important to recognize the power of whiteness, even to fear it, and to avoid encounter. There was nothing terrifying about the sharing of this knowledge as survival strategy, the terror was made real only when I journeyed from the black side of town to a predominantly white area near my grandmother’s house. I had to pass through this area to reach her place. Describing these journeys “across town” in the essay “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” I remembered:

It was a movement away from the segregated blackness of our community into a poor white neighborhood. I remember the fear, being scared to walk to Baba’s, our grandmother’s house, because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness—those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant those porches seemed to say *danger*, you do not belong here, you are not safe.

Oh! that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of our grandfather, Daddy Gus, sitting in his chair on the porch, smell his cigar, and rest on his lap. Such a contrast, that feeling of arrival, of homecoming—this sweetness and the bitterness of that journey, that constant reminder of white power and control.

Even though it was a long time ago that I made this journey, associations of whiteness with terror and the terrorizing remain. Even though I live and move in spaces where I am surrounded by whiteness, there is no comfort that makes the terrorism disappear. All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness.

* * *

In contemporary society, white and black people alike believe that racism no longer exists. This erasure, however mythic, diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black imagination. It allows for assimilation and forgetfulness. The eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality, is a response to the terror, but it has also become a way to perpetuate the terror by providing a cover, a hiding place. Black people still feel the terror, still associate it with whiteness, but are rarely able to articulate the varied ways we are terrorized because it is easy to silence by accusations of reverse racism or by suggesting that black folks who talk about the ways we are terrorized by whites are merely evoking victimization to demand special treatment.

Notes

1. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988):44–64.
2. Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

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Dead Black Man, Just Walking

William David Hart

This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about.

George Zimmerman's 911 call¹

Introduction

Trayvon Martin was dead before his deadly encounter with George Zimmerman. His execution (I use this loaded word intentionally) was a post-mortem event; a ratification after the fact of the facts of black male being-in-America. Though I write about the existential conditions of black male life, I should note that the lives of black Americans of all genders have always been priced cheaply, though the cost they are made to pay is dear. The existential chasm between the price of taking a black man's life and the cost borne by the one who loses that life (the sum of the loss, always being greater than one) are vast. Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, but he was dead before the bullet traveled a lethal path through his body. To be a black man is to be marked for death. How do these marks appear? How is it that the black male body "presents itself" as an object to be killed? According to

what semiotic is the black male body marked for death? In this chapter, I trace a backward looking genealogy of the marks and the signs of Trayvon Martin's "untimely" death.

The Shadow of Death

No one has explored the concept of social death more thoroughly than Orlando Patterson. It is a concept that is central to his comparative, historical, and sociological analysis of slavery.² According to Patterson, the slave is a subject of dishonor. Natively alienated, she has been forcibly cut off from ties of birth to "both ascending and descending generations," from ancestors and descendants. Deracinated, she has lost her country, her status as a native. Making matters worse, her condition is permanent and inheritable. Insofar as enslavement is a substitute for death, she lives only because her master suffers it to be so. Violently uprooted, desocialized, depersonalized, and dishonored (despised and devalued), the slave is "a stranger in a strange land." Subject to chronic violence, she is marked for death. She (the prototypical slave is female) is a "dead woman walking." Given these realities, most slaveholding societies "define the slave as a socially dead person." Socially dead but biologically alive, the slave, according to the ancient Egyptians, is a member of the "living dead,"³ an in-between thing, a *tertium quid*. Though black Americans are no longer subject to the *social death* of slavery, a large minority is subject to *civic death*. As a result of this legacy and contemporary reality, all black people, especially black males, are subject to a *virtual probation*. The presumption is that black people are disposed to criminality; they are guilty until proven innocent. George Zimmerman did not have to harbor conscious racial animus against black people to conclude that Trayvon Martin was a criminal or otherwise dangerous. Martin's body—black and male—did all the signifying work. As the Martin case shows, signs can kill, can lead interpreters to conclude that they must kill.

There will be those who will try to decontextualize and dehistoricize the killing of Trayvon Martin. Social death, they might argue, is history. Though it may tell us much about the past, it tells us nothing about the present and the specificity of the Martin case. Those who subscribe to this view may claim that white supremacy and racism—defined as political and economic structures, social practices, and cultural ideas that systematically advantage white people⁴—are vestigial. They might assert that the United States is a postracial society, that disparities between white people and nonwhite people, especially black Americans, have little or nothing to do with the white supremacy, racial ideology, and the practices of racism. To clinch their argument, they might point to the election of Barack Obama as president. Following Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's analysis, I regard this view as "colorblind racism." As the dominant expression of racism in post-civil rights America, colorblindness underwrites the contemporary phenomenon of "racism without racists." Though racial disparities are frankly acknowledged in this postracial

regime, they are attributed to causes other than white supremacy, such as the cultural pathology of those groups at the bottom of a “nonracist racial hierarchy.” If there are “faces at the bottom of the well,” their bad habits put them there.⁵

Colorblind racism obscures the legacy of social death, the ongoing crisis of civil death, and the virtual probation that shadows the lives of black Americans. Civil death refers to “the legal status of a person who is alive but who has been deprived of the rights and privileges of a citizen or a member of society; the legal status of one sentenced to life imprisonment.”⁶ Such a person has been deprived of their civil rights—especially the right to vote. The first clause of the Thirteenth Amendment reads as follows: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The amendment simultaneously abolished slavery and codified a penal exception: slavery is a constitutionally sanctioned punishment for crime. In one of the great ironies of American history, the same amendment that freed Africans from chattel slavery legitimates the penal enslavement of their African American descendants. Symbolic of penal servitude, women give birth while shackled and chained. While others are also subject to penal enslavement, black Americans suffer this fate disproportionately and massively. As slaves of the state (behind prison walls or on a chain gang), they are often denied the right to vote. According to Alex C. Ewald, the disenfranchisement of ex-felons is “akin to the medieval condition of ‘civil death’”⁷ under which a person was deprived of all civil rights. Post-Reconstruction Southern states “re-wrote their criminal disenfranchisement provisions with the express intent of excluding blacks from the suffrage.”⁸ Some white officials spoke openly of eliminating the “darkey as a political factor” and ensuring “complete supremacy of the white race in the affairs of government.” Crimes that were regarded as peculiarly “black” such as bigamy and vagrancy, which were common as a result of the dislocating effects of slavery and emancipation, were added to one state’s list of disenfranchisable offenses.⁹ Black life was criminalized.

Though outside prison walls “proper,” segregation is a form of confinement, a way of restricting mobility, rendering a population captive, making their labor easier to exploit. Slavery and neo-slavery (peonage, debt-tenant farming, and convict-lease system) have been the major regimes for exploiting black labor. Confining black people to the agricultural and domestic sectors was a way of restricting economic competition and mobility. Segregation is among other things a spatial relation between black and white bodies, even if and especially if, the distance is a matter of affect and attitude; the “pathos of distance,” rather than the distance of Newtonian space. Constraining black mobility (fundamentally, the freedom to be, the freedom to move) is a consistent thread in American history. Unless they are marked as servile or as exceptions, blacks in social space are regarded as an invasive species that needs to be carefully monitored, controlled, and possibly uprooted.

Slaves were subject to chronic violence and dishonor. These conditions characterized black life in America during successive and overlapping eras of chattel slavery (1619–1865), neoslavery (1877–1940), segregation (1876–1969), and mass incarceration/colorblindness (1967–present). From slave codes to black codes to segregation laws to the codes of colorblind racism, black people have been constructed by an *incarcerating-and-carceral gaze*.¹⁰ Black people are induced to normalize the gaze of white supremacy, to internalize the surveillance, to discipline and punish themselves. In concert with the criminal justice system, the dynamics of carceral subject formation conspires to imprison them. Within the white American imagination, black Americans are regarded with animosity, contempt and suspicion. Even small groups are regarded as insurrectionary or riotous.¹¹ Drawing on Orlando Patterson’s analysis of dishonor and social death and Erving Goffman’s analysis of stigma, Glenn Loury argues that black people are the subjects of a “spoiled collective identity.”¹² Distinguishing racial stereotyping from racial stigma, Loury notes that whereas the former “concerns an observer’s anticipation of acts that are thought to be associated with, but are not necessarily coextensive with, the subject, stigma invokes the observer’s (perhaps not consciously acknowledged) perception of qualities thought to be essential to the make-up of the subject.”¹³ Racial stigma is enigmatic, going beyond “rational” but mistaken acts of generalization characteristic of stereotyping. Supported by subterranean fantasies that construe black people as primordial and existential threats to white people, which inverts and perverts the historical relations between black and white, stigma—the construction of black Americans as dangerous and defective—feeds America’s bizarre racial reality. This reality is so bizarre that it renders many Americans colorblind—unable to see the obvious: the reality of white supremacy and racial stigma.

The black man moves. Where he moves is secondary if not irrelevant to the fact *that* he moves. His moves are perceived through the kind of body he has, through the way his body is marked, through the body’s status as flesh. Phenomenologically speaking, the basic expression of animal freedom, human or otherwise, is the ability to be, to occupy space and move. Self-directed movement is how the most rudimentary freedom appears to us. From the very beginning of their enslavement by Europeans in the fifteenth century to the age of Obama, there has been a desire to confine black people. The fugitive slave is the primordial criminal in the American imagination. From the moment the first slave attempted to escape, black people have been constructed as criminals. Michelle Alexander gets many things right in her provocative study *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. However, one might quibble with her use of Jim Crow as a metaphor for the mass imprisonment of black people. More questionable, is her use of caste as a synonym for Jim Crow. The cultural logics of the two are very different. “Caste” distorts the nature of white supremacy and racial ideology. I also think that Alexander errs when she claims that black people are constructed as criminals at the point of arrest.¹⁴ Long before they encounter the police, black people are suspect. Criminalization precedes arrest and

detention. Black Americans have long been suspect, illegitimate, the subject of a “spoiled collective identity” that is rooted in their enslavement. Over time, this suspicion has assumed different forms and has become granular in its capacity to allow for exceptions. (Of course, these exceptions are not always exceptional as Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates discovered when he fell under suspicion and was arrested by the Cambridge, Massachusetts, police for the crime of entering his own home.) These exceptions to the pervasive suspicion of blackness enable those who do not wish to see to remain blind. Black people are the prototypical “usual suspects,” always already under suspicion. *Free from his master’s supervision, the escaped slave was out of place.* Just walking around, adorned in the clothes of a slave or not, near the antebellum equivalent of a gated community of not, he appears suspicious to the white observer. Something is not right. “He looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around, looking about.” With these comments to the police dispatcher, George Zimmerman channeled the history of antiblack perception.

Virtual Probation

Black people are objects of a criminogenic gaze. They are constructed as criminals. Regardless of the race and gender of the perceivers, black people, especially black males, are perceived as criminal. The virtual unanimity of this perception (a transracial consensus) is an artifact of white supremacy. To paraphrase Marx, the perceptions of the dominant race are the dominant perceptions.¹⁵ They govern a common perceptual economy. Thus everyone “knows” that black people are disposed to criminality. The fear of slave insurrections (think: the Haitian Revolution) and the construction of black males as brutes underwrite the perception. Black people were subjected to the historical crimes of slavery, neoslavery, and segregation. But white supremacy and racial ideology construe black people as prototypically criminal. (This is an irony of American history that the Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr does not address.) If resisting slavery is the paradigmatic crime, then resisting segregation and constraints on their ability to move and occupy social space, exemplified by the ordinary activity of “walking around” (walking while black), replicates that paradigmatic act. These facts should capture the attention of psychologists and psychoanalysts. Indeed, these facts are constitutive components of America’s racialized common sense. This perception is counterfactual. Black people are perceived as always already guilty of crime (or of being predisposed) in the absence of evidence, even in the presence of contrary evidence. Black criminality is ontological. If you think that this claim is exaggerated, then consider the remarks of former Secretary of Education William Bennett. Speaking of the relations between race and crime, he remarks: “But I do know that it’s true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down.”¹⁶

Ignoring history and context, and with a rhetorical flourish that might reveal an unconscious desire, Bennett, recipient of a PhD in philosophy, ontologizes black criminality. He “knows” what everyone knows. And when George Zimmerman encountered Trayvon Martin on the evening of February 26, 2012, he “knew.”

To be the object of this kind of “knowledge,” to be *known* as Zimmerman *knows* you, is to be a subject of virtual probation. Part of the disagreeable if not unfair part of being on probation is that you become one of the “usual suspects.” When crimes occur in the local area, the police come looking for you. They treat you disrespectfully, pressure you to confess to crimes, provide information they presume you have, and threaten to arrest you. With impunity if not immunity, they make your life miserable. They rough you up and beat you down. You have little recourse. Who would believe you if you complained? The police have presumptive moral and epistemic credibility, you do not. You are trapped by your status as a convict. Civically speaking, you are virtually dead. As with the juridical subjects of actual probation, the subjects of virtual probation are always under suspicion, subject to question, to being stopped and frisked, in danger of being deprived of their liberty, if not their life. Because everyone knows that they are dangerous and disposed to criminality, “reasonable people” take proper precautions. Behavior regarded as normal, ordinary, and innocuous when performed by white people can reasonably be regarded as threatening when the actor is black. Simple movements such as holding one’s wallet or searching for one’s keys are construed as deadly threats. Revelers at a black bachelor party are construed by police officers who encounter them as existential threats. Clothing worn by young people across racial lines such as “hoodies” is viewed as a marker of criminal danger when worn by black people. It should go without saying that the problem is not the hoodie but the body in the hoodie. It is the body that *marks* the hoodie and makes the ordinary behavior of just walking a suspicious act.

There is a bit of art in my use of the term criminogenic. I do not claim that the gaze of white supremacy causes black people to commit crime. My point is about the subjects of the gaze rather than the objects. It is about the effects of the gaze on those who perceive black people. The subject position of “white observer” can be occupied by members of any race. To put it crudely, black people see black people through white eyes. *The perceptions of the dominant race are the dominant perceptions.* This dominance is part of what makes the subject-constructing gaze of white supremacy structural, material, and discursive rather than merely subjective. The fact that these criminogenic perceptions are dominant does not mean that they are not contested. People do resist; black people resist. But that contestation occurs within a discursive context of white dominance that positions both the observing subject who is normatively white and the observed subject who is prototypically black. Normative whiteness (panoptic whiteness) seeds the ground and scripts the nature of perception. Glenn Loury describes a feedback loop between white subjects and black objects of the gaze. Black people realize that they are being

perceived negatively and react in ways that reinforce the initial perception. Their body tenses. They become visibly irritated by the fact that they are negatively perceived. They realize that however they react, their actions are likely to be read negatively. Subject to the gaze of panoptic whiteness, some attempt to manage the situation by “whistling Vivaldi”—exaggerating their safe, non-threatening quality.¹⁷ Others act out the negative perception as a way, paradoxically, of freeing themselves from its tyranny, as if to say: “you can think *that* is who I am if you wish but I refuse to exaggerate my innocence, to manage my affect and behavior to make you comfortable; I refuse to become a prisoner of your biased perception.” Accompanied by an angry glare or sardonic smile, this refusal to make the observer comfortable *confirms* the initial perception. Such is the racial pathology of everyday life. The *relational space* between black people and white people, between black bodies and those who perceive them across race and gender is fraught. Where black female *flesh* signals impurity (dirty sex), black male *flesh* signifies danger (including violent sex).

Loury remarks, “When the meanings connoted by race-symbols undermine an observing agent’s ability to see their bearer as a person possessing a common humanity with the observer—‘as someone not unlike the rest of us’—then I will say that this person is ‘racially stigmatized,’ and that the group to which he belongs suffers a ‘spoiled collective identity.’”¹⁸ Trayvon Martin was the victim of such spoilage. This conclusion does not require the assumption that Zimmerman had racist feelings toward Martin. It is perfectly consistent with the third-party claim that he did not. It might even be consistent with the claim that Zimmerman, far from being Afrophobic, is an Afrophile. Zimmerman might truthfully say that some of his best friends are black. As Michelle Alexander remarks, “The fact that you may honestly believe that you are not biased against African Americans, and that you may even have black friends or relatives, does not mean that you are free from unconscious bias. Implicit bias tests may still show that you hold negative attitudes and stereotypes about blacks, even though you do not believe you do and do not want to.”¹⁹ (These same tests show that black Americans share this implicit antiblack bias.) These racial complexities should be common knowledge. Bias is compatible with interracial intimacy. After all, white masters fathered children with black slaves; arch segregationist Strom Thurmond fathered a black daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, with Carrie Butler, a sixteen-year-old household servant. Afrophobia does not preclude a love of black culture, even if it appears as caricature and ridicule. Thus minstrel shows were the dominant form of entertainment in the nineteenth century, and their radio and televised descendants persisted through the twentieth century.

Nothing illustrates the impoverished quality of racial knowledge (the power of resistance and denial) more than the notion that in the absence of racial epithets racism is absent; that racism is reducible to animus-bearing words. We see the quest to discover whether Zimmerman said nigger or similar words (the holy grail of journalistic accounts of racism), as if the presence

or absence of specific words settles the question of whether the killing of Martin was racially motivated. Concomitant with this unholy quest to document specific utterances—a kind of linguistic atomism that ignores weighty matters of context and history—are discussions of whether the killing was a hate crime, as if white supremacy can be reduced to hate. (Did Strom Thurmond hate Carrie Butler when he had sex with her? Did Jefferson hate Sally Hemings?) Colorblindness is remarkable. It is remarkable how often the denial of animus toward black Americans doubles as a denial of racial ideology *structured* by white supremacy.²⁰ The issue here is not about feelings, attitudes, animus; it's about information: how information-hungry agents process observational data regarding human bodies when some are racially marked and the associated identity is stigmatized.²¹ What cries for analysis is why Martin's behavior (just walking in the rain) struck Zimmerman as criminally suspicious rather than merely curious or unremarkable. It was Martin's *marked* body that made the *unremarkable* behavior of just walking *remarkable*. Whether they intended to do so or not, Zimmerman and the police dispatcher collaborated in imposing a "virtual identity"²² on Trayvon Martin. A criminal *doppelgänger*, this virtual identity had nothing to do with his real identity. The real Martin was victimized by the virtual Martin that racial stigma has made and that positioned Zimmerman as observing subject. Perceiving a correspondence between physical marks (black skin, male gender) and disposition, Zimmerman and the police dispatcher regard Martin as trouble, probably a criminal. Together they re-created the signifying power of white supremacy and racial ideology. Working backward from the dispatcher to Zimmerman, we learn that Martin is black, that he is walking in the rain, that he appears to be on drugs or some other mind-altering substance, and that he appears to be up to no good.

The Whitopian Imagination

Glenn Loury criticizes advocates of colorblindness who claim that race is a "figment of the pigment." On the contrary, he argues, race is the "enigma of the stigma."²³ Figments and stigma can kill. Martin's virtual probation was revoked with lethal force when Zimmerman decided that he did not belong in the neighborhood. He died as the victim of a virtual identity. Martin was guest in the home of his father's girlfriend who lived in a racially mixed gated community where Zimmerman also resided. According to the journalist Rich Benjamin, "Mr. Martin's 'suspicious' profile amounted to more than his black skin. He was profiled as young, loitering, non-property-owning and poor. Based on their actions, police officers clearly assumed Mr. Zimmerman was the private property owner and Mr. Martin the dangerous interloper." What else could have prompted the police to treat Mr. Martin like a criminal, instead of Mr. Zimmerman, to drug- and alcohol-test a black corpse, but not a living perpetrator?²⁴ These are good questions.

Benjamin associates the Martin tragedy with the proliferation of White Meccas and Wonderlands, Caucasian Arcadias, Blanched Bunker Communities,

and White Archipelagos. His preferred term for this phenomenon is Whitopia. “A Whitopia (pronounced why • *toh* • pee • uh) is whiter than the nation, its respective region, and its state. It has posted at least 6 percent population growth since 2000. The majority of that growth (often upward of 90 percent) is from white migrants. And a Whitopia has a *je ne sais quoi*—an ineffable social charisma, a pleasant look and feel.”²⁵ Whitopias are attractive places, and their residents associate their charm with racial homogeneity. They regard Latino immigration as a time bomb and associate Latinos with crime and tax-supported social services. “Whitopia is more hostile to immigration, legal and illegal, than the nation at large.”²⁶ But black people are the other against which these communities primarily define themselves.²⁷ Whitopia is what white flight looks like today. Benjamin identifies three kinds of whitopian communities: small towns, boom towns, and dream towns; modest-income, blue-collar communities, high-income, professional-oriented communities; and the enclaves of the super wealthy.²⁸ Benjamin notes that Whitopia is produced by both push and pull factors. Migrants to Whitopia, including a few nonwhites, seek to escape stagnant job markets, expensive housing markets, deteriorating public infrastructure and services, traffic congestion, child-hostile neighborhoods, and social problems (especially crime) they associate with blackness. In contrast, they are lured to Whitopia by virtues—“higher property values, friendliness, orderliness, hospitality, cleanliness, safety, and comfort”—they associate with whiteness.²⁹ In a *New York Times* op-ed on the Trayvon Martin killing, Benjamin calls this ensemble of black/white, negative and positive associations the “gated community mentality.”³⁰

Bodies signify. The semiotics of the black body has much to do with its particular location. Like “matter out of place,”³¹ black bodies out of place are threatening. They threaten to pollute the space they inhabit through various kinds of contagion (especially crime). Whether black people live there or not, black bodies do not belong in whitopian spaces.³² As desire and often as matters of fact, gated communities are whitopian spaces. The presence of black bodies spoils the whitopian dream: an imaginary (utopian) space devoid of black people. The dream of being rid of black people is as old as the republic: Jefferson had it, de Tocqueville wrote about it, and Lincoln shared it. Though he was just walking around, Martin’s very presence disturbed the ineffable qualities, the *je ne sais quoi* of the gated community. In that whitopian space, Martin was perceived as an *illegal alien*. One hears an ominous echo from the past, “Nigger, don’t let the sun go down on you in this town.”³³

Notes

1. <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/326700-full-transcript-zimmerman.html>

2. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

3. Patterson, 7, 9, 38, 42.

4. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 9.

5. Bonilla-Silva, 2–4.

6. <http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/civil%20death>

7. Alex C. Ewald, “‘Civil Death’: The Ideological Paradox of Criminal Disfranchisement Law in the United States.” *Wisconsin Law Review* 5 (January 2012): 1045–132.

8. Ewald, 1063–64.

9. Ewald, 1087–88, 1089.

10. For a thorough account of “The Carceral,” see the last section of Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

11. During my tenure at Duke University, a white colleague approached me and two other black faculty members and joked about our plans to riot. This kind of joke is fairly common.

12. Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 67.

13. Loury, 161.

14. “So long as large numbers of African Americans continue to be arrested and labeled drug criminals, they will continue to be relegated to a permanent second-class status upon their release, no matter how much (or how little) time they spend behind bars. The system of mass incarceration is based on the prison label, not prison time” (Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* [New York: The New Press, 2012], 14).

15. See Bonilla-Silva, 9. Bonilla-Silva is playing on Marx’s famous claim that the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas.

16. On May 7, 2012 Mark Zuckerberg the Facebook Wunderkind and CEO showed up at a meeting with potential Wall Street investors dressed in a hoodie. While some were annoyed with his attire, there was no suggestion of danger or criminality. His hoodie may have marked him as disrespectful of Wall Street’s sartorial norms but did not mark him as criminal. See http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/09/tech/social-media/zuckerberg-hoodie-wall-street/index.html?hpt=hp_t2.

17. Loury, 23, 27–28, 50.

18. Loury, 67.

19. Alexander, 107.

20. See Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (New York: UNESCO, 1980).

21. Loury, 66–67.

22. For a discussion of the concept, see Loury, 60–61.

23. Loury, 141–46.

24. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/30/opinion/the-gated-community-mentality.html>.

25. Rich Benjamin, *Searching for Whitopia: An Improbable Journey to the Heart of White America* (New York: Hyperion), 5.

26. Benjamin, 76–77, 80, 82.

27. Benjamin, 118.

28. Benjamin, 12–13.
29. Benjamin, 8.
30. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/30/opinion/the-gated-community-mentality.html>.
31. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984/1966), 44.
32. One might argue that Florida's "stand your ground" law codifies "racially constructed" notions of reasonable suspicion and fear. It reinscribes the prevailing perception of black people as criminals, as guilty until proven innocent. Black people cannot reasonably expect to have any grounds on which to stand. *They are groundless*. Their perceptions are groundless. Their fear (as Trayvon Martin feared) of a "crazy creepy" man pursuing them in the night, questioning their right to occupy space, to stand their ground, is groundless.
33. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2005), 25, 41.

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Questions for Thinking, Writing, and Discussion for Part One

1. What does Richard Dyer mean when he says that “racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world”? Do you agree or disagree? Argue for your answer by providing lots of specific examples to support your position.
2. Harlon Dalton suggests that most white people tend to not think of themselves in racial terms. What does he mean when he says this? Do you agree with him?
3. Derald Wing Sue writes that in the United States we are taught principles of democracy, such as inclusion, fairness, and equality, and yet racism persists. How does Sue explain this contradiction?
4. Sue defines institutional racism as any “policy, practice, and structure in governments, businesses, unions, schools, places of worship, courts and law enforcement agencies that unfairly subordinate persons of color while allowing Whites to profit from such actions.” Write about an example of institutional racism that you have witnessed in your lifetime. Which institutions were involved, who was harmed, and who benefited?
5. Using the definition that Sue offers, explain the term *cultural racism* in your own words. Write about examples of cultural racism that you have observed or experienced. What messages about race were being communicated and how were they delivered?
6. bell hooks writes: “In a white supremacist society, white people can ‘safely’ imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze.” What does it mean to have the right to control the black gaze? How does she elaborate on her claim?
7. Dyer, hooks, Dalton, and Sue are concerned with what they call “the invisibility of whiteness.” How can something be invisible if it’s everywhere?
8. What does Hart mean by “colorblind racism,” and what are its consequences? What does it prevent us from seeing?

9. Hart writes about how a long history of anti-black perception informs the way black people in the United States are currently seen. What connections does he make between history and today? Are there additional connections that you can make?
10. Hart writes about how the mobility of black people has been constrained historically and today. Can you think of additional examples of how the mobility of black people has been constrained?
11. What does Hart mean by “criminogenic gaze”? How does it put black people on “virtual probation”?
12. Can you remember how you learned to understand yourself in racial terms? What messages did you receive and where did these messages come from?
13. Why do the authors in this section believe it is important to study whiteness?

Part

2

Whiteness: The Power of the Past

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The Roots of Racial Classification

Philip C. Wander, Judith N. Martin, and Thomas K. Nakayama

Skin color (whiteness, blackness, yellowness, etc.) remains a concern in the late 20th century, not because it advances the mission of multiculturalism, helps us to understand different people, or allows us, as individuals, to congratulate ourselves on our “color blindness,” but because skin color has been used to rank order people for practical things like jobs, promotions, loans, and housing (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). The social significance of color also reveals itself in our poverty statistics. In 1986, the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a report titled *Economic Justice and the U.S. Economy*. Harsh poverty, they observed, plagues our country despite its great wealth. Thirty-three million Americans are poor and another 20 to 30 million are needy. This problem, however, does not fall evenly on the population:

These burdens fall most heavily on blacks, Hispanics and native Americans. Even more disturbing is the large increase in the number of women and children living in poverty. Today children are the largest single group among the poor. This tragic fact seriously threatens the nation's future. That so many people are poor in a nation as rich as ours is a social and moral scandal that we cannot ignore. (Catholic Bishops, 1991, p. 579)

Nearly 10 years later the statistics have, if anything, gotten worse. “Whiteness” does not stand alone. It draws part of its meaning from what it means to be nonwhite.

How did the concept of “whiteness” develop historically? How does it function in both the historical and contemporary United States? This seems to be

a moment in the United States to take a new approach to discussions of race, identity, and communication. Our goal is to provide a *sociohistorical* basis for discussions of race that allows us to contextualize thought and behavior and move beyond discussions of individual racism.

. . . Whiteness refers to a *historical systemic structural* race-based superiority. Using the construct of whiteness allows a discussion where no *one* is a racist and permits an exploration of ways in which some people happily if unwittingly benefit from and informally reproduce patterns established by racism. Throughout this discussion, we emphasize that whiteness, like other categories, is “leaky”; that is, race can *only* be seen in relation to other categories, such as class, gender, sexuality, and so on, that render any category problematic.

Racial Categories in the Nineteenth Century

The roots of racial classification emerge from the naturalistic science of the 18th and 19th centuries. During this time, scientific studies extended the classifications of humankind developed by zoologists and physical anthropologists by systematically measuring and describing differences in hair texture, skin color, average height, and cranial capacity in various races. These studies reflected a naturalist tradition—an assumption that the physical world had an intrinsically hierarchical order in which whites were the last and most developed link in “the great chain of being” (Webster, 1992, p. 4). . . .

How were these categories used socially and politically? To answer these questions, we must examine the historical contexts in which this scholarship occurred. This scholarship occurred during a period of global expansion by European powers and of westward expansion in the United States. The research on racial categories supported these efforts—often aimed at subjugating nonwhite peoples (Foner & Rosenberg, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994).

Anthropologists and Egyptologists found evidence of cultural, social, technological, and spiritual inferiority of nonwhite races throughout human history. These conclusions were corroborated by colonial officials and newspaper reports that described and discussed the inferiority of nonwhites in colonies and potential colonies throughout the world.

From Racial Classification to Race Theory

By using the research findings described above, race theory helped to explain and justify the expansion and colonizing by white peoples, their subjugation of nonwhite peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Orient, and the continuing domination of nonwhite peoples—slaves, peasants, aborigines, and the poor at home.

This attitude was also promoted by religious institutions. Presidents, scholars, theologians, and the elites in Europe and the United States in the 19th century proclaimed that the mission of the white race was to “civilize and Christianize” the heathen, the savages, the less fortunate—all lesser beings in God’s creation. Defenders of slavery and colonialism claimed that these efforts

were in fact a blessing to Africans—who by their biological inferiority were incapable of taking the first steps to civilization. This civilizing mission often included armed intervention and the establishment of empires, like Great Britain, that stretched around the world (Webster, 1992).

There was often fierce resistance. Colonial slaughter took the lives of tens of millions of people, six million in the Belgian Congo alone. There are many accounts of slave resistance in the United States, and there were white men and women who fought against white supremacy in the United States, in spite of the obvious benefits this supremacy afforded them (Aptheker, 1992; Chaudhuri & Strobel, 1992).

At first there were white and black slaves who suffered alike from the overwhelming English and European passion for material and spiritual expansion. A closer look at U.S. colonial history reveals the move from racial classification to racialization—as *slave* and *black* become synonymous. According to some scholars, this move was due to two unique characteristics of the American colonial experience. The first was the prevailing attitude toward property. For centuries, Europeans held a firm belief that the best in life was the expansion of self through property and property began and ended with possession of one's body (Kovel, 1984, p. 18). However, this law was violated by New World slavery, and it differed in this way from other slave systems. The slave owners, in proclaiming ownership of the bodies of slaves, detached the body from the self and then reduced this self to subhuman status (justified by the racial categorization system). Slave property became totally identified with people who happened to have black skin, the color that had always horrified the West (Kovel, 1984, p. 21).

The second characteristic revolves around the institutionalizing of slavery in the formation of the nation. There was some antislavery activity around the time of the War for Independence, but when the time came to structure the nation, the interests of property asserted themselves and the slave-race complex became part of the American culture and was made official in the Constitution where black slaves were quantified as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation. Thus, the paradox of U.S. history: that the ideal of freedom is historically rooted in the institution of slavery and the two inextricably racialized (Morgan, 1975).

You might think that because skin color was so central to the law, that “whiteness” and “blackness” were carefully defined and easy to understand. They were defined by law, but they were not easy to understand in practice. The best minds in the Old South tried valiantly over the years to draw a legal line to define who was white and who was black, in order to maintain a racial hierarchy. The inferior were, by God's will, destined to be enslaved by the superior. Such was the happy blend of theology and race theory advanced by spokespersons for the master class (Wander, 1972).

But not all black people were slaves. There were free black people, even in the South. Some of them prospered and even owned slaves. On the slave plantations in the 19th century, there were dark-skinned slaves and there were slaves who were lighter-skinned than their “white” masters. Antebellum

newspapers in the South sometimes carried stories about “white” children almost sold at auction.

Most white people in the Old South did not own slaves. Slave owners were a small but extremely powerful minority. When agitating for secession from the United States, they faced opposition from white farmers and workers who did not own slaves and did not idealize slavery as a way of organizing working-class people. Counties in Northern Alabama, a hilly country populated by white farmers and unsuitable for plantation agriculture, voted against secession.

Some members of the master class had reservations about slavery. The diaries of the wives of plantation owners at times reflect an awareness of their own condition as the property of males in their family who had complete control over their money and property. Some of these women expressed misgivings about the way their sons and husbands were “using” female slaves. Others expressed anger over how this “property” was misleading their husbands and sons.

There were white Southerners who objected to slavery. There were white Northerners who opposed its abolition. In the South, PSWMs (propertied, straight, white males) tended to defend slavery, especially those who held property in slaves; in the North, PSWMs tended to oppose or refuse to take a stand on abolition. In part, this related to interests linking wealthy people together, as in the case of the production of cotton in the South and its purchase by mill owners in the North, but it also related, in part, to the nature of the Abolitionist movement.

Abolitionism was the first mass-based movement in this country. It included blacks and whites, men and women, religious and nonreligious people. Those outside this movement sometimes found this alarming. Along with condemning slavery, abolitionists condemned the idea that working-class people, black or white, should be treated as slaves (a view advanced by the upper class in the South who argued that chattel slaves in the South were better off than “wage” slaves in the North). They also denounced a system in which women, black or white, were treated as property by men (Fuller, 1855/1971). Abolitionists not only wanted to abolish slavery, they wanted to abolish other forms of involuntary servitude as well, and this had implications for relations between the North and the South (Aptheker, 1989).

White abolitionists opposed slavery and sometimes worked with black people in the process, but they did not necessarily believe in racial equality. In part, among the abolitionists, were a society of people (“colonizationists”) dedicated to sending black people back to Africa (Wander, 1971). When Frederick Douglass, a leading abolitionist, spoke to white and black audiences, white people sometimes came up afterward and touched his cheek. They could not believe a black man could be so brilliant an orator. They thought he might have boot-black on his face. Abraham Lincoln was a colonizationist. He believed in the racial superiority of white people, though he thought black people ought to be paid a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. People in the South thought he was an abolitionist in disguise. Abolitionists thought he was wishy-washy.

The above hints at the complexity of thinking about “whiteness” (and “blackness”) in U.S. history. The confusion and the horror surrounding these

complexities emerged, after the Civil War, in Jim Crow laws designed to keep the “races” apart. The law, pressured by the leaky nature of racial categories, devised a “one drop” theory—if you had one drop of “nonwhite blood” in your veins, you could not qualify as white. Not qualifying as white had, as the history of slavery and the exploitation of Indians shows (Frickey, 1993), tremendous implications for the ways people lived and even for their right to earn a living. Throughout our history, “whiteness” has, legally speaking, been a form of property (Harris, 1993).

At the turn of the 20th century, whites in the United States were pursuing the industrial, capitalist dream and a continued manifest destiny. As immigrants poured in to the United States to help with the expansion, however, nativism, anti-immigrant feelings (e.g., The Chinese Exclusion Act) ensured that the prosperity benefited mainly the whites. Poor European immigrants and the many Southern ex-slaves represented a potential massive threat to the existing powers. The answer was racism.

For example, in 1912, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed his wish that “justice be done to the colored people in every matter; and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling.” He also, at the same time, issued an executive order that racially segregated eating and toilet facilities of federal civil service workers. The order also gave Southern federal officials the right to discharge or downgrade any black employee on any ground they saw fit. When a group of black leaders protested to the President, they were summarily dismissed (Kovel, 1984, p. 31).

As many scholars have noted, it is in the story of U.S. labor history in the first part of the 20th century that the racialization became solidified. W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) describes how white laborers were paid meager monetary wages, but were provided additional public and psychological “wages”: better schools and access to public facilities, deference, and so on. In continuing the story, David Roediger (1991) shows how this category of whiteness was carefully constructed through trial and error to assure white workers a secure place in the sometimes fragile economy. The whites distanced themselves from blacks, projecting on to them qualities they themselves lacked—sensuality and spontaneity—and in stressing this contrast, allowed despised ethnic groups (Irish, Eastern Europeans, Jews) a way to transcend their minority status and assimilate into the majority (Roediger, 1991).

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The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882–1924

Erika Lee

In 1876, H. N. Clement, a San Francisco lawyer, stood before a California State Senate Committee and sounded the alarm: “*The Chinese are upon us. How can we get rid of them? The Chinese are coming. How can we stop them?*”¹ Clement’s panicked cries and portrayals of Chinese immigration as an evil, “unarmed invasion” were shared by several witnesses before the committee which was charged with investigating the “social, moral, and political effects” of Chinese immigration.² Testimony like Clement’s was designed to reach a broad audience, and the committee hearings themselves were part of a calculated political attempt to nationalize the question of Chinese immigration.³ Their efforts proved successful when the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act on 6 May 1882. This law prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years and barred all Chinese immigrants from naturalized citizenship. Demonstrating the class bias in the law, merchants, teachers, students, travelers, and diplomats were exempt from exclusion.⁴

Historians have often noted that the Chinese Exclusion Act marks a “watershed” in United States history. Not only was it the country’s first significant restrictive immigration law; it was also the first to restrict a group of immigrants based on their race and class, and it thus helped to shape twentieth-century United States race-based immigration policy.⁵

The Example of Chinese Exclusion: Race and Racialization

One of the most significant consequences of Chinese exclusion was that by establishing a gatekeeping ideology, politics, and administration, it provided a powerful framework, model, and set of tools to be used to understand and further racialize other threatening, excludable, and undesirable aliens. Soon after the Chinese were excluded, calls to restrict or exclude other immigrants followed quickly, and the rhetoric and strategy of these later campaigns drew important lessons from the anti-Chinese movement. For example, the class-based arguments and restrictions in the Chinese Exclusion Act were echoed in later campaigns to bar contract laborers of any race. As Gwendolyn Mink has shown, southern and eastern European immigrants—like Chinese—were denounced as “coolies, serfs, and slaves.”⁶ The Democratic party made the connections explicit and blended the old anti-Chinese rhetoric into a more generalized racial nativism in its 1884 campaign handbook. Recalling the great success of Chinese exclusion, the Democrats pointed to a new danger:

If it became necessary to protect the American workmen on the Pacific slope from the disastrous and debasing competition of Coolie labor, the same argument now applies with equal force and pertinency to the importation of pauper labor from southern Europe.⁷

Such connections and arguments were significant. In 1885, the Foran Act prohibited the immigration of all contract laborers.⁸

The gender-based exclusions of the 1875 Page Act were also duplicated in later government attempts to screen out immigrants, especially women, who were perceived to be immoral or guilty of sexual misdeeds. The exclusion of Chinese prostitutes led to a more general exclusion of all prostitutes in the 1903 Immigration Act.⁹ Signifying a larger concern that independent female migration was a moral problem, other immigration laws restricted the entry of immigrants who were “likely to become public charges” or who had committed a “crime involving moral turpitude.”¹⁰ As Donna Gabbaccia has pointed out, such general exclusion laws were theoretically “gender-neutral.” In practice, however, “any unaccompanied woman of any age, marital status, or background might be questioned” as a potential public charge. Clauses in the 1891 Immigration Act excluded women on moral grounds. Sexual misdeeds such as adultery, fornication, and illegitimate pregnancy were all grounds for exclusion. Lastly, echoes of the “unwelcome invasion” of Chinese and Japanese immigration were heard in nativist rhetoric focusing on the high birthrates of southern and eastern European immigrant families. Immigrant fecundity, it was claimed, would cause the “race suicide” of the Anglo-American race.¹¹

Race clearly intersected with such class and gender-based arguments and continued to play perhaps the largest role in defining and categorizing which immigrant groups to admit or exclude. The arguments and lessons of Chinese exclusion were resurrected over and over again during the nativist debates over the “new” immigrants from Asia, Mexico, and southern and eastern

Europe, further refining and consolidating the racialization of these groups. In many ways, Chinese immigrants—racialized as the ultimate undesirable alien—became the model by which to measure the desirability of these new immigrants. David Roediger and James Barrett have suggested that the racialization of certain immigrant groups, and especially the racial vocabulary which described Italians as “guinea” and Slavic immigrants as “hunky” were racialized in relation to African Americans in the realms of labor and citizenship.¹² However, I suggest that in terms of immigration restriction, the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Mexico, and other parts of Asia were more closely racialized along the Chinese immigrant model, especially in the Pacific Coast states. There, immigration and whiteness were defined most clearly in opposition to Asian-ness or “yellowness.”¹³ The persistent use of the metaphor of the closed gate combined with the rhetoric of “unwelcome invasions” most clearly reveals the difference. African Americans, originally brought into the nation as slaves could never really be “sent back” despite their alleged inferiority and threat to the nation. Segregation and Jim Crow legislation was mostly aimed at keeping African Americans “in their place.” Chinese, who were racialized in ways that positioned them as polar opposites to “Americans” also clearly did not belong in the United States and were themselves often compared to blacks. But unlike African Americans, they could be kept at bay through immigration restriction. Thus, immigration laws served as the gates that had to be closed against the immigrant invasion; an argument made in relation to southern and eastern European and Mexican immigrants, but never applied to African Americans.

Following the exclusion of Chinese, Americans on the West Coast became increasingly alarmed with new immigration from Asia, particularly from Japan, Korea, and India. Californians portrayed the new immigration as yet another “Oriental invasion,” and San Francisco newspapers urged readers to “step to the front once more and battle to hold the Pacific Coast for the white race.”¹⁴ Like the Chinese before them, these new Asian immigrants were also considered to be threats due to their race and their labor. The Japanese were especially feared, because of their great success in agriculture and their tendency to settle and start families in the United States (as compared to the Chinese who were mostly sojourners). The political and cultural ideology that came to be used in the anti-Japanese movement immediately connected the new Japanese threat with the old Chinese one. Headlines in San Francisco newspapers talked of “Another phase in the Immigration from Asia” and warned that the “Japanese [were] Taking the Place of the Chinese.” Moreover, similar charges of being unassimilable and exploitable cheap labor were made against the Japanese. And because the Japanese were supposedly even more “tricky and unscrupulous” as well as more “aggressive and warlike” than the Chinese, they were considered even “more objectionable.”¹⁵ Political leaders made the connections explicit. Denis Kearney, the charismatic leader of the Workingmen’s party which spearheaded the anti-Chinese movement in San Francisco during the 1870s, found the Chinese and Japanese “problems” to be synonymous to each other. A Sacramento reporter recorded Kearney in 1892 berating the

“foreign Shylocks [who] are rushing another breed of Asiatic slaves to fill up the gap made vacant by the Chinese who are shut out by our laws . . . Japs . . . are being brought here now in countless numbers to demoralize and discourage our domestic labor market.” Kearney rousingly ended his speech with “The Japs Must Go!”—a highly original revision of his “the Chinese Must Go!” rallying cry from the 1870s.¹⁶ In 1901, James D. Phelan, mayor of San Francisco spearheaded the Chinese Exclusion Convention of 1901 and centered it around the theme “For Home, Country, and Civilization.” Later, in 1920 he ran for the United States Senate under the slogan, “Stop the Silent Invasion” (of Japanese).¹⁷

The small population of Asian Indian immigrants also felt the wrath of nativists, who regarded them as the “most objectionable of all Orientals” in the United States.¹⁸ In 1905, the San Francisco-based Japanese-Korean Exclusion League renamed itself the Asiatic Exclusion League in an attempt to meet the new threat. Newspapers complained of “Hindu Hordes” coming to the United States. Indians were “dirty, diseased,” “the worst type of immigrant . . . not fit to become a citizen . . . and entirely foreign to the people of the United States.” Their employment by “moneyed capitalists” as expendable cheap labor and India’s large population “teeming with millions upon millions of emaciated sickly Hindus existing on starvation wages” also hearkened back to the charges of a cheap labor invasion made against Chinese and Japanese immigrants.¹⁹

Likewise, the racialized definitions of Mexican immigrants also referred back to Chinese immigration. Long classified as racial inferiors, Mexican immigrants often served as replacement agricultural laborers following the exclusion of Asian immigrants.²⁰ Although their immigration was largely protected by agricultural and industrial employers through the 1920s, Mexican immigrants were long-standing targets of racial nativism, and many of the arguments directed towards Mexicans echoed earlier charges lobbied at the Chinese. Because the legal, political, and cultural understanding of Chinese immigrants as permanent foreigners had long been established, nativists’ direct connections between Chinese and Mexicans played a crucial role in racializing Mexicans as foreign.

Nativists used the Chinese framework to characterize Mexicans as foreign on the basis of two main arguments: racial inferiority and racial unassimilability. George P. Clemens, the head of the Los Angeles County Agricultural Department explained that Asians and Mexicans were racially inferior to whites because they were physically highly suitable for the degraded agricultural labor in which they were often employed. The tasks involved were those “which the Oriental and Mexican due to their crouching and bending habits are fully adapted, while the white is physically unable to adapt himself to them.”²¹ While Chinese were considered to be biologically inferior due to their status as heathens and their alleged inability to assimilate in an Anglo-American mold, Mexicans were degraded as an ignorant “hybrid race” of Spanish and Indian origin.²² As Mexican immigration increased, fears of a foreign invasion of cheap, unassimilable laborers similar to the Chinese one

rippled throughout the nativist literature. Major Frederick Russell Burnham warned that “the whole Pacific Coast would have been Asiatic in blood today except for the Exclusion Acts. Our whole Southwest will be racially Mexican in three generations unless some similar restriction is placed upon them.”²³ (Burnham, of course, conveniently ignored the fact that the Southwest—as well as most of the American West—had already been “racially Mexican” long before he himself had migrated west.) V.S. McClatchy, editor of the *Sacramento Bee* warned that the “wholesale introduction of Mexican peons” presented California’s “most serious problem” in the 1920s.²⁴ Increased Mexican migration to Texas was especially contested, and nativists there explicitly pointed to the example of California and Chinese immigration to allude to their state’s future. “To Mexicanize Texas or Orientalize California is a crime,” raged one nativist.²⁵ Chester H. Rowell argued that the Mexican invasion was even more detrimental than the Chinese one, because at least the “Chinese coolie”—“the ideal human mule”—would not “plague us with his progeny. His wife and children are in China, and he returns there himself when we no longer need him.” Mexicans, he argued, might not be so compliant or easy to send back.²⁶

The comparisons between Chinese and Mexicans continued. Other nativists extended the Chinese racial unassimilability argument to Mexicans by claiming that they “can no more blend into our race than can the Chinaman or the Negro.”²⁷ Anti-Mexican nativists increasingly issued a call for restriction by explicitly framing the new Mexican immigration problem within the old argument for Chinese exclusion. Railing against the need for cheap Mexican labor, Major Burnham blamed the immigration promoters of the 1920s just as Denis Kearney had blamed the capitalists and their “Chinese pets” during the 1870s. “It is the old Chinese stuff, an echo of the [18]70s, word for word!” wrote Burnham. Moreover, Burnham also viewed that immigration laws—and specifically the same types of exclusionary measures used against the Chinese—were the only remedy: “Let us refuse cheap labor. Let us restrict Mexican immigration and go steadily on to prosperity and wealth just as we did after the Asiatic Exclusion Acts were passed.”²⁸ In many nativists’ minds, the image of Mexicans merged with that of the biologically inferior, unassimilable, and threatening Chinese immigrant.

Conclusion

Both the rhetoric and the tools used in the battle over Chinese exclusion were repeated in later debates over immigration. In many ways, Chinese immigrants became the models by which others were measured. Nativists repeatedly pointed to ways in which the new Asians, Mexicans, and Europeans were “just like” the Chinese. They also argued that similar restrictions should be established. By 1924, the cycle begun with Chinese exclusion was complete, and gatekeeping had changed from being the exception to the rule. Immigration inspectors and inspections, passport and other documentary requirements, the surveillance and criminalization of immigration and the deportation of

immigrants found to be in the country illegally all became standard operating procedures in the United States. Nativists no longer needed to ask “*how* can we stop immigrants?” They had found the answer in Chinese exclusion.

Notes

Numerous people have read earlier versions of this article, and I have benefited greatly from their comments: David Roediger, George Anthony Pepper, Paul Spickard, Catharine Ceniza Choy, Jigna Desai, Pat McNamara, Liping Wang, Claire Fox, and Claudia Sadowski-Smith, and the anonymous reader from the *Journal*. Michael LeMay provided early guidance.

1. California State Senate, Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, *Chinese Immigration: It's Social, Moral, and Political Effect* (Sacramento, 1878), p. 275.
2. *San Francisco Alta California*, 6 April 1876, as cited in Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), p. 78.
3. Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, p. 78; Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), p. 73.
4. Act of May 6, 1882 (22 Stat. 58).
5. Roger Daniels, “No Lamps Were Lit for Them: Angel Island and the Historiography of Asian American Immigration,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 17, 1 (Fall 1997): 4; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, pp. 1, 258–9.
6. *Congressional Record*, 48th Cong., 2d sess. (February 13, 1885), p. 1634; as cited in Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants*, p. 109.
7. Democratic National Committee, *The Political Reformation of 1884: A Democratic Campaign Handbook* (1884); as cited in Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants*, p. 107.
8. Act of February 26, 1885 (also known as the Alien Contract Labor Law and the Foran Act) (23 Stat. 332).
9. Act of March 3, 1903 (32 Stat. 1222).
10. The 1882 Regulation of Immigration Act (Act of August 3, 1882; 22 Stat. 214) also excluded lunatics, convicts, and idiots. The 1891 Immigration Act added polygamists and “persons suffering from a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease.” (Act of March 3, 1891; 26 Stat. 1084).
11. Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the US, 1820–1990* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), p. 37.
12. James Barrett and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16, 3 (1997): 8–9.
13. Recent studies on racial formation in the West illustrate the importance of moving beyond the white and black binary. See Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994); Chris Friday, “In DueTime: Narratives of Race and Place in the Western United States,” in *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the United States: Toward the Twenty-First Century*, ed., Paul Wong (Boulder, Colo., 1999), pp. 102–152.

14. "Shut the Gates to the Hindu Invasion," *San Francisco Examiner*, 16 June 1910; "The Watchdog States," *San Francisco Post*, 24 May 1910.
15. *San Francisco Bulletin*, 4 May 1891, as cited in Roger Daniels, *Asian America*, p. 111. "Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League," July, 1911 (Allied Printing, San Francisco, 1911).
16. Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, Calif., 1962), p. 20.
17. Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans—an Interpretive History* (Boston, 1991), p. 44.
18. "Advance Guard of Hindu Horde Has Arrived," *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 August 1910, as cited in Lucy Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers*, p. 127.
19. *San Francisco Daily News*, 20 September 1910.
20. George Sanchez writes that "Mexicans rapidly replaced the Japanese as a major component of the agricultural labor force." George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993), p. 19.
21. Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929–1939* (Tucson, Ariz., 1974), p. 10.
22. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), p. 54.
23. Frederick Russell Burnham, "The Howl for Cheap Mexican Labor," in *The Alien in Our Midst or Selling Our Birthright for a Mess of Pottage*, ed. Madison Grant and Charles Stewart Davison (New York, 1930), p. 48. See also Neil Foley, *White Scourge*, p. 51.
24. V. S. McClatchy, "Oriental Immigration"; Neil Foley, *White Scourge*, pp. 195, 197.
25. Foley, *The White Scourge*, p. 55.
26. Chester H. Rowell, "Why Make Mexico an Exception?" *Survey*, 1 May 1931; and idem, "Chinese and Japanese Immigrants," *Annals of the American Academy*, 34 (September, 1909): 4; as cited in Foley, *The White Scourge*, p. 53.
27. Frederick Russell Burnham, "The Howl for Cheap Mexican Labor," p. 45.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 48

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How White People Became White

James E. Barrett and David Roediger

By the eastern European immigration the labor force has been cleft horizontally into two great divisions. The upper stratum includes what is known in mill parlance as the English-speaking men; the lower contains the “Hunkies” or “Ginnies.” Or, if you prefer, the former are the “white men,” the latter the “foreigners.”

John Fitch, *The Steel Workers*

In 1980, Joseph Loguidice, an elderly Italian-American from Chicago, sat down to give his life story to an interviewer. His first and most vivid childhood recollection was of a race riot that had occurred on the city’s near north side. Wagons full of policemen with “peculiar hats” streamed into his neighborhood. But the “one thing that stood out in my mind,” Loguidice remembered after six decades, was “a man running down the middle of the street hollering . . . ‘I’m White, I’m White!’” After first taking him for an African-American, Loguidice soon realized that the man was a white coal handler covered in dust. He was screaming for his life, fearing that “people would shoot him down.” He had, Loguidice concluded, “got caught up in . . . this racial thing.”¹

Joseph Loguidice’s tale might be taken as a metaphor for the situation of millions of “new immigrants” from Eastern and Southern Europe who arrived in the United States between the end of the nineteenth century and

the early 1920s. That this episode made such a profound impression is in itself significant, suggesting both that this was a strange, new situation and that thinking about race became an important part of the consciousness of immigrants like Loguidice. How did this racial awareness and increasingly racialized worldview develop among new immigrant workers? Most did not arrive with conventional U.S. attitudes regarding “racial” difference, let alone its significance and implications in industrial America. Yet most, it seems, “got caught up in . . . this racial thing.” How did this happen? If race was indeed socially constructed, then what was the raw material that went into the process?

How did these immigrant workers come to be viewed in racial terms by others—employers, the state, reformers, and other workers? Like the coal handler in Loguidice’s story, their own ascribed racial identity was not always clear. A whole range of evidence—laws, court cases, formal racial ideology, social conventions, and popular culture in the form of slang, songs, films, cartoons, ethnic jokes, and popular theatre—suggests that the native born and older immigrants often placed the new immigrants not only *above* African- and Asian-Americans, for example, but also *below* “white” people. Indeed, many of the older immigrants, and particularly the Irish, had themselves been perceived as “nonwhite” just a generation earlier. As labor historians, we are interested in the ways in which Polish, Italian, and other European artisans and peasants became American workers, but we are equally concerned with the process by which they became “white.” Indeed, in the U.S. the two identities merged, and this explains a great deal of the persistent divisions within the working-class population. How did immigrant workers wind up “inbetween”? . . .

We make no brief for the consistency with which “race” was used, by experts or popularly, to describe the “new immigrant” Southern and East Europeans who dominated the ranks of those coming to the U.S. between 1895 and 1924 and who “remade” the American working class in that period. We regard such inconsistency as important evidence of the “inbetween”² racial status of such immigrants. The story of Americanization is vital and compelling, but it took place in a nation also obsessed by race. For new immigrant workers the processes of “becoming white” and “becoming American” were connected at every turn. The “American standard of living,” which labor organizers alternately and simultaneously accused new immigrants of undermining and encouraged them to defend via class organization, rested on “white men’s wages.” Political debate turned on whether new immigrants were fit to join the American nation and “American race.” Nor do we argue that new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were in the same situation as non-whites. Stark differences between the racialized status of African-Americans and the racial inbetween-ness of new immigrants meant that the latter *eventually* “became ethnic” and that their trajectory was predictable. But their history was sloppier than their trajectory. From day to day they were, to borrow from E. P. Thompson, “proto-nothing,” reacting and acting in a highly racialized nation.³

America's racial vocabulary had no agency of its own, but rather reflected material conditions and power relations—the situations that workers faced on a daily basis in their workplaces and communities. Yet the words themselves were important. They were not only the means by which native born and elite people marked new immigrants as inferiors, but also those by which immigrant workers came to locate themselves and those about them in the nation's racial hierarchy. In beginning to analyze the vocabulary of race, it makes little sense for historians to invest the words themselves with an agency that could be exercised only by real historical actors, or meanings that derived only from the particular historical contexts in which the language was developed and employed.

The word *guinea*, for example, had long referred to African slaves, particularly those from the continent's northwest coast, and to their descendants. But from the late 1890s, the term was increasingly applied to southern European migrants, first and especially to Sicilians and southern Italians, who often came as contract laborers. At various times and places in the United States, *guinea* has been applied to mark Greeks, Jews, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, and perhaps any new immigrant.⁴

Likewise, *hunky*, which began life, probably in the early twentieth century, as a corruption of "Hungarian," eventually became a pan-Slavic slur connected with perceived immigrant racial characteristics. By World War I the term was frequently used to describe any immigrant steelworker, as in *mill hunky*. Opponents of the Great 1919 Steel Strike, including some native born skilled workers, derided the struggle as a "hunky strike." Yet Josef Barton's work suggests that for Poles, Croats, Slovenians, and other immigrants who often worked together in difficult, dangerous situations, the term embraced a remarkable, if fragile, sense of prideful identity across ethnic lines. In *Out of This Furnace*, his epic novel of 1941 based on the lives of Slavic steelworkers, Thomas Bell observed that the word *hunky* bespoke "unconcealed racial prejudice" and a "denial of social and racial equality." Yet as these workers built the industrial unions of the late 1930s and took greater control over their own lives, the meaning of the term began to change. The pride with which second- and third-generation Slavic-American steelworkers, women as well as men, wore the label in the early 1970s seemed to have far more to do with class than with ethnic identity. At about the same time, the word *honky*, possibly a corruption of *hunky*, came into common use as black nationalism reemerged as a major ideological force in the African-American community.⁵

Words and phrases employed by social scientists to capture the inbetween identity of the new immigrants are a bit more descriptive, if more cumbersome. As late as 1937, John Dollard wrote repeatedly of the immigrant working class as "our temporary Negroes." More precise, if less dramatic, is the designation "not-yet-white ethnics" offered by immigration historian John Bukowczyk. The term not only reflects the popular perceptions and everyday experiences of such workers, but also conveys the dynamic quality of racial formation.⁶

The examples of Greeks and Italians particularly underscore the new immigrants' ambiguous positions with regard to popular perceptions of race. When Greeks suffered as victims of an Omaha race riot in 1909 and when eleven Italians died at the hands of lynchers in Louisiana in 1891, their less-than-white racial status mattered alongside their nationalities. Indeed, as Loguidice's coal handler shows, their ambivalent racial status put their lives in jeopardy. According to Gunther Peck's fine study of copper miners in Bingham, Utah, the Greek and Italian immigrants were "nonwhite" before their tension-fraught cooperation with the Western Federation of Miners during a 1912 strike ensured that "the category of Caucasian worker changed and expanded." Indeed, the work of Dan Georgakas and Yvette Huginnie shows that Greeks and other Southern Europeans often "bivouacked" with other "non-white" workers in Western mining towns. Pocatello, Idaho, Jim-Crowed Greeks in the early twentieth century and in Arizona they were not welcomed by white workers in "white men's towns" or "white men's jobs." In Chicago during the Great Depression, a German-American wife expressed regret over marrying her "half-nigger," Greek-American husband. African-American slang in the 1920s in South Carolina counted those of mixed American Indian, African-American, and white heritage as *Greeks*. Greek-Americans in the Midwest showed great anxieties about race, and were perceived not only as Puerto Rican, mulatto, Mexican, or Arab, but also as non-white *because of* being Greek.⁷

Italians, involved in a spectacular international diaspora in the early twentieth century, were racialized as the "Chinese of Europe" in many lands.⁸ But in the U.S. their racialization was pronounced and, as *guinea's* evolution suggests, more likely to connect Italians with Africans. During the debate at the Louisiana state constitutional convention of 1898 over how to disfranchise blacks, and over which whites might lose the vote, some acknowledged that the Italian's skin "happens to be white" even as they argued for his disfranchisement. But others held that "according to the spirit of our meaning when we speak of 'white man's government,' [the Italians] are as black as the blackest negro in existence."⁹ More than metaphor intruded on this judgment. At the turn of the century, a West Coast construction boss was asked, "You don't call the Italian a white man?" The negative reply assured the questioner that the Italian was "a dago." Recent studies of Italian- and Greek-Americans make a strong case that racial, not just ethnic, oppression long plagued "non-white" immigrants from Southern Europe.¹⁰

The racialization of East Europeans was likewise striking. While racist jokes mocked the black servant who thought her child, fathered by a Chinese man, would be a Jew, racist folklore held that Jews, inside-out, were "niggers." In 1926 Serbo-Croatians ranked near the bottom of a list of forty "ethnic" groups whom "white American" respondents were asked to order according to the respondents' willingness to associate with members of each group. They placed just above Negroes, Filipinos, and Japanese. Just above them were Poles, who were near the middle of the list. One sociologist has recently written that "a good many groups on this color continuum [were] not considered white by a large number of Americans."¹¹ The literal inbetween-ness of new

immigrants on such a list suggests what popular speech affirms: The state of whiteness was approached gradually and controversially. The authority of the state itself both smoothed and complicated that approach.

Notes

1. The epigraph is from John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (New York, 1910), 147. Joe Sauris, Interview with Joseph Loguidice, July 25, 1980, Italians in Chicago Project, copy of transcript, Box 6, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.
2. We borrow "inbetween" from Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned 'Other' in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly*, 44 (September 1992): passim, and also from John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New York, 1974), 169.
3. Lawrence Glickman, "Inventing the 'American Standard of Living': Gender, Race and Working-Class Identity, 1880–1925," *Labor History*, 34 (Spring–Summer, 1993): 221–35; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (Urbana, Ill., 1981), 254.
4. On *guinea's* history, see David Roediger, "Guineas, Wiggers and the Dramas of Racialized Culture," *American Literary History*, 7 (1995): 654. On post-1890 usages, see William Harlen Gilbert, Jr., "Memorandum Concerning the Characteristics of the Larger Mixed-Blood Islands of the United States," *Social Forces*, 24 (March 1946): 442; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1989), 6:937–38; Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan Houston Hall, eds., *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge and London, 1991), 2: 838.
5. Tamony's notes on *hunky* (or *hunkie*) speculate on links to *honky* (or *honkie*) and refer to the former as an "old labour term." By no means did *Hun* refer unambiguously to Germans before World War I. See, e.g., Henry White, "Immigration Restriction as a Necessity," *American Federationist*, 4 (June 1897): 67; Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892: Politics, Culture and Steel* (Pittsburgh, 1992), 216–17; David Brody, *Steelworkers in America* (New York, 1969), 120–21. See also the *Mill Hunky Herald*, published in Pittsburgh throughout the late 1970s.
6. Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 2d ed. (Garden City, N.Y., 1949), 93; Barry Goldberg, "Historical Reflections on Transnationalism, Race, and the American Immigrant Saga" (unpublished paper delivered at the Rethinking Migration, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in Historical Perspective Conferences, New York Academy of the Sciences, May, 1990).
7. Albert S. Broussard, "George Albert Flippin and Race Relations in a Western Rural Community," *The Midwest Review*, 12 (1990): 15, n. 42; J. Alexander Karlin, "The Italo-American Incident of 1891 and the Road to Reunion," *Journal of Southern History*, 8 (1942); Gunther Peck, "Padrones and Protest: 'Old' Radicals and 'New' Immigrants in Bingham, Utah, 1905–1912," *Western Historical Quarterly*, (May 1993): 177; Dan Georgakas, *Greek America at Work* (New York, 1992), 12 and 16–17; Yvette Huginnie, *Strikitos: Race, Class, and Work in the Arizona Copper Industry, 1870–1920*, Thesis (Ph.D.) Yale University, 1991.

8. Donna Gabaccia, "The 'Yellow Peril' and the 'Chinese of Europe': Italian and Chinese Labourers in an International Labour Market" (unpublished paper, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, c. 1993).

9. George E. Cunningham, "The Italian: A Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890–1898," *Journal of Negro History*, 50 (January 1965): 34, includes the quotes.

10. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 66; Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885–1985* (Urbana, Ill., 1987), 241; Micaela DiLeonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), 24, n. 16; Georgakas, *Greek America at Work*, 16. See also Karen Brodtkin Sacks' superb "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" in Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek, eds., *Race* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1994).

11. Quoted in Brody, *Steelworkers*, 120; W. Lloyd Warner and J. O. Low, *The Social System of the Modern Factory. The Strike: A Social Analysis* (New Haven, 1947), 140; Gershon Legman, *The Horn Book* (New York, 1964), 486–87; *Anecdotal Americana: Five Hundred Stories for the Amusement of Five Hundred Nations That Comprise America* (New York, 1933), 98.

How Jews Became White Folks

Karen Brodtkin

The American nation was founded and developed by the Nordic race, but if a few more million members of the Alpine, Mediterranean and Semitic races are poured among us, the result must inevitably be a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe.

Kenneth Roberts, in Carlson and Colburn 1972:312

It is clear that Kenneth Roberts did not think of my ancestors as white like him. The late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries saw a steady stream of warnings by scientists, policymakers, and the popular press that “mongrelization” of the Nordic or Anglo-Saxon race—the real Americans—by inferior European races (as well as inferior non-European ones) was destroying the fabric of the nation. I continue to be surprised to read that America did not always regard its immigrant European workers as white, that they thought people from different nations were biologically different. My parents, who are first-generation U.S.-born Eastern European Jews, are not surprised. They expect anti-Semitism to be part of the fabric of daily life, much as I expect racism to be part of it. They came of age in a Jewish world in the 1920s and 1930s at the peak of anti-Semitism in the United States (Gerber 1986). . . .

It is certainly true that the United States has a history of anti-Semitism and of beliefs that Jews were members of an inferior race. But Jews were hardly alone. American anti-Semitism was part of a broader pattern of late-nineteenth-century racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants, as well as against Asian immigrants. These views justified all sorts of discriminatory treatment including closing the doors to immigration from Europe and Asia in the 1920s.¹ This picture changed radically after World War II. Suddenly the same folks who promoted nativism and xenophobia were eager to believe that the Euro-origin people whom they had deported, reviled as members of inferior races, and prevented from immigrating only a few years earlier were now model middle-class white suburban citizens.

It was not an educational epiphany that made those in power change their hearts, their minds, and our race. Instead, it was the biggest and best affirmative action program in the history of our nation, and it was for Euromales. There are similarities and differences in the ways each of the European immigrant groups became “whitened.” I want to tell the story in a way that links anti-Semitism to other varieties of anti-European racism, because this foregrounds what Jews shared with other Euroimmigrants and shows changing notions of whiteness to be part of America’s larger system of institutional racism.

Euroraces

The U.S. “discovery” that Europe had inferior and superior races came in response to the great waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century. Before that time, European immigrants—including Jews—had been largely assimilated into the white population. The twenty-three million European immigrants who came to work in U.S. cities after 1880 were too many and too concentrated to disperse and blend. Instead, they piled up in the country’s most dilapidated urban areas, where they built new kinds of working-class ethnic communities. Since immigrants and their children made up more than 70 percent of the population of most of the country’s largest cities, urban America came to take on a distinctly immigrant flavor. The golden age of industrialization in the United States was also the golden age of class struggle between the captains of the new industrial empires and the masses of manual workers whose labor made them rich. As the majority of mining and manufacturing workers, immigrants were visibly major players in these struggles (Higham 1955:226; Steinberg 1989:36).²

The Red Scare of 1919 clearly linked anti-immigrant to anti-working-class sentiment—to the extent that the Seattle general strike of native-born workers was blamed on foreign agitators. The Red Scare was fueled by economic depression, a massive postwar strike wave, the Russian revolution, and a new wave of postwar immigration. Strikers in steel, and the garment and textile workers in New York and New England, were mainly new immigrants. “As part of a fierce counteroffensive, employers inflamed the historic identification of class conflict with immigrant radicalism.” Anticommunism and anti-immigrant sentiment came together in the Palmer raids and deportation of immigrant

working-class activists. There was real fear of revolution. One of President Wilson's aides feared it was "the first appearance of the soviet in this country" (Higham 1955:226).

Not surprisingly, the belief in European races took root most deeply among the wealthy U.S.-born Protestant elite, who feared a hostile and seemingly unassimilable working class. By the end of the nineteenth century, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge pressed Congress to cut off immigration to the United States; Teddy Roosevelt raised the alarm of "race suicide" and took Anglo-Saxon women to task for allowing "native" stock to be outbred by inferior immigrants. In the twentieth century, these fears gained a great deal of social legitimacy thanks to the efforts of an influential network of aristocrats and scientists who developed theories of eugenics—breeding for a "better" humanity—and scientific racism. Key to these efforts was Madison Grant's influential *Passing of the Great Race*, in which he shared his discovery that there were three or four major European races ranging from the superior Nordics of northwestern Europe to the inferior southern and eastern races of Alpines, Mediterraneans, and, worst of all, Jews, who seemed to be everywhere in his native New York City. Grant's nightmare was race mixing among Europeans. For him, "the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew" (qtd. in Higham 1955:156). He didn't have good things to say about Alpine or Mediterranean "races" either. For Grant, race and class were interwoven: the upper class was racially pure Nordic, and the lower classes came from the lower races.

Far from being on the fringe, Grant's views resonated with those of the nonimmigrant middle class. A *New York Times* reporter wrote of his visit to the Lower East Side:

This neighborhood, peopled almost entirely by the people who claim to have been driven from Poland and Russia, is the eyesore of New York and perhaps the filthiest place on the western continent. It is impossible for a Christian to live there because he will be driven out, either by blows or the dirt and stench. Cleanliness is an unknown quantity to these people. They cannot be lifted up to a higher plane because they do not want to be. If the cholera should ever get among these people, they would scatter its germs as a sower does grain. (qtd. in Schoener 1967:58)³

Such views were well within the mainstream of the early-twentieth-century scientific community. Grant and eugenicist Charles B. Davenport organized the Galton Society in 1918 in order to foster research and to otherwise promote eugenics and immigration restriction.⁴ Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, and Robert Yerkes, developers of the so-called intelligence test, believed firmly that southeastern European immigrants, African Americans, American Indians, and Mexicans were "feeble-minded." And indeed, more than 80 percent of the immigrants whom Goddard tested at Ellis Island in 1912 turned out to be just that. Racism fused with eugenics in scientific circles, and the eugenics circles overlapped with the nativism of WASP aristocrats. During World War I,

racism shaped the army's development of a mass intelligence test. Psychologist Robert Yerkes, who developed the test, became an even stronger advocate of eugenics after the war. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1923, he noted:

If we may safely judge by the army measurements of intelligence, races are quite as significantly different as individuals. . . . [and] almost as great as the intellectual difference between negro and white in the army are the differences between white racial groups. . . .

For the past ten years or so the intellectual status of immigrants has been disquietingly low. Perhaps this is because of the dominance of the Mediterranean races, as contrasted with the Nordic and Alpine. (qtd. in Carlson and Colburn 1972:333–334)

By the 1920s, scientific racism sanctified the notion that real Americans were white and real whites came from northwest Europe. Racism animated laws excluding and expelling Chinese in 1882, and then closing the door to immigration by virtually all Asians and most Europeans in 1924 (Saxton 1971, 1990). Northwestern European ancestry as a requisite for whiteness was set in legal concrete when [in 1923] the Supreme Court denied Bhagat Singh Thind the right to become a naturalized citizen under a 1790 federal law that allowed whites the right to become naturalized citizens. Thind argued that Asian Indians were the real Aryans and Caucasians, and therefore white. The Court countered that the United States only wanted blond Aryans and Caucasians, “that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today” (Takaki 1989:298–299). A narrowly defined white, Christian race was also built into the 1705 Virginia “Act concerning servants and slaves.” This statute stated “that no negroes, mulattos and Indians or other infidels or jews, Moors, Mahometans or other infidels shall, at any time, purchase any christian servant, nor any other except of their own complexion” (Martyn 1979:111).⁵

The 1930 census added its voice, distinguishing not only immigrant from “native” whites, but also native whites of native white parentage, and native whites of immigrant (or mixed) parentage. In distinguishing immigrant (southern and eastern Europeans) from “native” (northwestern Europeans), the census reflected the racial distinctions of the eugenicist-inspired intelligence tests.⁶

Racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in general and anti-Semitism in particular flourished in higher education. Jews were the first of the Euroimmigrant groups to enter colleges in significant numbers, so it wasn't surprising that they faced the brunt of discrimination there.⁷ The Protestant elite complained that Jews were unwashed, uncouth, unrefined, loud, and pushy. Harvard University President A. Lawrence Lowell, who was also a vice president of the Immigration Restriction League, was openly opposed to Jews at Harvard. The Seven Sisters schools had a reputation for “flagrant discrimination.” M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr president, may have been a feminist of a kind, but she also was an admirer of scientific racism and an advocate of immigration restriction. She “blocked

both the admission of black students and the promotion of Jewish instructors” (Synott 1986:233, 238–239, 249–250).

Anti-Semitic patterns set by these elite schools influenced standards of other schools, made anti-Semitism acceptable, and “made the aura of exclusivity a desirable commodity for the college-seeking clientele” (Synott 1986:250; and see Karabel 1984; Silberman 1985; Steinberg 1989: chaps. 5, 9). Fear that colleges “might soon be overrun by Jews” were publicly expressed at a 1918 meeting of the Association of New England Deans. In 1919 Columbia University took steps to decrease the number of entering Jews by a set of practices that soon came to be widely adopted. The school developed a psychological test based on the World War I army intelligence tests to measure “innate ability—and middle-class home environment” and redesigned the admission application to ask for religion, father’s name and birthplace, a photo, and a personal interview (Synott 1986:239–240). Other techniques for excluding Jews, like a fixed class size, a chapel requirement, and preference for children of alumni were less obvious. Sociologist Jerome Karabel (1984) has argued that these exclusionary efforts provided the basis for contemporary criteria for college admission that mix grades and test scores with criteria for well-roundedness and character, as well as affirmative action for athletes and children of alumni, which allowed schools to select more affluent Protestants. Their proliferation in the 1920s caused the intended drop in the number of Jewish students in law, dental, and medical schools and also saw the imposition of quotas in engineering, pharmacy, and veterinary schools.⁸

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Euroethnics into Whites

By the time I was an adolescent, Jews were just as white as the next white person. Until I was eight, I was a Jew in a world of Jews. Everyone on Avenue Z in Sheepshead Bay was Jewish. I spent my days playing and going to school on three blocks of Avenue Z, and visiting my grandparents in the nearby Jewish neighborhoods of Brighton Beach and Coney Island. There were plenty of Italians in my neighborhood, but they lived around the corner. They were a kind of Jew, but on the margins of my social horizons. Portuguese were even more distant, at the end of the bus ride, at Sheepshead Bay. The schul, or temple, was on Avenue Z, and I begged my father to take me like all the other fathers took their kids, but religion wasn’t part of my family’s Judaism. Just how Jewish my neighborhood was hit me in first grade when I was one of two kids in my class to go to school on Rosh Hashanah. My teacher was shocked—she was Jewish too—and I was embarrassed to tears when she sent me home. I was never again sent to school on Jewish holidays. We left that world in 1949 when we moved to Valley Stream, Long Island, which was Protestant, Republican, and even had farms until Irish, Italian, and Jewish exurbanites like us gave it a more suburban and Democratic flavor. Neither religion nor ethnicity separated us at school or in the neighborhood. Except temporarily. In elementary school years,

I remember a fair number of dirt-bomb (a good suburban weapon) wars on the block. Periodically one of the Catholic boys would accuse me or my brother of killing his God, to which we would reply, "Did not" and start lobbing dirt-bombs. Sometimes he would get his friends from Catholic school, and I would get mine from public school kids on the block, some of whom were Catholic. Hostilities lasted no more than a couple of hours and punctuated an otherwise friendly relationship. They ended by junior high years, when other things became more important. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, Italians, Irish, Poles, and "English" (I don't remember hearing WASP as a kid) were mixed up on the block and in school. We thought of ourselves as middle class and very enlightened because our ethnic backgrounds seemed so irrelevant to high school culture. We didn't see race (we thought), and racism was not part of our peer consciousness, nor were the immigrant or working-class histories of our families.

Like most chicken and egg problems, it's hard to know which came first. Did Jews and other Euroethnics become white because they became middle class? That is, did money whiten? Or did being incorporated in an expanded version of whiteness open up the economic doors to a middle-class status? Clearly, both tendencies were at work. Some of the changes set in motion during the war against fascism led to a more inclusive version of whiteness. Anti-Semitism and anti-European racism lost respectability. The 1940 census no longer distinguished native whites of native parentage from those, like my parents, of immigrant parentage, so that Euroimmigrants and their children were more securely white by submersion in an expanded notion of whiteness. (This census also changed the race of Mexicans to white [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1940:4].) Theories of nurture and culture replaced theories of nature and biology. Instead of dirty and dangerous races who would destroy U.S. democracy, immigrants became ethnic groups whose children had successfully assimilated into the mainstream and risen to the middle class. In this new myth, Euroethnic suburbs like mine became the measure of U.S. democracy's victory over racism. Jewish mobility became a new Horatio Alger story. In time and with hard work, every ethnic group would get a piece of the pie, and the United States would be a nation with equal opportunity for all its people to become part of a prosperous middle-class majority. And it seemed that Euroethnic immigrants and their children were delighted to join middle America⁹. . . .

Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euroethnics to become middle class, it was also the case that economic prosperity played a very powerful role in the whitening process. Economic mobility of Jews and other Euroethnics rested ultimately on U.S. postwar economic prosperity with its enormously expanded need for professional, technical, and managerial labor, and on government assistance in providing it. The United States emerged from the war with the strongest economy in the world. Real wages rose between 1946 and 1960, increasing buying power a hefty 22 percent and giving most Americans some discretionary income (Nash et al. 1986:885–886). U.S. manufacturing, banking, and business services became increasingly dominated by large corporations, and these grew into multinational corporations. Their organizational centers lay in big, new urban headquarters that demanded

growing numbers of technical and managerial workers. The postwar period was a historic moment for real class mobility and for the affluence we have erroneously come to believe was the U.S. norm. It was a time when the old white and the newly white masses became middle class.

The GI Bill of Rights, as the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act was known, was arguably the most massive affirmative action program in U.S. history. It was created to develop needed labor-force skills, and to provide those who had them with a life-style that reflected their value to the economy. The GI benefits ultimately extended to sixteen million GIs (veterans of the Korean War as well) included priority in jobs—that is, preferential hiring, but no one objected to it then—financial support during the job search; small loans for starting up businesses; and, most important, low-interest home loans and educational benefits, which included tuition and living expenses (Brown 1946; Hurd 1946; Mosch 1975; *Postwar Jobs for Veterans* 1945; Willenz 1983). This legislation was rightly regarded as one of the most revolutionary postwar programs. I call it affirmative action because it was aimed at and disproportionately helped male, Euro-origin GIs.

GI benefits, like the New Deal affirmative action programs before them and the 1960s affirmative action programs after them, were responses to protest. Business executives and the general public believed that the war economy had only temporarily halted the Great Depression. Many feared its return and a return to the labor strife and radicalism of the 1930s (Eichler 1982:4; Nash et al. 1986:885). “[M]emories of the Depression remained vivid and many people suffered from what Davis Ross has aptly called ‘depression psychosis’—the fear that the war would inevitably be followed by layoffs and mass unemployment” (Wynn 1976:15).

It was a reasonable fear. The eleven million military personnel who were demobilized in the 1940s represented a quarter of the U.S. labor force (Mosch 1975:1, 20). In addition, ending war production brought a huge number of layoffs, growing unemployment, and a high rate of inflation. To recoup war-time losses in real wages caused by inflation as well as by the unions' no-strike pledge in support of the war effort, workers staged a massive wave of strikes in 1946. More workers went out on strike that year than ever before, and there were strikes in all the heavy industries: railroads, coal mining, auto, steel, and electrical. For a brief moment, it looked like class struggle all over again. But government and business leaders had learned from the experience of bitter labor struggles after World War I just how important it was to assist demobilized soldiers. The GI Bill resulted from their determination to avoid those mistakes this time. The biggest benefits of this legislation were for college and technical school education, and for very cheap home mortgages.

Education and Occupation

It is important to remember that prior to the war, a college degree was still very much a “mark of the upper class” (Willenz 1983:165). Colleges were largely finishing schools for Protestant elites. Before the postwar boom,

schools could not begin to accommodate the American masses. Even in New York City before the 1930s, neither the public schools nor City College had room for more than a tiny fraction of potential immigrant students.

Not so after the war. The almost eight million GIs who took advantage of their educational benefits under the GI bill caused “the greatest wave of college building in American history” (Nash et al. 1986:885). White male GIs were able to take advantage of their educational benefits for college and technical training, so they were particularly well positioned to seize the opportunities provided by the new demands for professional, managerial, and technical labor. “It has been well documented that the GI educational benefits transformed American higher education and raised the educational level of that generation and generations to come. With many provisions for assistance in upgrading their educational attainments veterans pulled ahead of nonveterans in earning capacity. In the long run it was the nonveterans who had fewer opportunities” (Willenz 1983:165).¹⁰

Just how valuable a college education was for white men’s occupational mobility can be seen in John Keller’s study of who benefited from the metamorphosis of California’s Santa Clara Valley into Silicon Valley. Formerly an agricultural region, in the 1950s the area became the scene of explosive growth in the semiconductor electronics industry. This industry epitomized the postwar economy and occupational structure. It owed its existence directly to the military and to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), who were its major funders and its major markets. It had an increasingly white-collar work force. White men, who were the initial production workers in the 1950s, quickly transformed themselves into a technical and professional work force thanks largely to GI benefits and the new junior college training programs designed to meet the industry’s growing work-force needs. Keller notes that “62 percent of enrollees at San Jose Junior College (later renamed San Jose City College) came from blue-collar families, and 55 percent of all job placements were as electronics technicians in the industrial and service sectors of the country economy” (1983:363). As white men left assembly work and the industry expanded between 1950 and 1960, they were replaced initially by Latinas and African-American women, who were joined after 1970 by new immigrant women. Immigrating men tended to work in the better-paid unionized industries that grew up in the area (Keller 1983:346–373). . . .

Educational and occupational GI benefits really constituted affirmative action programs for white males because they were decidedly not extended to African Americans or to women of any race. White male privilege was shaped against the backdrop of wartime racism and postwar sexism. During and after the war, there was an upsurge in white racist violence against black servicemen in public schools, and in the KKK, which spread to California and New York (Dalfiume 1969:133–134). The number of lynchings rose during the war, and in 1943 there were antiblack race riots in several large northern cities. Although there was a wartime labor shortage, black people were discriminated against in access to well-paid defense industry jobs and in housing. In 1946 there were white riots against African Americans across the South, and in Chicago and

Philadelphia as well. Gains made as a result of the wartime Civil Rights movement, especially employment in defense-related industries, were lost with peacetime conversion as black workers were the first fired, often in violation of seniority (Wynn 1976:114, 116). White women were also laid off, ostensibly to make jobs for demobilized servicemen, and in the long run women lost most of the gains they had made in wartime (Kessler-Harris 1982). We now know that women did not leave the labor force in any significant numbers but instead were forced to find inferior jobs, largely nonunion, part-time, and clerical.

Theoretically available to all veterans, in practice women and black veterans did not get anywhere near their share of GI benefits. Because women's units were not treated as part of the military, women in them were not considered veterans and were ineligible for Veterans' Administration (VA) benefits (Wilenz 1983:168). The barriers that almost completely shut African-American GIs out of their benefits were more complex. In Wynn's portrait (1976:115), black GIs anticipated starting new lives, just like their white counterparts. Over 43 percent hoped to return to school and most expected to relocate to find better jobs in new lines of work. The exodus from the South toward the North and far West was particularly large. So it wasn't a question of any lack of ambition on the part of African-American GIs.

Rather, the military, the Veterans' Administration, the U.S. Employment Service, and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) effectively denied African-American GIs access to their benefits and to the new educational, occupational, and residential opportunities. Black GIs who served in the thoroughly segregated armed forces during World War II served under white officers, usually southerners (Binkin and Eitelberg 1982; Dalfiume 1969; Foner 1974; Johnson 1967; Nalty and MacGregor 1981). African-American soldiers were disproportionately given dishonorable discharges, which denied them veterans' rights under the GI Bill. Thus between August and November 1946, 21 percent of white soldiers and 39 percent of black soldiers were dishonorably discharged. Those who did get an honorable discharge then faced the Veterans' Administration and the U.S. Employment Service. The latter, which was responsible for job placements, employed very few African Americans, especially in the South. This meant that black veterans did not receive much employment information, and that the offers they did receive were for low-paid and menial jobs. "In one survey of 50 cities, the movement of blacks into peacetime employment was found to be lagging far behind that of white veterans: in Arkansas 95 percent of the placements made by the USES for Afro-Americans were in service or unskilled jobs" (Nalty and MacGregor 1981:218, and see 60–61). African Americans were also less likely than whites, regardless of GI status, to gain new jobs commensurate with their wartime jobs, and they suffered more heavily. For example, in San Francisco by 1948, Black Americans "had dropped back halfway to their pre-war employment status" (Wynn 1976:114, 116).¹¹

Black GIs faced discrimination in the educational system as well. Despite the end of restrictions on Jews and other Euroethnics, African Americans were not welcome in white colleges. Black colleges were overcrowded, and the combination of segregation and prejudice made for few alternatives. About twenty

thousand black veterans attended college by 1947, most in black colleges, but almost as many, fifteen thousand could not gain entry. Predictably, the disproportionately few African Americans who did gain access to their educational benefits were able, like their white counterparts, to become doctors and engineers, and to enter the black middle class (Walker 1970).

* * *

The record is very clear that instead of seizing the opportunity to end institutionalized racism, the federal government did its best to shut and double seal the postwar window of opportunity in African Americans' faces. It consistently refused to combat segregation in the social institutions that were key for upward mobility: education, housing, and employment. Moreover, federal programs that were themselves designed to assist demobilized GIs and young families systematically discriminated against African Americans. Such programs reinforced white/nonwhite racial distinctions even as intrawhite racialization was falling out of fashion. This other side of the coin, that white men of northwestern and southeastern European ancestry were treated equally in theory and in practice with regard to the benefits they received, was part of the larger postwar whitening of Jews and other eastern and southern Europeans.

The myth that Jews pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps ignores the fact that it took federal programs to create the conditions whereby the abilities of Jews and other European immigrants could be recognized and rewarded rather than denigrated and denied. The GI Bill and FHA and VA mortgages were forms of affirmative action that allowed male Jews and other Euro-American men to become suburban homeowners and to get the training that allowed them—but not women vets or war workers—to become professionals, technicians, salesmen, and managers in a growing economy. Jews' and other white ethnics' upward mobility was the result of programs that allowed us to float on a rising economic tide. To African Americans, the government offered the cement boots of segregation, redlining, urban renewal, and discrimination.

Those racially skewed gains have been passed across the generations, so that racial inequality seems to maintain itself "naturally," even after legal segregation ended. Today, in a shrinking economy where downward mobility is the norm, the children and grandchildren of the postwar beneficiaries of the economic boom have some precious advantages. For example, having parents who own their own homes or who have decent retirement benefits can make a real difference in young people's ability to take on huge college loans or to come up with a down payment for a house. Even this simple inheritance helps perpetuate the gap between whites and nonwhites. Sure Jews needed ability, but ability was not enough to make it. The same applies even more in today's long recession.

Notes

This is a revised and expanded version of a paper published in *Jewish Currents* in June 1992 and delivered at the 1992 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in the session *Blacks and Jews, 1992: Reaching across the Cultural Boundaries* organized by

Angela Gilliam. I would like to thank Emily Abel, Katya Gibel Azoulay, Edna Bonacich, Angela Gilliam, Isabelle Gunning, Valerie Matsumoto, Regina Morantz-Sanchez, Roger Sanjek, Rabbi Chaim Scidler-Feller, Janet Silverstein, and Eloise Klein Hoaly's writing group for uncovering wonderful sources and for critical readings along the way.

1. Indeed, Boasian and Du Boisian anthropology developed in active political opposition to this nativism; on Du Bois, see Harrison and Nonini 1992.

2. On immigrants as part of the industrial work force, see Steinberg 1989:36.

3. I thank Roger Sanjek for providing me with this source.

4. It was intended, as Davenport wrote to the president of the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Fairfield Osborne, as "an anthropological society . . . with a central governing body, self-elected and self-perpetuating, and very limited in members, and also confined to native Americans who are anthropologically, socially and politically sound, no Bolsheviki need apply" (Barkan 1991:67–68).

5. I thank Valerie Matsumoto for telling me about the Thind case and Katya Gibel Azoulay for providing this information to me on the Virginia statute.

6. "The distinction between white and colored" has been "the only racial classification which has been carried through all the 15 censuses." "Colored" consisted of "Negroes" and "other races": Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Hawaiian, Malay, Siamese, and Samoan (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930:25, 26).

7. For why Jews entered colleges earlier than other immigrants, and for a challenge to views that attribute it to Jewish culture, see Steinberg 1989.

8. Although quotas on Jews persisted into the 1950s in some of the elite schools, they were much attenuated, as the postwar college-building boom gave the coup-de-grace to the gentleman's finishing school.

9. Indeed, Jewish social scientists were prominent in creating this ideology of the United States as a meritocracy. Most prominent of course was Nathan Glazer, but among them also were Charles Silberman and Marshall Sklare.

10. The belief was widespread that "the GI Bill . . . helped millions of families move into the middle class" (Nash et al. 1986:885). A study that compares mobility among veterans and nonveterans provides a kind of confirmation. In an unnamed small city in Illinois, Havighurst and his colleagues (1951) found no significant difference between veterans and nonveterans, but this was because apparently very few veterans used any of their GI benefits.

11. African Americans and Japanese Americans were the main target of wartime racism (see Murray 1992). By contrast, there were virtually no anti-German American or anti-Italian American policies in World War II (see Takaki 1989:357–406).

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Becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and Whiteness

Neil Foley

In 1980 the U.S. Bureau of the Census created two new ethnic categories of Whites: “Hispanic” and “non-Hispanic.” The Hispanic category, an ethnic rather than racial label, comprised Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Panamanians, and other ethnic groups of Latin American descent. Creating a separate ethnic category within the racial category of White seemed to solve the problem of how to count Hispanics without racializing them as non-Whites, as it had done in 1930. To identify oneself today as a “Hispanic” is partially to acknowledge one’s ethnic heritage without surrendering one’s “whiteness.” Hispanic identity thus implies a kind of “separate but equal” whiteness—whiteness with a twist of salsa, enough to make one ethnically flavorful and culturally exotic without, however, compromising one’s racial privilege as a White person. The history of Mexican Americans in the Southwest is thus more than the history of their “becoming” Mexican American or Hispanic; for many, especially those of the middle class, it is also the history of their becoming White.

Unlike Black Americans, who experienced *de jure* segregation throughout the South before 1960, Mexican Americans in the Southwest experienced *de facto* segregation based on custom rather than statutory authority. Legally, Mexican Americans were accorded the racial status of White people; socially, politically, and economically, however, they were treated as non-Whites. With the rise of the so-called Mexican American generation of the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, Mexican Americans began insisting on their status as Whites in order to overcome the worst features of Jim Crow segregation, restrictive housing

covenants, employment discrimination, and the social stigma of being “Mexican,” a label that, in the eyes of Anglos, designated race rather than one’s citizenship status.

Many middle-class Mexican Americans did not object to the segregation of Blacks or challenge the assumptions of White supremacy. On the contrary, they supported strict segregation of Whites and Blacks in the schools and in public facilities. The basis for their claim for social equality was that they were also White, that some unfortunate mistake had been made in regarding persons of Mexican descent as non-Whites.

A group of Mexican Americans, mostly urban and middle class, founded their own organization in 1929 in Corpus Christi, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), to foster the goals of Americanization in Texas and other states of the Southwest, restricting membership to U.S. citizens and emphasizing English language skills and loyalty to the Constitution of the United States. LULAC members sought to set the racial record straight. In a 1932 article in the *LULAC News* titled “Are Texas-Mexicans ‘Americans?’” the author asserted that Mexican Americans were “the first white race to inhabit this vast empire of ours.” Another member of LULAC boasted that Mexican Americans were “not only a part and parcel but as well the sum and substance of the white race.” As self-constituted Whites, LULAC members considered it “an insult” to be associated with Blacks or other “colored” races.¹ In 1936 a LULAC official deplored the practice of hiring “Negro musicians” to play at Mexican *bailes* (dances) because it led to “illicit relations” between Black men and “ill-informed Mexican girls.” He urged fellow LULAC members to “tell these Negroes that we are not going to permit our manhood and womanhood to mingle with them on an equal social basis.”² Not surprisingly, therefore, LULAC, the premiere civil rights group for Mexican Americans, turned its back on opportunities to forge ties with the NAACP during its own civil rights battles in the 1940s and 1950s. The African American author and Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison deserves credit for stating bluntly what many Mexican Americans have been slow to acknowledge: “In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens.”³

Of course, African Americans are not “aliens” in any legal or cultural sense; they are natives of the United States, share in intimate ways the culture and history of the United States, and in many important respects have shaped White culture. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that he saw through the “souls of white folks”: “Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign. . . . I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know.”⁴ Blacks are inside American culture, but Morrison’s point is that they remain alienated and estranged from the domain of White power and privilege. Mexican immigrants may begin as racial outsiders and “illegal aliens,” but their U.S.-born offspring are sometimes able to forge identities as ethnically White Hispanics.

Unlike the experience of most immigrants, however, discrimination against Mexicans in the United States has been continuous, pervasive, and systemic.

After Mexican Americans established LULAC and the G.I. Forum (founded in 1948), they challenged school segregation and other forms of discrimination in state and federal courts. While these organizations and their middle-class Mexican American leaders sought equality based on their constitutional rights as U.S. citizens, increasingly they came to the realization that race—specifically, being White—mattered far more than U.S. citizenship in the course of everyday life. The majority of people of African descent in the United States were citizens, but that fact did not enable them to sit in the front of the bus or attend White schools. As sociologist Mary Waters observed, “If the Irish had to sit at the back of the bus sometime in the past, and now being Irish just means having fun at funerals, then there is hope for all groups facing discrimination now.”⁵ The assumption here is that most immigrant groups, including Mexicans, have had the “option,” unlike Blacks, of becoming White and thus benefiting from what historian George Lipsitz has called the “possessive investment in whiteness.”⁶ Choosing the Caucasian option, as had the Irish before them, enabled some Mexican Americans to forge White racial identities that were constructed, as Toni Morrison has accurately observed, “on the backs of blacks.”⁷

Having failed to convince Anglos that the word “Mexican” denoted nationality rather than a separate race, LULAC members and other urban Mexican Americans constructed new identities as “Spanish American” or “Latin American” in order to arrogate to themselves the privileges of whiteness routinely denied to Mexicans, Blacks, Chinese, and Indians. Becoming Spanish or Latin American also enabled Mexican Americans to distance themselves from recently arrived Mexican immigrants who were often illiterate, poor, non-English speaking, and dark skinned. Mexican Americans thus began to object strenuously to being labeled as “colored” or forced to share facilities with Black Americans. Increasingly, middle-class Mexican Americans during the thirties and forties began to call themselves “Spanish” and insist on their whiteness. . . .

Many Mexicans had learned whiteness and “whitening” (*blanqueamiento*) before coming to the United States. Long-term interaction among African, indigenous, and Spanish peoples had led to the formation of a complex, hierarchical racial system in Mexico. After centuries of *mestizaje*, or race-mixing, society in colonial New Spain was composed of multiple ethnoracial groups. By the early twentieth century, the Mexican government had created census categories for three racial groups: Whites, Indians, and mestizos. The population of Mexico in 1920 consisted of about 14 million: 10 percent were classified as *raza blanca* (Whites), 30 percent as *raza indigena* (Indians), and about 60 percent as *raza mezclada* (mestizos).⁸ Mestizos had occupied an awkward position in this racial hierarchy, often hated by the Spanish for being part Indian and shunned by the Indians for being part Spanish. Those able to construct identities as Spaniards often regarded mestizos, Indians, and Africans with racial contempt. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many urban mestizo elites claimed to be Spanish, or mostly Spanish, in order to establish racial and cultural distance between themselves and Indians. . . .

Some Mexican Americans were therefore mortified when Anglo Americans made no effort to distinguish between “Spanish” or “White” Mexicans and “Indian” Mexicans, which also became a source of irritation to the Mexican government. Mexican consuls frequently complained that Mexican citizens were not being treated like White people in the United States. In 1933 the Mexican consul in Dallas wrote a county sheriff to protest that a Mexican citizen had been jailed “with the negro prisoners” instead of with the Anglos. “It is my opinion,” the Mexican consul general wrote to the sheriff, “that there is no reason for segregating Mexicans from white Americans, inasmuch as they are both of the white race.”⁹

The different views of the Texas sheriff and the Mexican consul over the racial status of Mexicans in the United States reflected their countries’ legal and cultural perspectives on the issue of race mixing. For Mexicans, theoretically at least, *mestizaje* produced racial strength. The fusion of Spanish, Indian, and African created a race of people that was greater than the sum of its parts, what the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos called the “cosmic race.” To the Texas sheriff and the average White person in America, however, race mixing was a menace to the purity of the Nordic race that, unchecked, would lead to the demise of White civilization. When Spaniards mixed their blood with Indians and Africans, White Americans believed, they removed themselves from the domain of whiteness. This “dark stream” of “peon blood” was inferior to even that of southern European Jews and Slavs whom the eugenicist Madison Grant accused of producing “race bastards” and other “amazing racial hybrids” and “ethnic horrors that will be beyond the powers of future anthropologists to unravel.”¹⁰

The history of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the Southwest is a thrice-told tale and does not bear repetition here. What is key, however, is the way in which the courts and the census constructed whiteness and the often conflicting and contradictory way in which Whites themselves constructed it. Historically, if not legally, Mexicans had been regarded as non-White and denied most of the rights and privileges that whiteness bestowed. In school segregation cases, however, the courts uniformly ruled that Mexicans belonged to the White race; and in the one naturalization case concerning a Mexican American, the court ruled that Mexican citizens, regardless of race, were entitled to become U.S. citizens as a result of treaty agreements. Mexican Americans reasoned that if the law said they were White, then Anglos broke the law by discriminating against them as non-Whites. . . .

The Supreme Court acknowledged that many immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who were considered White in the 1920s—Italians, Greeks, Slavs, and Jews, for example—were outside the bounds of whiteness in 1790 and had only later been granted status as Whites. The courts, especially those adjudicating whiteness for the purpose of naturalization, often relied on “common knowledge,” or how the average White person viewed the whiteness of a person. Between 1878 and 1909 the courts heard twelve prerequisite or naturalization cases to determine whether a person seeking U.S. citizenship was White or not. In eleven of the cases, the courts barred the naturalization of

applicants from China, Japan, Burma, and Hawaii, as well as that of two mixed-race applicants. As in other prerequisite cases, the applicants sought to convince the court that they met the racial criteria of whiteness by either scientific evidence (the division of humans into five racial groups: Mongolian, Negro, Caucasian, Indian, and Malay) or "common knowledge." The courts used either or both of these criteria to decide who was White and who was not. Takao Ozawa, a Japanese citizen educated at the University of California at Berkeley and resident of the United States for twenty-eight years, petitioned the court to become a citizen on the grounds that his skin color made him a "white person." The court disagreed with this literal interpretation of whiteness and in 1923 denied him citizenship on the grounds that he was of the Mongolian, not the Caucasian, race. White skin, by itself, did not guarantee one's "property right" in whiteness.¹¹

Three months after ruling that Japanese were not Caucasian and therefore not White, the Supreme Court in *United States v. Thind* (1923) rejected its own equation that only Caucasians were White. Bhagat Singh Thind, one of approximately 6,400 Asian Indians in the United States by 1920, applied for citizenship on the grounds that Asian Indians were Caucasian and not Mongolian, were therefore White, and were therefore eligible for citizenship. The court did not dispute that Thind was a Caucasian but ruled that not all Caucasians were White despite the technical link between Europeans and South Asians. "It may be true," the court ruled, "that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today."¹² The Supreme Court thus ruled in the same year that Takao Ozawa was not White because, although he had white skin, he was not of the Caucasian race, whereas Bhagat Singh Thind was denied citizenship on the grounds that, although he was a Caucasian, he was not White. Whiteness, the courts increasingly ruled, was whatever they said it was. The Thind ruling was the Supreme Court's final concession to the subjective, cultural construction of whiteness. . . .

To many Whites it must have seemed long overdue when the census bureau announced in 1930 that it had created a separate category for Mexicans. For the first time in census history, Mexicans had become racialized as a non-White group. The absence of a separate classification for persons of Mexican descent before 1930 had prevented immigration restrictionists and anti-restrictionists alike from knowing the demographic dimensions of the "Mexican problem" during the 1920s when immigration restriction was hotly debated in Congress.¹³ Accordingly, the instructions to the enumerators for the 1930 census stated: "Practically all Mexican laborers are of a racial mixture difficult to classify, though usually well recognized in the localities where they are found. In order to obtain separate figures for this racial group, it has been decided that all persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico, *who are not definitely white*, negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese, should be returned as Mexican."¹⁴ Unlike census instructions before and after 1930, the 1930 census presumed Mexicans to be non-White unless "definitely

white.” Although no instructions were given to determine who was and who was not “definitely white,” enumerators had to decide which Mexicans to count as Whites and which to enter in the non-White “Mexican” column. The outcome, not surprisingly, was that over 1.4 million persons were returned as “Mexicans” and therefore non-White, while only 65,986 (4 percent) of persons of Mexican descent were listed as White.¹⁵ The majority of Mexicans in the United States were therefore recognized by the census, if not the courts, as non-Whites. Both the Mexican government and many Mexican Americans objected strenuously to the new classification scheme, and much to the dismay of eugenicists and assorted nativists, the census abandoned the category in subsequent censuses. Although having their whiteness restored did not lessen discrimination, the Mexican government and Mexican Americans fully understood the implications of being officially or legally recognized as a non-White group.

Segregation statutes consistently defined all those without African ancestry as “whites.” Texas, for example, defined “colored children” as persons of mixed blood descended from “negro ancestry” for purposes of its school segregation laws and defined all persons besides those of African descent as White for purposes of its antimiscegenation and Jim Crow laws.¹⁶ Chinese and Mexicans in Texas were thus White under state laws governing the segregation of the races, although in practice Mexicans were segregated into “Mexican schools” on the grounds that they needed special language instruction, were “dirty,” or had fallen too far behind to be educated with Anglos of the same age.

In Texas the line between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation became increasingly blurred as school officials made decisions about district boundaries, school construction, transportation, and so forth that resulted in segregation of Mexican children from White schools. In the absence of statutory segregation that existed in the South between whites and blacks, Mexican Americans first challenged school segregation in 1930, the same year in which they achieved segregated status in the census. In *Independent School District v. Salvatierra* (1930), the Mexican American plaintiffs of Del Rio, Texas, sought to prove that the actions taken by school officials were designed to accomplish “the complete segregation of the school children of Mexican and Spanish descent . . . from the school children of *all other white races* in the same grade.” This clever wording recognized that Mexicans were not White in the sense that Anglos were, but that they belonged to a parallel universe of whiteness. The Texas Court of Civil Appeals agreed with the plaintiffs and ruled that “school authorities have no power to arbitrarily segregate Mexican children, assign them to separate schools, and exclude them from schools maintained for children of *other white races*, merely or solely because they are Mexicans.”¹⁷ However, it was a Pyrrhic victory for Mexicans because the court also affirmed the principle that children could be segregated if they had language difficulties or if as migrant workers they started school late. School officials were barred only from segregating Mexican children arbitrarily.

Mexican Americans had learned that the courts ended officially sanctioned segregation of Mexicans only when they insisted on their status as Whites. But how was one to become *de facto* White as well as *de jure* White? LULAC members had tried just about everything they could to prove how Americanized they were: they spoke English, voted, used the court systems, got elected to office, actively opposed Mexican immigration, and excluded Mexican citizens from membership in LULAC. They organized baseball teams and ate quantities of hot dogs. What more could they do to assimilate whiteness? Assimilation, however, is not only about what one leaves behind; it is also about what one is moving toward, what one acquires in the process of cultural exchange and fusion.

For many immigrant groups, assimilation, in part, meant becoming “American,” which is also to say, becoming White. And becoming White, Toni Morrison has written, means that “A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open,” adding that African Americans have historically served the “less than covert function of defining whites as the ‘true’ Americans.”¹⁸ As with other ethnic groups in the past—Italians, Poles, and Irish, for example—for Mexican Americans the path to whiteness involved not so much losing one’s culture as becoming wedded to the notion that people of African descent were culturally and biologically inferior to Whites. “Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned,” Toni Morrison reminds us, “is assimilation complete.”¹⁹

Growing numbers of middle-class Mexican Americans thus made Faustian bargains that offered them inclusion within whiteness provided that they subsumed their ethnic identities under their newly acquired White racial identity and its core value of White supremacy. . . .

Not all Mexican Americans, of course, sought to define themselves as Caucasian or to achieve equality with Anglos on “the backs of blacks.” One member of the Mexican American generation who resisted the lure of whiteness was Emma Tenayuca, a labor organizer and leader of the Pecan Shellers Strike in San Antonio, Texas, during the 1930s. As a woman Tenayuca defied the gendered boundaries of both Anglo and Mexican culture when she assumed the role of labor activist; she also crossed the ideological divide between “patriotic Americans” and “traitors” when she joined the Communist Party.²⁰ While Anglos probably regarded Tenayuca as a stereotypical Mexican who had suddenly gone “*loca*,” the largely Catholic, anti-Communist, and middle-class Mexican American community of San Antonio, which included LULAC leaders and the Catholic Church, opposed Tenayuca along ethnoracial fault lines as well as those of religion, gender, and politics. Tenayuca identified herself as an “Indian” like her father and was fond of saying that she did not have a “fashionable Spanish name like García or Sánchez.”²¹

Despite numerous examples of those who, like Emma Tenayuca, rejected whiteness and White privilege, many Mexican Americans must nevertheless acknowledge their complicity in maintaining boundaries around “blackness” in order to claim the privileges of whiteness. By embracing whiteness, Mexican Americans have reinforced the color line that has denied people of African

descent full participation in American democracy. In pursuing White rights, Mexican Americans combined Latin American racialism with Anglo racism, and in the process separated themselves and their political agenda from the Black civil rights struggles of the forties and fifties.

After 1960 a new generation of Mexican Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, rejected the accommodationist strategies of the Mexican American generation and sought empowerment through “brownness” and the return, symbolically at least, to Aztlán, the heritage of their Indian past. Chicanos, many who were themselves middle class and college educated, were ridiculed for wearing serapes and resurrecting their Indian heritage, about which they knew very little, but these criticisms have largely missed the mark: in rejecting whiteness, Chicanos found common cause with all oppressed groups—Blacks, Indians, Chinese, and Vietnamese, as well as Mexican immigrants. They rejected the “wages of whiteness” as the “wages of sin” and celebrated their exclusion from and opposition to White America. The White response, about 150 years too late, was: “Why do you insist on being different, on being Chicano or Mexican? Why can’t you just be American?” Chicanos rejected being “American” on the historically accurate grounds that being American had always meant being White. But as they accused LULAC members and conservative Mexican Americans of running from their brownness, it was also the case that many Chicanos were trying to escape from their whiteness. Many still are.

Today many Hispanics enjoy the “wages of whiteness” as a result of a complex matrix of phenotype, class position, culture, and citizenship status, as well as the willingness of many Anglos to make room for yet another group of off-white Hispanics. Still, many persons of Mexican descent, especially recent immigrants, are excluded from the domain of whiteness. A dark-skinned non-English-speaking Mexican immigrant doing lawn and garden work does not share the same class and ethnoracial status as acculturated, educated Hispanics. Hispanicized Mexican Americans themselves often construct a “racial” gulf between themselves and “illegal aliens” and “wetbacks.”

The lure of whiteness continues to divide various Mexican constituencies along both race and class lines in their fractured, and often fractious, struggles for civil rights. Research on the various paths by which Mexican Americans sought to achieve their own civil rights goals since World War II has the potential to alter significantly our understanding of the complexity and confusion surrounding the ethnoracial identity of Mexican Americans and the process by which many became Hispanic, an identity given official sanction by the U.S. government, business, and academic communities. By examining how law (naturalization, segregation, and miscegenation), comparative civil rights politics (e.g., LULAC and NAACP), labor disputes, culture (e.g., “hispanismo”), religion (e.g., evangelical Protestantism), and literary works have constructed whiteness, often in conflicting and contradictory ways, such a study can illuminate the peculiarly hybrid identities of Mexican Americans and explore the historical roots of the tension that exists between the Hispanic and African

American communities, analogous to the tension that has developed between Jews and Blacks, in the context of these groups' particular orientations toward whiteness.

Notes

1. LULAC News 1 (1932) and 4 (1937), LULAC Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin; and Benjamín Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Association* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 32–33.
2. Márquez, *LULAC*, 33.
3. Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," *Time* 142 (Fall 1993): 57.
4. Quoted in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, ed. Michelle Fine et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), vii.
5. Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 162.
6. George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47 (September 1995): 369–387. For the historical literature on whiteness, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); and his *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); and Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). On the legal construction of whiteness, see Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (June 1993): 1709–1771. On racial formation and the gendered construction of racial ideologies, see Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Meta-language of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 251–274; Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996): 44–69; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992). See also Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in America," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–177; Thomas C. Holt, "Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History," *American Historical Review* 100 (February 1995), 1–20; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); and Ronald Takaki,

Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).

7. Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," 57.

8. Douglas R. Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination in Mexico: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1600–1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); and Patricia Seed, "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 62 (1982): 559–606. See also Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 214–215; and Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 9–19.

9. Raúl G. Domínguez to J. B. Davis, June 1, 1933, folder "Mexican Affairs," box 301–495, Miriam A. Ferguson Papers, Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas. In another case the Mexican consul general in San Antonio wrote to the governor of Texas to protest the policy of Brackenridge Hospital in Austin, where Mexicans "are placed in the same ward with colored people, and treated as such." Ricardo G. Hill to James V. Allred, May 13, 1937, folder "Mexican Affairs," box 4-14/260, James Allred Papers, Texas State Library.

10. José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race* (1925; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race, Or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 69, 81; and C. M. Goethe, "Peons Need Not Apply," *World's Work* 59 (November 1930): 47–48.

11. See Haney López, *White by Law*; and Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

12. Haney López, *White by Law*, 89.

13. The debate can be traced through the numerous congressional hearings by the Immigration and Naturalization Committee during the 1920s. See, for example, United States Congress, House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere*, 70th Cong., 2nd sess. 1930; idem, *Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere*, 70th Cong., 1st sess., Hearing No. 70.1.5 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1928); idem, *Immigration from Mexico*, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. 1930; idem, *Naturalization*, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. 1930; idem, *Restriction of Immigration*, 68th Cong., 1st sess., serial 1-A. 1924; idem, *Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico*, 69th Cong., 1st sess. 1926; idem, *Temporary Admission of Illiterate Mexican Laborers*, 66th Cong., 2nd sess. 1920; idem, *Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. 1930. For a scholarly treatment and analysis of the immigration debate, see Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900–1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976); and David G. Gutiérrez, ed., *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1996).

14. Quoted in Gary A. Greenfield and Don B. Kates Jr., "Mexican Americans, Racial Discrimination, and the Civil Rights Act of 1866," *California Law Review* 63 (January 1975), 700.

15. T. J. Woofter, Jr., *Races and Ethnic Groups in American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), 57; Greenfield and Kates, "Mexican Americans and the Civil Rights Act of 1866," *California Law Review* 63 (January 1975), 700.

16. Jorge C. Rangel and Carlos M. Alcalá, "Project Report: De Jure Segregation of Chicanos in Texas Schools," *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review* 7 (March

1972), 311–312, 332–333; Greenfield and Kates, “Mexican Americans and the Civil Rights Act of 1866,” 682.

17. Quoted in Rangel and Alcalá, “De Jure Segregation of Chicanos in Texas Schools,” 334. See also Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *“Let All of Them Take Heed”: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910–1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 78–81.

18. Morrison, “On the Backs of Blacks,” 57.

19. Morrison, “On the Backs of Blacks,” 57.

20. Teresa Córdova et al., eds., *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies Publications, University of Texas at Austin, 1986), 38. See also Zaragosa Vargas, “Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement,” *Pacific Historical Review* (1997).

21. Córdova, *Chicana Voices*, 38.

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The Possessive Investment in Whiteness

George Lipsitz

Blacks are often confronted, in American life, with such devastating examples of the white descent from dignity; devastating not only because of the enormity of white pretensions, but because this swift and graceless descent would seem to indicate that white people have no principles whatever.

—James Baldwin

Shortly after World War II, a French reporter asked expatriate Richard Wright for his views about the “Negro problem” in America. The author replied, “There isn’t any Negro problem; there is only a white problem.”¹ By inverting the reporter’s question, Wright called attention to its hidden assumptions—that racial polarization comes from the existence of blacks rather than from the behavior of whites, that black people are a “problem” for whites rather than fellow citizens entitled to justice, and that, unless otherwise specified, “Americans” means “whites.”² But Wright’s formulation also placed political mobilization by African Americans during the civil rights era in context, connecting black disadvantages to white advantages and finding the roots of black consciousness in the systemic practices of aversion, exploitation, denigration, and discrimination practiced by people who think of themselves as “white.”

Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see. As Richard Dyer suggests, “[W]hite power secures its dominance by seeming not to be

anything in particular.”³ As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.⁴ To identify, analyze, and oppose the destructive consequences of whiteness, we need what Walter Benjamin called “presence of mind.” Benjamin wrote that people visit fortune-tellers less out of a desire to know the future than out of a fear of not noticing some important aspect of the present. “Presence of mind,” he suggested, “is an abstract of the future, and precise awareness of the present moment more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events.”⁵ In U.S. society at this time, precise awareness of the present moment requires an understanding of the existence and the destructive consequences of the possessive investment in whiteness that surreptitiously shapes so much of our public and private lives.”

Race is a cultural construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans. Studies of culture too far removed from studies of social structure leave us with inadequate explanations for understanding racism and inadequate remedies for combating it.

Desire for slave labor encouraged European settlers in North America to view, first, Native Americans and, later, African Americans as racially inferior people suited “by nature” for the humiliating subordination of involuntary servitude. The long history of the possessive investment in whiteness stems in no small measure from the fact that all subsequent immigrants to North America have come to an already racialized society. From the start, European settlers in North America established structures encouraging a possessive investment in whiteness. The colonial and early national legal systems authorized attacks on Native Americans and encouraged the appropriation of their lands. They legitimated racialized chattel slavery, limited naturalized citizenship to “white” immigrants, identified Asian immigrants as expressly unwelcome (through legislation aimed at immigrants from China in 1882, from India in 1917, from Japan in 1924, and from the Philippines in 1934), and provided pretexts for restricting the voting, exploiting the labor, and seizing the property of Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans.⁶

The possessive investment in whiteness is not a simple matter of black and white; all racialized minority groups have suffered from it, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. The African slave trade began in earnest only after large-scale Native American slavery proved impractical in North America. The abolition of slavery led to the importation of low-wage labor from Asia. Legislation banning immigration from Asia set the stage for the recruitment of low-wage labor from Mexico. The new racial categories that emerged in each of these eras all revolved around applying racial labels to “nonwhite” groups in order to stigmatize and exploit them while at the same time preserving the value of whiteness.

Although reproduced in new form in every era, the possessive investment in whiteness has always been influenced by its origins in the racialized history of the United States—by its legacy of slavery and segregation, of “Indian” extermination and immigrant restriction, of conquest and colonialism. Although slavery has existed in many countries without any particular racial dimensions to it, the slave system that emerged in North America soon took on distinctly racial forms. Africans enslaved in North America faced a racialized system of power that reserved permanent, hereditary, chattel slavery for black people. White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another. Fearful of alliances between Native Americans and African Americans that might challenge the prerogatives of whiteness, white settlers prohibited slaves and free blacks from traveling in “Indian country.” European Americans used diplomacy and force to compel Native Americans to return runaway slaves to their white masters. During the Stono Rebellion of 1739, colonial authorities offered Native Americans a bounty for every rebellious slave they captured or killed. At the same time, British settlers recruited black slaves to fight against Native Americans within colonial militias.⁷ The power of whiteness depended not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations. . . .

Yet today the possessive investment is not simply the residue of conquest and colonialism, of slavery and segregation, of immigrant exclusion and “Indian” extermination. Contemporary whiteness and its rewards have been created and recreated by policies adopted long after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s and even after the outlawing of *de jure* segregation in the 1960s. There has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same racism. Political and cultural struggles over power have shaped the contours and dimensions of racism differently in different eras. . . .

Contemporary racism has been created anew in many ways over the past five decades, but most dramatically by the putatively race-neutral, liberal, social democratic reforms of the New Deal Era and by the more overtly race-conscious neoconservative reactions against liberalism since the Nixon years. It is a mistake to posit a gradual and inevitable trajectory of evolutionary progress in race relations; on the contrary, our history shows that battles won at one moment can later be lost. Despite hard-fought battles for change that secured important concessions during the 1960s in the form of civil rights legislation, the racialized nature of social policy in the United States since the Great Depression has actually increased the possessive investment in whiteness among European Americans over the past half century.

During the New Deal Era of the 1930s and 1940s, both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely afforded whites. The Federal Housing Act

of 1934 brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency's (FHA) "confidential" city surveys and appraisers' manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color.⁸ In the post-World War II era, trade unions negotiated contract provisions giving private medical insurance, pensions, and job security largely to the white workers who formed the overwhelming majority of the unionized work force in mass production industries, rather than fighting for full employment, medical care, and old-age pensions for all, or even for an end to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices by employers in those industries.⁹

Each of these policies widened the gap between the resources available to whites and those available to aggrieved racial communities. Federal housing policy offers an important illustration of the broader principles at work in the possessive investment in whiteness. By channeling loans away from older inner-city neighborhoods and toward white home buyers moving into segregated suburbs, the FHA and private lenders after World War II aided and abetted segregation in U.S. residential neighborhoods. FHA appraisers denied federally supported loans to prospective home buyers in the racially mixed Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1939, for example, because the area struck them as a "melting pot" area literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements."¹⁰ Similarly, mostly white St. Louis County secured five times as many FHA mortgages as the more racially mixed city of St. Louis between 1943 and 1960. Home buyers in the county received six times as much loan money and enjoyed per capita mortgage spending 6.3 times greater than those in the city.¹¹

The federal government has played a major role in augmenting the possessive investment in whiteness. For years, the General Services Administration routinely channeled the government's own rental and leasing business to realtors who engaged in racial discrimination, while federally subsidized urban renewal plans reduced the already limited supply of housing for communities of color through "slum clearance" programs. In concert with FHA support for segregation in the suburbs, federal and state tax monies routinely funded the construction of water supplies and sewage facilities for racially exclusive suburban communities in the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1960s, these areas often incorporated themselves as independent municipalities in order to gain greater access to federal funds allocated for "urban aid."¹²

At the same time that FHA loans and federal highway building projects subsidized the growth of segregated suburbs, urban renewal programs in cities throughout the country devastated minority neighborhoods. During the 1950s and 1960s, federally assisted urban renewal projects destroyed 20 percent of the central-city housing units occupied by blacks, as opposed to only 10 percent of those inhabited by whites.¹³ More than 60 percent of those displaced by urban renewal were African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, or members of other minority racial groups.¹⁴ The Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration financed more than \$120 billion

worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962, but less than 2 percent of this real estate was available to nonwhite families—and most of that small amount was located in segregated areas.¹⁵

Even in the 1970s, after most major urban renewal programs had been completed, black central-city residents continued to lose housing units at a rate equal to 80 percent of what had been lost in the 1960s. Yet white displacement declined to the relatively low levels of the 1950s.¹⁶ In addition, the refusal first to pass, then to enforce, fair housing laws has enabled realtors, buyers, and sellers to profit from racist collusion against minorities largely without fear of legal retribution. During the decades following World War II, urban renewal helped construct a new “white” identity in the suburbs by helping to destroy ethnically specific European American urban inner-city neighborhoods. Wrecking balls and bulldozers eliminated some of these sites, while others were transformed by an influx of minority residents desperately competing for a declining supply of affordable housing units. As increasing numbers of racial minorities moved into cities, increasing numbers of European American ethnics moved out. Consequently, ethnic differences among whites became a less important dividing line in U.S. culture, while race became more important. The suburbs helped turn Euro-Americans into “whites” who could live near each other and intermarry with relatively little difficulty. But this “white” unity rested on residential segregation, on shared access to housing and life chances largely unavailable to communities of color.¹⁷

During the 1950s and 1960s, local “pro-growth” coalitions led by liberal mayors often justified urban renewal as a program designed to build more housing for poor people, but it actually destroyed more housing than it created. Ninety percent of the low-income units removed for urban renewal during the entire history of the program were never replaced. Commercial, industrial, and municipal projects occupied more than 80 percent of the land cleared for these projects, with less than 20 percent allocated for replacement housing. In addition, the loss of taxable properties and the tax abatements granted to new enterprises in urban renewal zones often meant serious tax increases for poor, working-class, and middle-class home owners and renters.¹⁸ Although the percentage of black suburban dwellers also increased during this period, no significant desegregation of the suburbs took place. From 1960 to 1977, 4 million whites moved out of central cities, while the number of whites living in suburbs increased by 22 million; during the same years, the inner-city black population grew by 6 million, but the number of blacks living in suburbs increased by only 500,000.¹⁹ By 1993, 86 percent of suburban whites still lived in places with a black population below 1 percent. At the same time, cities with large numbers of minority residents found themselves cut off from loans by the FHA. For example, because of their growing black and Puerto Rican populations, neither Camden nor Paterson, New Jersey, in 1966 received one FHA-sponsored mortgage.²⁰

In 1968, lobbyists for the banking industry helped draft the Housing and Urban Development Act, which allowed private lenders to shift the risks of financing low-income housing to the government, creating a lucrative and

thoroughly unregulated market for themselves. One section of the 1968 bill authorized FHA mortgages for inner-city areas that did not meet the usual eligibility criteria, and another section subsidized interest payments by low-income families. If administered wisely, these provisions might have promoted fair housing goals, but FHA administrators deployed them in ways that actually promoted segregation in order to provide banks, brokers, lenders, developers, realtors, and speculators with windfall profits. As a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights investigation later revealed, FHA officials collaborated with blockbusters in financing the flight of low-income whites out of inner-city neighborhoods, and then aided unscrupulous realtors and speculators by arranging purchases of substandard housing by minorities desperate to own their own homes. The resulting sales and mortgage foreclosures brought great profits to lenders (almost all of them white), but their actions led to price fixing and a subsequent inflation of housing costs in the inner city by more than 200 percent between 1968 and 1972. Bankers then foreclosed on the mortgages of thousands of these uninspected and substandard homes, ruining many inner-city neighborhoods. In response, the Department of Housing and Urban Development essentially red-lined inner cities, making them ineligible for future loans, a decision that destroyed the value of inner-city housing for generations to come.²¹

Federally funded highways designed to connect suburban commuters with downtown places of employment also destroyed already scarce housing in minority communities and often disrupted neighborhood life as well. Construction of the Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles, the Gulf Freeway in Houston, and the Mark Twain Freeway in St. Louis displaced thousands of residents and bisected neighborhoods, shopping districts, and political precincts. The processes of urban renewal and highway construction set in motion a vicious cycle: population loss led to decreased political power, which made minority neighborhoods more vulnerable to further urban renewal and freeway construction, not to mention more susceptible to the placement of prisons, incinerators, toxic waste dumps, and other projects that further depopulated these areas.

In Houston, Texas—where blacks make up slightly more than one quarter of the local population—more than 75 percent of municipal garbage incinerators and 100 percent of the city-owned garbage dumps are located in black neighborhoods.²² A 1992 study by staff writers for the *National Law Journal* examined the Environmental Protection Agency's response to 1,177 toxic waste cases and found that polluters of sites near the greatest white population received penalties 500 percent higher than penalties imposed on polluters in minority areas—an average of \$335,566 for white areas contrasted with \$55,318 for minority areas. Income did not account for these differences—penalties for low-income areas on average actually exceeded those for areas with the highest median incomes by about 3 percent. The penalties for violating all federal environmental laws regulating air, water, and waste pollution were 46 percent lower in minority communities than in white communities. In addition, superfund remedies left minority communities waiting longer

than white communities to be placed on the national priority list, cleanups that began from 12 to 42 percent later than at white sites, and with a 7 percent greater likelihood of "containment" (walling off a hazardous site) than cleanup, while white sites experienced treatment and cleanup 22 percent more often than containment.²³

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's 1988 survey of children suffering from lead poisoning showed that among families with incomes under \$6,000 per year, 36 percent of white children but 68 percent of black children suffered from excess lead in their bloodstreams. Among families with incomes above \$15,000 per year, only 12 percent of white children but 38 percent of black children suffered from toxic levels of lead.²⁴ In the Los Angeles area, only 34 percent of whites inhabit areas with the most polluted air, but 71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in neighborhoods with the highest levels of air pollution.²⁵ Nationwide, 60 percent of African Americans and Latinos live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.²⁶

Scholarly studies reveal that even when adjusted for income, education, and occupational status, aggrieved racial minorities encounter higher levels of exposure to toxic substances than white people experience.²⁷ In 1987, the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ found race to be the most significant variable in determining the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities.²⁸ In a review of sixty-four studies examining environmental disparities, the National Wildlife Federation found that racial disparities outnumbered disparities by income, and in cases where disparities in race and income were both present, race proved to be more important in twenty-two out of thirty tests.²⁹ As Robert D. Bullard demonstrates, "race has been found to be an independent factor, not reducible to class" in predicting exposure to a broad range of environmental hazards, including polluted air, contaminated fish, lead poisoning, municipal landfills, incinerators, and toxic waste dumps.³⁰ The combination of exposure to environmental hazards and employment discrimination establishes a sinister correlation between race and health. One recent government study revealed that the likelihood of dying from nutritional deficiencies was two and a half times greater among African Americans than among European Americans.³¹ Another demonstrated that Asian and Pacific Islander recipients of aid for at-risk families exhibited alarming rates of stunted growth and underweight among children under the age of five.³² Corporations systematically target Native American reservations when looking for locations for hazardous waste incinerators, solid waste landfills, and nuclear waste storage facilities; Navajo teenagers develop reproductive organ cancer at seventeen times the national average because of their exposure to radiation from uranium mines.³³ Latinos in East Los Angeles encounter some of the worst smog and the highest concentration of air toxins in southern California because of prevailing wind patterns and the concentration of polluting industries, freeways, and toxic waste dumps.³⁴ Environmental racism makes the possessive investment in whiteness literally a matter of life and death; if African Americans had access to the nutrition, wealth, health care,

and protection against environmental hazards offered routinely to whites, seventy-five thousand fewer of them would die each year.³⁵

Minorities are less likely than whites to receive preventive medical care or costly operations from Medicare. Eligible members of minority communities are also less likely than European Americans to apply for food stamps.³⁶ The labor of migrant farm workers from aggrieved racialized groups plays a vital role in providing adequate nutrition for others, but the farm workers and their children suffer disproportionately from health disorders caused by malnutrition.³⁷ In her important research on health policy and ethnic diversity, Linda Wray concludes that “the lower life expectancies for many ethnic minority groups and subgroups stem largely from their disproportionately higher rates of poverty, malnutrition, and poor health care.”³⁸

Just as residential segregation and urban renewal make minority communities disproportionately susceptible to health hazards, their physical and social location gives these communities a different relationship to the criminal justice system. A 1990 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse revealed that while only 15 percent of the thirteen million habitual drug users in the United States were black and 77 percent were white, African Americans were four times more likely to be arrested on drug charges than whites in the nation as a whole, and seven to nine times more likely in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. A 1989 study by the Parents’ Resource Institute for Drug Education discovered that African American high school students consistently showed lower levels of drug and alcohol use than their European American counterparts, even in high schools populated by residents of low-income housing projects. Yet, while comprising about 12 percent of the U.S. population, blacks accounted for 10 percent of drug arrests in 1984, 40 percent in 1988, and 42 percent in 1990. In addition, white drug defendants receive considerably shorter average prison terms than African Americans convicted of comparable crimes. A U.S. Sentencing Commission study found in 1992 that half of the federal court districts that handled cases involving crack cocaine prosecuted minority defendants *exclusively*. A *Los Angeles Times* article in 1995 revealed that “black and Latino crack dealers are hammered with 10-year mandatory federal sentences while whites prosecuted in state court face a minimum of five years and often receive no more than a year in jail.” Alexander Lichtenstein and Michael A. Kroll point out that sentences for African Americans in the federal prison system are 20 percent longer than those given to whites who commit the same crimes. They observe that if blacks received the same sentences as whites for these offenses, the federal prison system would require three thousand fewer prison cells, enough to close completely six of the new five-hundred bed institutions.³⁹

Racial animus on the part of police officers, prosecutors, and judges accounts for only a small portion of the distinctive experience that racial minorities have with the criminal justice system. Economic devastation makes the drug trade appealing to some people in the inner city, while the dearth of capital in minority neighborhoods curtails opportunities for other kinds of employment. Deindustrialization, unemployment, and lack of intergenerational transfers of

wealth undermine parental and adult authority in many neighborhoods. The complex factors that cause people to turn to drugs are no more prevalent in minority communities than elsewhere, but these communities and their inhabitants face more stress while having fewer opportunities to receive private counseling and treatment for their problems.

The structural weaknesses of minority neighborhoods caused by discrimination in housing, education, and hiring also play a crucial role in relations between inner-city residents and the criminal justice system. Cocaine dealing, which initially skyrocketed among white suburban residents, was driven into the inner city by escalating enforcement pressures in wealthy white communities. Ghettos and barrios became distribution centers for the sale of drugs to white suburbanites. Former New York and Houston police commissioner Lee Brown, head of the federal government's antidrug efforts during the early years of the Clinton presidency and later mayor of Houston, noted, "There are those who bring drugs into the country. That's not the black community. Then you have wholesalers, those who distribute them once they get here, and as a rule that's not the black community. Where you find the blacks is in the street dealing."⁴⁰

You also find blacks and other minorities in prison. Police officers in large cities, pressured to show results in the drive against drugs, lack the resources to effectively enforce the law everywhere (in part because of the social costs of deindustrialization and the tax limitation initiatives designed to shrink the size of government). These officers know that it is easier to make arrests and to secure convictions by confronting drug users in areas that have conspicuous street corner sales, that have more people out on the street with no place to go, and that have residents more likely to plead guilty and less likely to secure the services of attorneys who can get the charges against them dropped, reduced, or wiped off the books with subsequent successful counseling and rehabilitation. In addition, politicians supported by the public relations efforts of neoconservative foundations often portray themselves to suburban voters as opponents of the "dangerous classes" in the inner cities.

Minority disadvantages craft advantages for others. Urban renewal failed to provide new housing for the poor, but it played an important role in transforming the U.S. urban economy from one that relied on factory production to one driven by producer services. Urban renewal projects subsidized the development of downtown office centers on previously residential land, and they frequently created buffer zones of empty blocks dividing poor neighborhoods from new shopping centers designed for affluent commuters. To help cities compete for corporate investment by making them appealing to high-level executives, federal urban aid favored construction of luxury housing units and cultural centers like symphony halls and art museums over affordable housing for workers. Tax abatements granted to these producer services centers further aggravated the fiscal crisis that cities faced, leading to tax increases on existing industries, businesses, and residences.

Workers from aggrieved racial minorities bore the brunt of this transformation. Because the 1964 Civil Rights Act came so late, minority workers who

received jobs because of it found themselves more vulnerable to seniority-based layoffs when businesses automated or transferred operations overseas. Although the act initially made real progress in reducing employment discrimination, lessened the gaps between rich and poor and between black and white workers, and helped bring minority poverty to its lowest level in history in 1973, that year's recession initiated a reversal of minority progress and a reassertion of white privilege.⁴¹ In 1977, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported on the disproportionate impact of layoffs on minority workers. In cases where minority workers made up only 10 to 12 percent of the work force in their area, they accounted for from 60 to 70 percent of those laid off in 1974. The principle of seniority, a trade union triumph designed to protect workers from age discrimination, in this case guaranteed that minority workers would suffer most from technological changes, because the legacy of past discrimination by their employers left them with less seniority than white workers.⁴²

When housing prices increased dramatically during the 1970s, white home owners who had been able to take advantage of discriminatory FHA financing policies in the past realized increased equity in their homes, while those excluded from the housing market by earlier policies found themselves facing even higher costs of entry into the market in addition to the traditional obstacles presented by the discriminatory practices of sellers, realtors, and lenders. The contrast between European Americans and African Americans is instructive in this regard. Because whites have access to broader housing choices than blacks, whites pay 15 percent less than blacks for similar housing in the same neighborhood. White neighborhoods typically experience housing costs 25 percent lower than would be the case if the residents were black.⁴³

A recent Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study revealed that Boston bankers made 2.9 times as many mortgage loans per 1,000 housing units in neighborhoods inhabited by low-income whites than in neighborhoods populated by low-income blacks.⁴⁴ In addition, loan officers were far more likely to overlook flaws in the credit records of white applicants or to arrange creative financing for them than they were with black applicants.⁴⁵ A Los Angeles study found that loan officers more frequently used dividend income and underlying assets as criteria for judging black applicants than for whites.⁴⁶ In Houston, the NCNB Bank of Texas disqualified 13 percent of middle-income white loan applicants but 36 percent of middle-income black applicants.⁴⁷ Atlanta's home loan institutions gave five times as many home loans to whites as to blacks in the late 1980s. An analysis of sixteen Atlanta neighborhoods found that home buyers in white neighborhoods received conventional financing four times as often as those in black sections of the city.⁴⁸ Nationwide, financial institutions receive more money in deposits from black neighborhoods than they invest in them in the form of home mortgage loans, making home lending a vehicle for the transfer of capital away from black savers toward white investors.⁴⁹ In many locations, high-income blacks were denied loans more often than low-income whites.⁵⁰

When confronted with evidence of systematic racial bias in home lending, defenders of the possessive investment in whiteness argue that the disproportionate share of loan denials to members of minority groups stems not from

discrimination, but from the low net worth of minority applicants, even those who have high incomes. This might seem a reasonable position, but net worth is almost totally determined by past opportunities for asset accumulation, and therefore is the one figure most likely to reflect the history of discrimination. Minorities are told, in essence, "We can't give you a loan today because we've discriminated against members of your race so effectively in the past that you have not been able to accumulate any equity from housing and to pass it down through the generations."

Most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a discriminatory housing market. In their prize-winning book *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro demonstrate how the history of housing discrimination makes white parents more able to borrow funds for their children's college education or to loan money to their children to enter the housing market. In addition, much discrimination in home lending is not based on considerations of net worth; it stems from decisions made by white banking officials based on their stereotypes about minority communities. The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study showed that black and Latino mortgage applicants are 60 percent more likely to be turned down for loans than whites, even after controlling for employment, financial, and neighborhood characteristics.⁵¹ Ellis Cose reports on a white bank official confronted with evidence at a board of directors' meeting that his bank denied loans to blacks who had credit histories and earnings equal to those of white applicants who received loans. The banker replied that the information indicated that the bank needed to do a better job of "affirmative action," but one of his colleagues pointed out that the problem had nothing to do with affirmative action—the bank was simply letting prejudice stand in the way of its own best interests by rejecting loans that should be approved.⁵²

Yet bankers also make money from the ways in which discrimination creates artificial scarcities in the market. Minorities have to pay more for housing because much of the market is off limits to them. Blockbusters profit from exploiting white fears and provoking them into panic selling. Minority home owners denied loans in mainstream banks often turn to exploitative lenders who make "low end" loans at enormously high interest rates. If they fail to pay back these loans, regular banks can acquire the property cheaply and charge someone else exorbitant interest for a loan on the same property.

Federal home loan policies have put the power of the federal government at the service of private discrimination. Urban renewal and highway construction programs have enhanced the possessive investment in whiteness directly through government initiatives. In addition, decisions about where to locate federal jobs have also systematically subsidized whiteness. Federal civilian employment dropped by 41,419 in central cities between 1966 and 1973, but total federal employment in metropolitan areas grew by 26,558.⁵³ While one might naturally expect the location of government buildings that serve the public to follow population trends, the federal government's policy of locating offices and records centers in suburbs aggravated the flight of jobs to suburban

locations less accessible to inner-city residents. Because racial discrimination in the private sector forces minority workers to seek government positions disproportionate to their numbers, these moves exact particular hardships on them. In addition, minorities who follow their jobs to the suburbs must generally allocate more for commuter costs, because housing discrimination makes it harder and more expensive for them than for whites to relocate.

The policies of neoconservatives in the Reagan and Bush administrations during the 1980s and 1990s greatly exacerbated the racialized aspects of more than fifty years of these social welfare policies. Regressive policies that cut federal aid to education and refused to challenge segregated education, housing, and hiring, as well as the cynical cultivation of an antiblack consensus through attacks on affirmative action and voting rights legislation clearly reinforced possessive investments in whiteness. In the U.S. economy, where 86 percent of available jobs do not appear in classified ads and where personal connections prove the most important factor in securing employment, attacks on affirmative action guarantee that whites will be rewarded for their historical advantage in the labor market rather than for their individual abilities or efforts.⁵⁴

Attacking the civil rights tradition serves many functions for neoconservatives. By mobilizing existing racisms and generating new ones, neoconservatives seek to discredit the egalitarian and democratic social movements of the post-World War II era and to connect the attacks by those movements on wealth, special privilege, and elite control over education and opportunity to despised and unworthy racial "others."

Attacks on the gains made by civil rights activism also act as a wedge to divide potentially progressive coalitions along racial lines, a strategy that attained its peak moment with the defection of "blue collar" trade unionists from the Democratic Party in the 1980s to become "Reagan Democrats." In addition to protecting centralized power and wealth and dividing its opponents, the neoracism of contemporary conservatism also functions as an important unifying symbol for a disparate and sometimes antagonistic coalition that includes Hamiltonian big-government conservatives as well as antistate libertarians, and that incorporates born-again Christians into an alliance with "objectivist" free market thinkers who celebrate selfishness and view the love of gain as the engine of human progress. This coalition often has trouble agreeing on the things it favors, but it has no difficulty agreeing about the alleged bad behavior and inferior morality of minority individuals and communities. Most important, by generating an ever repeating cycle of "moral panics" about the family, crime, welfare, race, and terrorism, neoconservatives produce a perpetual state of anxiety that obscures the actual failures of conservatism as economic and social policy, while promoting demands for even more draconian measures of a similar nature for the future. The neoracism of contemporary conservatism plays a vital role in building a counter-subversive consensus because it disguises the social disintegration brought about by neoconservatism itself as the fault of "inferior" social groups, and because it builds a sense of righteous indignation among its constituents that

enables them to believe that the selfish and self-interested politics they pursue are actually part of a moral crusade.

Yet even seemingly race-neutral policies supported by both neoconservatives and liberals in the 1980s and 1990s have increased the absolute value of being white. In the 1980s, changes in federal tax laws decreased the value of wage income and increased the value of investment income—a move harmful to minorities, who suffer from a gap between their total wealth and that of whites even greater than the disparity between their income and white income. The failure to raise the minimum wage between 1981 and 1989 and the decline of more than one-third in the value of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments injured all poor people, but they exacted special costs on nonwhites, who faced even more constricted markets for employment, housing, and education than poor whites.⁵⁵

Similarly, the “tax reforms” of the 1980s made the effective rate of taxation higher on investment in actual goods and services than on profits from speculative enterprises. This change encouraged the flight of capital from industrial production with its many employment opportunities toward investments that can be turned over quickly to allow the greatest possible tax write-offs. Government policies thus discouraged investments that might produce high-paying jobs and encouraged investors to strip companies of their assets to make rapid short-term profits. These policies hurt almost all workers, but they fell particularly heavily on minority workers, who because of employment discrimination in the retail and small business sectors were overrepresented in blue-collar industrial jobs.

On the other hand, while neoconservative tax policies created incentives for employers to move their enterprises elsewhere, they created disincentives for home owners to move. Measures like California’s Proposition 13 (passed in 1978) granting tax relief to property owners badly misallocate housing resources, because they make it financially unwise for the elderly to move out of large houses, further reducing the supply of housing available to young families. While one can well understand the necessity for protecting senior citizens on fixed incomes from tax increases that would make them lose their homes, the rewards and punishments provided by Proposition 13 are so extreme that they prevent the kinds of generational succession that have routinely opened up housing to young families in the past. This reduction works particular hardships on those who also face discrimination by sellers, realtors, and lending institutions.

Subsidies to the private sector by government agencies also tend to enhance the rewards of past discrimination. Throughout the country, tax increment financing for redevelopment programs offers tax-free and low-interest loans to developers whose projects use public services, often without having to pay taxes to local school boards or county governments. In St. Louis, for example, tax abatements for wealthy corporations deprive the city’s schools (and their majority African American population) of \$17 million a year. Even if these redevelopment projects eventually succeed in increasing municipal revenues through sales and earnings taxes, their proceeds go to funds that

pay for the increased services these developments demand (fire and police protection, roads, sewers, electricity, lighting, etc.) rather than to school funds, which are dependent upon property tax revenues.⁵⁶ Nationwide, industrial development bonds resulted in a \$7.4 billion tax loss in 1983, which ordinary taxpayers had to make up through increased payroll taxes. Compared to white Americans, people of color, more likely to be poor or working class, suffer disproportionately from these changes as taxpayers, as workers, and as tenants. A study by the Citizens for Tax Justice found that wealthy Californians spend less than eleven cents in taxes for every dollar earned, while poor residents of the state pay fourteen cents out of every dollar in taxes. As groups overrepresented among the poor, minorities have been forced to subsidize the tax breaks given to the wealthy.⁵⁷ While holding property tax assessments for businesses and some home owners to about half of their market value, California's Proposition 13 deprived cities and counties of \$13 billion a year in taxes. Businesses alone avoided \$3.3 billion to \$8.6 billion in taxes per year under this statute.⁵⁸

Because they are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive investment in whiteness—generated by slavery and segregation, immigrant exclusion and Native American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented by liberal and conservative social policies as well—Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. The increased possessive investment in whiteness generated by disinvestment in U.S. cities, factories, and schools since the 1970s disguises as *racial* problems the general social problems posed by deindustrialization, economic restructuring, and neoconservative attacks on the welfare state. It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes, while hiding the privileges of whiteness by attributing the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values, faith in fatherhood, and foresight—rather than to the favoritism they enjoy through their possessive investment in whiteness.

The demonization of black families in public discourse since the 1970s is particularly instructive in this regard. During the 1970s, the share of low-income households headed by blacks increased by one-third, while black family income fell from 60 percent of white family income in 1971 to 58 percent in 1980. Even adjusting for unemployment and for African American disadvantages in life-cycle employment (more injuries, more frequently interrupted work histories, confinement to jobs most susceptible to layoffs), the wages of full-time year-round black workers fell from 77 percent of white workers' income to 73 percent by 1986. In 1986, white workers with high school diplomas earned \$3,000 per year more than African Americans with the same education.⁵⁹ Even when they had the same family structure as white workers, blacks found themselves more likely to be poor.

Recent economic gains by blacks brighten the picture somewhat, but the deindustrialization and economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s imposes yet another racial penalty on wage earners from minority communities, who suffered setbacks while members of other groups accumulated equity-producing assets. And even when some minority groups show improvement,

others do not. In 1995, for example, every U.S. ethnic and racial group experienced an increase in income except the twenty-seven million Hispanics, who experienced a 5.1 percent drop in income during that year alone.⁶⁰

Forty-six percent of black workers between the ages of twenty and twenty-four held blue-collar jobs in 1976, but only 20 percent by 1984. Earnings by young black families that had reached 60 percent of white families' income in 1973, fell to 46 percent by 1986. Younger African American families experienced a 50 percent drop in real earnings between 1973 and 1986, with the decline in black male wages particularly steep.⁶¹ Many recent popular and scholarly studies have delineated the causes for black economic decline over the past two decades.⁶² Deindustrialization has decimated the industrial infrastructure that formerly provided high wage jobs and chances for upward mobility to black workers. Neoconservative attacks on government spending for public housing, health, education, and transportation have deprived members of minority groups of needed services and opportunities for jobs in the public sector. A massive retreat at the highest levels of government from the responsibility to enforce antidiscrimination laws has sanctioned pervasive overt and covert racial discrimination by bankers, realtors, and employers.

Yet public opinion polls of white Americans reflect little recognition of these devastating changes. Seventy percent of whites in one poll said that African Americans "have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites," and nearly three-fourths of white respondents to a 1989 poll believed that opportunities for blacks had improved under Reagan.⁶³ If such optimism about the opportunities available to African Americans does not demonstrate ignorance of the dire conditions facing black communities, it indicates that many whites believe that blacks suffer deservedly, because they do not take advantage of the opportunities offered them. In opinion polls, favorable assessments of black chances for success often accompanied extremely negative judgments about the abilities, work habits, and character of black people. A National Opinion Research Report in 1990 disclosed that more than 50 percent of U.S. whites viewed blacks as innately lazy and less intelligent and less patriotic than whites.⁶⁴ More than 60 percent said that they believed that blacks suffer from poor housing and employment opportunities because of their own lack of will power. Some 56.3 percent said that blacks preferred welfare to employment, while 44.6 percent contended that blacks tended toward laziness.⁶⁵ Even more important, research by Mary Edsall and Thomas Byrne Edsall indicates that many whites structure nearly all of their decisions about housing, education, and politics in response to their aversions to black people.⁶⁶

The present political culture in this country gives broad sanction for viewing white supremacy and antiblack racism as forces from the past, as demons finally put to rest by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.⁶⁷ Jurists, journalists, and politicians have generally been more vocal in opposing what they call "quotas" and "reverse discrimination"—by which they usually mean race-specific measures, designed to remedy existing racial discrimination, that inconvenience or offend whites—than in

challenging the thousands of well-documented cases every year of routine, systematic, and unyielding discrimination against minorities. It is my contention that the stark contrast between nonwhite experiences and white opinions during the past two decades cannot be attributed solely to individual ignorance or intolerance, but stems instead from liberal individualism's inability to describe adequately the collective dimensions of our experience.⁶⁸ As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberative individual activities, we will be able to discern as racist only *individual* manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight. Collective exercises of power that relentlessly channel rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear "racist" from this perspective, because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals. Yet they nonetheless give racial identities their sinister social meaning by giving people from different races vastly different life chances.

The gap between white perception and minority experience can have explosive consequences. Little more than a year after the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, a sixteen-year-old high school junior shared her opinions with a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*. "I don't think white people owe anything to black people," she explained. "We didn't sell them into slavery, it was our ancestors. What they did was wrong, but we've done our best to make up for it." A seventeen-year-old senior echoed those comments, telling the reporter, "I feel we spend more time in my history class talking about what whites owe blacks than just about anything else when the issue of slavery comes up. I often received dirty looks. This seems strange given that I wasn't even alive then. And the few members of my family from that time didn't have the luxury of owning much, let alone slaves. So why, I ask you, am I constantly made to feel guilty?"⁶⁹

More ominously, after pleading guilty to bombing two homes and one car, vandalizing a synagogue, and attempting to start a race war by planning the murder of Rodney King and the bombing of Los Angeles's First African Methodist Episcopal Church, twenty-year-old Christopher David Fisher explained that "sometimes whites were picked on because of the color of their skin. . . . Maybe we're blamed for slavery."⁷⁰ Fisher's actions were certainly extreme, but his justification of them drew knowingly and precisely on a broadly shared narrative about the victimization of "innocent" whites by irrational and ungrateful minorities.

The comments and questions raised about the legacy of slavery by these young whites illuminate broader currents in our culture, with enormous implications for understanding the enduring significance of race in our country. These young people associate black grievances solely with slavery, and they express irritation at what they perceive as efforts to make them feel guilty or unduly privileged because of things that happened in the distant past. The claim that one's own family did not own any slaves is frequently voiced in our culture. It is almost never followed with a statement to the effect that of course some people's families did own slaves and we will not rest until we track them down and make them pay reparations. This view never acknowledges how the

existence of slavery and the exploitation of black labor after emancipation created opportunities from which immigrants and others benefited, even if they did not personally own slaves. Rather, it seems to hold that, because not all white people owned slaves, no white people can be held accountable or inconvenienced by the legacy of slavery. More important, having dispensed with slavery, they feel no need to address the histories of Jim Crow segregation, racialized social policies, urban renewal, or the revived racism of contemporary neoconservatism. On the contrary, Fisher felt that his discomfort with being “picked on” and “blamed” for slavery gave him good reason to bomb homes, deface synagogues, and plot to kill black people.

Unfortunately for our society, these young whites accurately reflect the logic of the language of liberal individualism and its ideological predispositions in discussions of race. In their apparent ignorance of the disciplined, systemic, and collective *group* activity that has structured white identities in U.S. history, they are in good company. In a 1979 law journal article, future Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia argued that affirmative action “is based upon concepts of racial indebtedness and racial entitlement rather than individual worth and individual need” and is thus “racist.”⁷¹ Yet liberal individualism is not completely color-blind on this issue. As Cheryl I. Harris demonstrates, the legacy of liberal individualism has not prevented the Supreme Court from recognizing and protecting the group interests of *whites* in the Bakke, Croson, and Wygant cases.⁷² In each case, the Court nullified affirmative action programs because they judged efforts to help blacks as harmful to whites: to white expectations of entitlement, expectations based on the possessive investment in whiteness they held as members of a group. In the Bakke case, for instance, where the plaintiff argued that medical school affirmative action programs disadvantaged white applicants like himself, neither Bakke nor the Court contested the legitimacy of medical school admissions standards that reserved five seats in each class for children of wealthy donors to the university or that penalized Bakke for being older than most of the other applicants. The group rights of not-wealthy people or of people older than their classmates did not compel the Court or Bakke to make any claim of harm. But they did challenge and reject a policy designed to offset the effects of past and present discrimination when they could construe the medical school admission policies as detrimental to the interests of whites as a group—and as a consequence they applied the “strict scrutiny” standard to protect whites while denying that protection to people of color. In this case, as in so many others, the language of liberal individualism serves as a cover for coordinated collective group interests.

Group interests are not monolithic, and aggregate figures can obscure serious differences within racial groups. All whites do not benefit from the possessive investment in whiteness in precisely the same ways; the experiences of members of minority groups are not interchangeable. But the possessive investment in whiteness always affects individual and group life chances and opportunities. Even in cases where minority groups secure political and economic power through collective mobilization, the terms and conditions of

their collectivity and the logic of group solidarity are always influenced and intensified by the absolute value of whiteness in U.S. politics, economics, and culture.⁷³

In the 1960s, members of the Black Panther Party used to say that “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” But those of us who are “white” can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree to which we are already part of the problem—not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it. Neither conservative “free market” policies nor liberal social welfare policies can solve the “white problem” in the United States, because both reinforce the possessive investment in whiteness. . . .

Failure to acknowledge our society’s possessive investment in whiteness prevents us from facing the present openly and honestly. It hides from us the devastating costs of disinvestment in America’s infrastructure over the past two decades and keeps us from facing our responsibility to reinvest in human resources by channeling resources toward education, health, and housing—and away from subsidies for speculation and luxury. After two decades of disinvestment, the only further disinvestment we need is from the ruinous pathology of whiteness, which has always undermined our own best instincts and interests.

Notes

The epigraph is from Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 1.

1. Raphael Tardon, “Richard Wright Tells Us: The White Problem in the United States,” *Action*, October 24, 1946. Reprinted in Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 99. Malcolm X and others used this same formulation in the 1960s, but I believe that it originated with Wright, or at least that is the earliest citation I have found.

2. Toni Morrison points out the ways in which African Americans play an essential role in the white imagination, how their representations both hide and reveal the terms of white supremacy upon which the nation was founded and has been sustained ever since. See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3. Richard Dyer, “White,” *Screen* 29, 4 (fall 1998): 44.

4. I thank Michael Schudson for pointing out to me that since the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s whiteness dares not speak its name, cannot speak in its own behalf, but rather advances through a color-blind language radically at odds with the distinctly racialized distribution of resources and life chances in U.S. society.

5. Walter Benjamin, “Madame Ariane: Second Courtyard on the Left,” in *One-Way Street* (London: New Left Books, 1969), 98–99.

6. See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 11–16; Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 177–83.

7. Nash, *Red, White, and Black*, 292–93.
8. See Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
9. I thank Phil Ethington for pointing out to me that these aspects of New Deal policies emerged out of political negotiations between the segregationist Dixiecrats and liberals from the North and West. My perspective is that white supremacy was not a gnawing aberration within the New Deal coalition but rather an essential point of unity between southern whites and northern white ethnics.
10. Records of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board of the Home Owners Loan Corporation, City Survey File, Los Angeles, 1939, Neighborhood D-53, National Archives, Box 74, RG 195.
11. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 54.
12. John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 182.
13. *Ibid.*, 114.
14. Arlene Zarembka, *The Urban Housing Crisis: Social, Economic, and Legal Issues and Proposals* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1990), 104.
15. Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92, 91.
16. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 130.
17. See Gary Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus," *International Labor and Working Class History* 44 (fall 1993): 36.
18. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 168–69.
19. Troy Duster, "Crime, Youth Unemployment, and the Underclass," *Crime and Delinquency* 33, 2 (April 1987): 308, 309.
20. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 55.
21. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*, 105, 113; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 204–5.
22. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 113.
23. Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice for All," in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*, ed. Robert Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994), 9–10.
24. Robert D. Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grass Roots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End, 1993), 21.
25. Bullard, "Environmental Justice for All," 13.
26. Charles Lee, "Beyond Toxic Wastes and Race," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grass Roots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End, 1993), 49. Two corporate-sponsored research institutes challenged claims of racial bias in the location and operation of toxic and hazardous waste systems. Andy B. Anderson, Douglas L. Anderton, and John Michael Oakes made the corporate case in "Environmental Equity: Evaluating TSDF Siting over the Past Two Decades," *Waste Age*, July 1994. These results were trumpeted in a report by the Washington University Center for the Study of American Business, funded by the John M. Olin

Foundation. But the study by Anderson, Anderton, and Oakes was sponsored by the Institute of Chemical Waste Management, an industry trade group. The researchers claimed that their results were not influenced by corporate sponsorship, but they limited their inquiry to urban areas with toxic storage, disposal, and treatment facilities, conveniently excluding seventy facilities, 15 percent of TSDFs, and 20 percent of the population. The world's largest waste company, WMX Company, contributed \$250,000 to the study, and the study's research plan excluded from scrutiny two landfills owned by WMX: the nation's largest commercial landfill, located in the predominately African American city of Emelle, Alabama, and the nation's fifth largest landfill, in Kettelman City Hills, California, a predominately Latino community.

27. Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992).

28. Lee, "Beyond Toxic Wastes and Race," 48.

29. Robert D. Bullard, "Decision Making," in Laura Westra and Peter S. Wenz, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 4.

30. Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism," 21.

31. David L.L. Shields, "What Color Is Hunger?" in David L.L. Shields, ed., *The Color of Hunger: Race and Hunger in National and International Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 4.

32. Centers for Disease Control, "Nutritional Status of Minority Children: United States, 1986," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports (MMWR)* 36, 23 (June, 19, 1987): 366–69.

33. Peter S. Wenz, "Just Garbage," in Laura Westra and Peter S. Wenz, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 66; Robert D. Bullard, "Decision Making," in Laura Westra and Peter S., Wenz, eds., *Faces of Environmental Racism*, 8.

34. Laura Pulido, "Multiracial Organizing Among Environmental Justice Activists in Los Angeles," in Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Shockman, and Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, CA, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1996): 175.

35. Charles Trueheart, "The Bias Most Deadly," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1990, sec. 7, cited in Shields, *The Color of Hunger*, 3.

36. George Anders, "Disparities in Medicare Access Found Among Poor, Black or Disabled Patients," *Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1994; Lina R. Godfrey, "Institutional Discrimination and Satisfaction with Specific Government Services by Heads of Households in Ten Southern States," paper presented at the Rural Sociological Society annual meeting, 1984, cited in Shields, *The Color of Hunger*, 6, 13.

37. Jeffrey Shotland, *Full Fields, Empty Cupboards: The Nutritional Status of Migrant Farm-workers in America* (Washington: Public Voice for Food and Health: 1989) cited in Shields, *The Color of Hunger*, 3.

38. Linda A. Wray, "Health Policy and Ethnic Diversity in Older Americans: Dissonance or Harmony," *Western Journal of Medicine* 157, 3 (September 1992): 357–61.

39. Eva Bertram, Morris Blachman, Kenneth Sharpe, and Peter Andreas, *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 38–42; Alexander C. Lichtenstein and Michael A. Kroll, "The Fortress

- Economy: The Economic Role of the U.S. Prison System," in Elihu Rosenblatt, ed., *Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis* (Boston: South End, 1996), 21, 25–26.
40. Ibid., 41.
 41. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 61.
 42. Gertrude Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 25.
 43. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 116.
 44. Jim Campen, "Lending Insights: Hard Proof That Banks Discriminate," *Dollars and Sense*, January–February 1991, 17.
 45. Mitchell Zuckoff, "Study Shows Racial Bias in Lending," *Boston Globe*, October 9, 1992.
 46. Paul Ong and J. Eugene Grigsby III, "Race and Life-Cycle Effects on Home Ownership in Los Angeles, 1970 to 1980," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 23, 4 (June 1988): 605.
 47. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 108.
 48. Gary Orfield and Carol Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door: Conservative Policy and Black Opportunity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 58, 78.
 49. Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, 129.
 50. Campen, "Lending Insights," 18.
 51. Alicia H. Munnell, Lyn E. Browne, James McEneaney, and Geoffrey M. B. Tootel, "Mortgage Lending in Boston: Interpreting HMDA Data" (Boston: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 1993); Kimberly Blanton, "Fed Blocks Shawmut's Bid to Gain N.H. Bank," *Boston Globe*, November 16, 1993.
 52. Ellis Cose, *Rage of a Privileged Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 191.
 53. Gregory Squires, "'Runaway Plants,' Capital Mobility, and Black Economic Rights," in *Community and Capital in Conflict: Plant Closings and Job Loss*, ed. John C. Raines, Lenora E. Berson, and David McL. Gracie (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 70.
 54. Ezorsky, *Racism and Justice*, 15.
 55. Orfield and Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door*, 225–26.
 56. Peter Downs, "Tax Abatements Don't Work," *St. Louis Journalism Review*, February 1997, 16.
 57. "State Taxes Gouge the Poor, Study Says," *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, April 23, 1991, sec. A.
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 59. William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 442; Noel J. Kent, "A Stacked Deck: Racial Minorities and the New American Political Economy," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 14, 1 (January 1991): 11.
 60. Carey Goldberg, "Hispanic Households Struggle as Poorest of the Poor in the U.S.," *New York Times*, January 30, 1997, sec. A.
 61. Kent, "A Stacked Deck," 13.
 62. Melvin Oliver and James Johnson, "Economic Restructuring and Black Male Joblessness in United States Metropolitan Areas," *Urban Geography* 12, 6 (November–December 1991); Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, Jr., eds., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989); Reynolds Farley and Walter R. Allen, *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in*

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63. Orfield and Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door*, 46, 206.

64. Bart Landry, "The Enduring Dilemma of Race in America," in *America at Century's End*, ed. Alan H. Wolfe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 206; John Hope Franklin, *The Color Line: Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 36–37.

65. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 100.

66. Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

67. Nathan Glazer makes this argument in *Affirmative Discrimination* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

68. I borrow the term "overdetermination" from Louis Althusser, who uses it to show how dominant ideologies become credible to people in part because various institutions and agencies independently replicate them and reinforce their social power.

69. Rogena Schuyler, "Youth: We Didn't Sell Them into Slavery," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1993, sec. B.

70. Jim Newton, "Skinhead Leader Pleads Guilty to Violence, Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1993, sec. A.

71. Antonin Scalia, "The Disease as Cure," *Washington University Law Quarterly*, no. 147 (1979): 153–54, quoted in Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, 8 (June 1993): 1767.

72. Harris, *ibid.*, 1993.

73. The rise of a black middle class and the setbacks suffered by white workers during deindustrialization may seem to subvert the analysis presented here. Yet the black middle class remains fragile, far less able than other middle-class groups to translate advances in income into advances in wealth and power. Similarly, the success of neoconservatism since the 1970s has rested on securing support from white workers for economic policies that do them objective harm by mobilizing counter-subversive electoral coalitions against busing and affirmative action, while carrying out attacks on public institutions and resources by representing "public" space as black space. See Oliver and Shapiro, "Wealth of a Nation." See also Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*.

Global White Supremacy

Charles W. Mills

“White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.” That was the opening sentence of a book I published in 1997, *The Racial Contract*.¹ In the following short summary, drawing on sections of the book, I am going to try to explain and defend this claim. Perhaps after reading my summary, some readers will be interested enough that they will seek out the original.

I

How could white supremacy possibly be, or have been, *global*, a system that has “made the modern world what it is today”? Even if people concede (as many are still reluctant to do) that the United States was once a white-supremacist state, they would quickly point out that that doesn’t say anything about the rest of the world.

The problem here is a combination of historical amnesia (a forgetting of the facts) and conceptual blindness (a failure to admit the implications of those facts, even when remembered). We need to see the European expansion over the world in the modern period for what it is—not as voyages of “discovery” but as missions of *conquest*, a conquest that, in the words of V. G. Kiernan, made them “the lords of human kind.”² In effect, Europeans came to rule the world.

Consider the history. The United States itself, of course, is a white settler state established on territory expropriated from its aboriginal inhabitants through a combination of military force, disease, and hundreds of broken

treaties. George Washington, Father of the Nation, was, understandably, known somewhat differently to the Senecas as “Town Destroyer.” In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson characterized Native Americans as “merciless Indian Savages,” while his inspiring opening sentence—“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal”—was evidently not meant to apply to the black slaves he owned. So the American polity was created as a racial one, in which only whites got to be full persons and equal citizens, with nonwhites being sub-persons and non- or at best second-class citizens.

But the point is that the United States is not unique. Though on a smaller scale and not always so ruthlessly . . . the other white settler states—for example, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa—were all founded on similar policies: the extermination, displacement, and/or herding onto reservations of the aboriginal population. And until a few decades ago, all imposed racially restrictive immigration rules, aimed at maintaining a “white” nation.

Elsewhere, in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, large parts of the world were colonized, that is, formally brought under the rule of one or another of the European powers (or, later, the United States): the early Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas, the Philippines, and south Asia; the jealous competition from Britain, France, and Holland; the British conquest of India; the French expansion into Algeria and Indochina; the Dutch advance into Indonesia; the Opium Wars against China; the late nineteenth-century “scramble for Africa”; the U.S. war against Spain, seizure of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, and annexation of Hawaii.

So in those colonized nations which only became independent after World War II, whites ruled formally, and in countries which became independent at a relatively early stage, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and beginning of the twentieth centuries, like the United States, the Latin American nations, Australia, and others, whites were politically dominant, with people of color (Native Americans and Australians; black, Mexican, and Asian North Americans; black, *indio*, mulatto, and *mestizo* Latin Americans) being formally or informally subordinated. In fact, if we were to go back in a time machine a hundred years, to the early twentieth century, we would find a world more than 90% of which was controlled by whites. The few exceptions—such as Japan, which was never colonized, or Haiti, famous for having the only successful slave revolution in history—still had to operate in a white-ruled world.

Moreover, this racial dichotomization was not incidental. It was not just that the rulers happened to be white and the subjected happened to be nonwhite. Rather, race was absolutely central to the justificatory ideology of the period. It was precisely *because* of alleged white superiority to other races that whites saw themselves as entitled to rule over them. In fact, the phrase originally used for nonwhites—a phrase that is today an embarrassment for whites—was “subject races,” making their inequality clear. The long history of derogatory terms for people of color—niggers, injuns, chinks, wogs, darkies, greasers, blackfellows, kaffirs, coolies, abos, dinks, googoos, gooks—is not a matter of idiosyncratic individual white racism. Rather, it reflects the reality of a world that was objectively divided between the racially dominant and the racially subordinated,

between “men” and “natives,” the “civilized” and the “savage.” A two-tiered moral and legal code was created, based on the principle that one set of rules obtained for whites (persons) and another for nonwhites (sub-persons).

The “Doctrine of Discovery,” for example, stated that as “infidels, heathens, and savages,” Native Americans had no “right of property and dominion” over their land, which was “deemed as if it were inhabited only by brute animals,” so that Europeans gained “an absolute dominion” over these territories “as a right acquired by discovery.” In the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* U.S. Supreme Court decision, Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote that blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.” A French colonial theorist, Jules Harmand, explained matter-of-factly that “It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization. . . . Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity.”

So racism was not an anomaly, a deviation from the norm. Racism *was* the norm. In effect, European humanism usually meant that only Europeans were human. One could say that European expansionism created a transnational white polity, a virtual community of people linked by their citizenship in Europe at home and abroad . . . and constituted in opposition to their indigenous subjects. In most of Africa and Asia, where colonial rule ended only after World War II, rigid “color bars” maintained the separation between Europeans and natives. As European, as white, one knew oneself to be a member of the superior race, one’s skin being one’s passport. So though there were local variations in the patterns of racial domination—for example, a bipolar racial system in the (Anglo) United States, as against a subtler color hierarchy in (Iberian) Latin America—it remained the case that the white tribe, as the global representative of civilization and modernity, was generally on top of the social pyramid.

The modern world was thus expressly created as a racially hierarchical polity, globally dominated by Europeans. In the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) which divided the planet between Spain and Portugal, the Valladolid, Spain, Conference (1550–51) to decide whether Native Americans were really human, the later debates over African slavery and abolitionism, the Berlin Conference (1884–85) to partition Africa, the various intra-European pacts, treaties, and informal arrangements on policing their colonies, the 1919 post–World War I Versailles Conference in which the Japanese delegation’s proposal to include “the equality of races” in the League of Nations’ Covenant was formally defeated, we see (or should see) with complete clarity a world being governed by white people. . . .

II

Against this background, we can now appreciate why the moral and political theory, and the practical struggles of nonwhites, have so often centered on *race*. Everywhere in the Native American, black American, and Third and

Fourth World anti-colonial thought one can find a recognition of the person/sub-person differentiation, the correspondingly racially structured moral code, and the white-supremacist character of the polity.

Sitting Bull asks: "What treaty that the whites have kept has the red man broken? Not one. What treaty that the white man ever made with us have they kept? Not one. When I was a boy the Sioux owned the world; the sun rose and set on their land. . . . Where are our lands? Who owns them?" Marcus Garvey concludes that blacks are "a race without respect." Jawaharlal Nehru claims that British policy in India is "that of the herrenvolk and the master race." Malcolm X asserts that: "We are fighting for recognition as human beings." Frantz Fanon maps a colonial world divided between "two different species," a "governing race" and "zoological" natives. Australian Aborigines in a 1982 protest statement point out that "since the White invasion . . . our humanity is being degraded and our history distorted by strangers. . . . *We hereby demand yet again recognition of our humanity and our land rights.*" The central moral commonality uniting all their experiences is the reality of racial subordination, necessarily generating a different moral topography from the one standardly examined in white ethnical discourse.

Correspondingly, the polity was usually thought of in racial terms, as white-ruled, and this perspective would become global in the period of formal colonial administration. Political theory is in part about who the main actors are, and for this unacknowledged polity they are neither the atomic individuals of classic liberal thought nor the classes of Marxist theory but races. The various native and colonial peoples' attempts . . . to forge a *racial* unity—Pan-Indianism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Asianism, Pan-Islamism—arose in response to an *already achieved* white unity, a Pan-Europeanism.

In the period of *de jure* global white supremacy, of colonialism and slavery, this solidarity was clearly perceived by whites also. "That race is everything, is simply a fact," wrote Scotsman Robert Knox in *The Races of Men* (1850), and theories of the necessity of racial struggle, race war, against the subordinate races were put forward as obvious. Darwin's work raised hopes in some quarters that natural selection (perhaps with a little help from its friends) would sweep away the remaining inferior races, as it had already done so providentially in the Americas and Tasmania, so that the planet as a whole could be cleared for white settlement. And after that only the sky would be the limit. In fact, even the sky would *not* be the limit, for there was always the solar system. Cecil Rhodes dreamed that perhaps he could "annex the planets" for Britain: "Where there is space, there is hope."

But alas, this noble dream was not to be realized. Even with encouragement, nonwhites did not die fast enough. So whites had to settle for colonial rule over stubbornly growing native populations, while of course keeping a watchful eye out for both rebellion and subversive notions of self-government. Witness the various colored perils—Red (Native American, that is), black, and yellow—that have haunted the European and Euro-implemented imagination. "Europe," V. G. Kiernan comments, "thought of its identity in terms of race or color and plagued itself with fears of the Yellow Peril or a Black Peril—boomerang effects,

as they might be called, of a White Peril from which the other continents were more tangibly suffering.”³ The political framework was quite explicitly predicated on the notion that whites everywhere had a common interest in maintaining global white supremacy against insurrections conceived of in racial terms. At the turn of the twentieth century, Europeans were worried about the “vast ant-heap” filled with “soldier-ants” of China, while “similar fears were in the air about a huge black army,” threatening a race war of revenge led by “dusky Napoleons.”⁴

Though there were occasional breaches for strategic national advantage, international white racial solidarity was generally demonstrated in the joint actions to suppress and isolate slave rebellions and colonial uprisings: the boycott of Haiti, the only successful slave revolution in history (and, noncoincidentally, today the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere), the common intervention against the 1899–1900 Boxer rebellion in China, the concern raised by the 1905 Japanese victory over Russia. As late as the early twentieth century, books were still being published with such warning titles as *The Passing of the Great Race* (Madison Grant, 1916) and *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (Lothrop Stoddard, 1920). Intra-European differences and conflicts were real enough but would be quickly put aside in the face of the nonwhite threat: “When it came to any serious colonial upheaval, white men felt their kinship, and Europe drew together. . . . Above all, and very remarkably, despite innumerable crises over rival claims the European countries managed from the War of American Independence onward to avoid a single colonial war among themselves.”⁵

This unity ended in the twentieth century with the outbreak of World War I, which was in part an inter-imperialist war over competing colonial claims. But despite nonwhite political agitation and military participation in the armies of their respective mother countries, the postwar settlement led not to decolonization but to a territorial redistribution among the colonial powers themselves. (“OK, I’ll take this one, and you can take that one.”) In the interwar years Japan’s Pan-Asiatic Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was seen by most white Western leaders as a threat to global white supremacy. Indeed, as late as World War II, the popular American writer Pearl Buck had to warn her readers that colonized peoples would not continue to put up with global white domination, and that unless there was change their discontent would lead to “the longest of human wars . . . the war between the white man and his world and the colored man and his world.”

Corresponding to this global white solidarity transcending national boundaries, the virtual white polity, nonwhites’ common oppression manifested itself in patterns of partisan emotional identification that from a modern, more nationalistic perspective now seem quite bizarre. In 1879, for example, when the King of Burma learned of the Zulu defeat of a British army at Isandhlwana, he immediately announced his intention of marching on Rangoon. In 1905 Indians cheered the Japanese victory over the czar’s (white) armies in the Russo-Japanese War. In the Spanish-American War, black Americans raised doubts about the point of being “a black man in the army of the white man

sent to kill the brown man,” and a few blacks actually went over to the side of Emilio Aguinaldo’s Filipino forces. After Pearl Harbor, the ominous joke circulated in the American press of a black sharecropper who comments to his white boss, “By the way, Cap’n, I hear the Japs done declared war on you white folks”; black civil rights militants demanded the “double-V,” “Victory at Home as Well as Abroad”; Japanese intelligence considered the possibility of an alliance with black Americans in a domestic colored front against white supremacy; and white Americans worried about black loyalty. The 1954 Vietnamese victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu (like the Japanese capture of Singapore in World War II) was in part seen as a *racial* triumph, the defeat of a white by a brown people, a blow against the arrogance of global white supremacy.

So on the level of the popular consciousness of nonwhites, racial self-identification was deeply embedded. The different battles around the world against slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, the “color bar,” European imperialism, apartheid, were in a sense all part of a common struggle against global white supremacy, so that a victory for one was a victory for all. . . .

Today, correspondingly, though formal decolonization has taken place and in Africa and Asia black, brown, and yellow natives are in office, ruling independent nations, the global economy is essentially dominated by the former colonial powers, their offshoots (Euro–United States, Euro–Canada), and their international financial institutions, lending agencies, and corporations. (The notable exception, whose history confirms rather than challenges the rule, is Japan, which escaped colonization and, after the Meiji Restoration, successfully embarked on its own industrialization.) Global figures on income and property ownership are, of course, broken down nationally rather than racially, but if a transnational racial disaggregation were to be done, it would reveal that whites control a percentage of the world’s wealth grossly disproportionate to their numbers. This globally color-coded distribution of wealth and poverty has been produced by the legacy of global white supremacy. But the connection between the development of the European and Euro-implemented nation-state’s industry, culture, and civilization, and the material and cultural contributions of Afro-Asia and the Americas is denied, so that Europeans and their descendants seem peculiarly rational and industrious, differentially endowed with qualities that have enabled them to dominate the world. Other parts of the world then disappear from the white political history, subsumed under the general category of risible non-European space, the “Third World,” where for reasons of local folly and geographical blight the inspiring model of the self-sufficient white polity cannot be followed. The ever-deepening abyss between the First World and the Third World, where millions—largely non-white—die of starvation each year and many more hundreds of millions—also largely nonwhite—live in wretched poverty, is seen as unfortunate (calling, certainly, for the occasional charitable contribution), but unrelated to the history of transcontinental and intracontinental racial exploitation.

Moreover, it is not merely that Europe and the former white settler states are globally dominant but that *within* them, where there is a significant nonwhite presence (indigenous peoples, descendants of imported slaves, voluntary

nonwhite immigration), whites continue to be advantaged vis-à-vis nonwhites. So if in the period of de jure white supremacy, white domination was explicit, in the present period it has been written out of formal existence. Racial discriminatory practices continue, of course, if not on the same scale as before. But even apart from these, a crucial manifestation of ongoing white privilege is simply *the failure to ask certain questions*, the taking for granted as a status quo and baseline the existing racialized configurations of wealth, poverty, property, and opportunities, the pretence that formal, juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege. That as recently as 2001, the median net worth of white American households was fourteen times the median net worth of black American households is not seen as connected to the history of black subordination, but as a reflection of black unwillingness to work.

III

If to white readers this history, less than a century distant, now seems like an alien universe, it is a tribute to the success of a self-transforming white supremacy in rewriting the terms of public discourse so that white domination is now conceptually invisible. But the history is real. The struggle to close the gap between the modern ideal of the liberal democratic polity and the modern reality of the white-supremacist polity has been the unacknowledged political history of the past few hundred years, the “battle of the color line,” in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois. Moreover, it is likely to continue being so for the near future, as racial division continues to fester, the United States moves demographically from a white-majority to a nonwhite-majority society, the chasm between a largely white First World and a largely nonwhite Third World continues to deepen, desperate illegal immigration from the latter to the former escalates, and demands for global justice grow louder. Naming this reality—global white supremacy—is a crucial prerequisite for these issues to be honestly addressed. Until whites can admit this history, they will continue to be complicit with it.

Notes

1. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 1.
2. V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in an Age of Empire* (1969; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
3. V. G. Kiernan, *Imperialism and Its Contradictions*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 146.
4. Kiernan, *Lords*, pp. 171, 237.
5. Kiernan, *Lords*, p. 27.

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Neither Black nor White

Angelo N. Ancheta

Race Relations in Black and White

“Are you black or are you white?” For Asian Americans the obvious answer would seem to be “neither.” Yet, when questions of race relations arise, a dichotomy between black and white typically predominates. Formed largely through inequities and conflicts between blacks and whites, discourse on race relations provides minimal space to articulate experiences independent of a black–white framework. The representation of Asian Americans is especially elusive and often shifts, depending on context, between black and white.

Popular works on race suggest that expositions of Asian American experiences are peripheral, more often confined to the footnotes than expounded in the primary analyses. Studs Terkel’s *Race* frames race relations through a dialogue about blacks and whites, confined almost entirely to the opinions of blacks and whites. Andrew Hacker’s *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* contains, as its subtitle implies, extensive discussions of inequality between blacks and whites, but only a minimal analysis of inequality among other racial groups.¹ The controversial books *The Bell Curve*, by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, and *The End of Racism*, by Dinesh D’Souza, go to considerable length to expound arguments that blacks as a group are less intelligent than whites and suffer from cultural pathologies that inhibit advancement to the level of whites. When discussed at all, Asian Americans are offered as a “model minority” group, to be contrasted with blacks and likened to whites because of their higher IQ scores and cultural values stressing family, hard work, and educational achievement.

News media portrayals of racial minorities suffer from the same tendency to reduce race relations to a simple black–white equation. Popular television news shows such as ABC’s *Nightline* offer recurring programming on race relations, but typically confine their analyses to black–white relations. Public opinion polls on race and civil rights usually exclude Asian Americans as subjects or as participants, or reduce them to the category of “Other.” News coverage of racially charged events is most often framed by black versus white antagonisms. The murder trial of O. J. Simpson, for instance, provoked extensive dialogue on the impact of race and racism on the criminal justice system, but excluded for the most part any perspectives from Asian Americans or Latinos, which is ironic for a trial held in Los Angeles, a city where half of the population is Asian American and Latino.²

Public policies that reflect and reinforce race relations also approach race in terms of black and white. Historically, the major landmarks denoting both racial subordination and progress in racial rights have been measured through the experiences of African Americans. Slavery and its abolition, the black codes and the Reconstruction-era constitutional amendments, Jim Crow laws and the desegregation cases culminating in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the struggles of the civil rights movement and the federal legislation of the 1960s—these are the familiar signs that have dominated the landscape of civil rights in the United States. Debates on affirmative action have occasionally shone the spotlight on Asian Americans, but almost exclusively as unintended victims of affirmative action in higher education. Problems of ongoing racial discrimination and inequality among Asian American communities are largely ignored.

Not that focusing on black experiences is unjustified. African Americans have been the largest racial minority group in the United States since the country’s birth, and continue to endure the effects of racial subordination. By any social or economic measure, African Americans suffer extensive inequality because of race. In describing the African American experience, the statement of the Kerner Commission resonates as strongly today as it did in 1968: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separated but unequal.”³ But to say that our nation is moving toward two separate and unequal societies, however disconcerting, is fundamentally incomplete. Underlying the Kerner Commission’s statement is the assumption that our nation’s cities are divisible along a single racial axis. Cleavages between black and white persist but American race relations are not an exclusively black–white phenomenon and never have been. The civil unrest in Los Angeles in 1992 is just one example of the intricacy of contemporary racial dynamics, shedding light on a host of race-based and class-based conflicts, as well as an array of racial and ethnic groups—blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos—who were both victims and victimizers.

Black and White by Analogy

Dualism is a convenient lens through which to view the world. Black or white, male or female, straight or gay—the categories help us frame reality and make sense of it. In matters of race, a black–white dichotomy has been the dominant

model, based primarily on the fact that African Americans have been the largest and most conspicuous nonwhite racial group in the United States. But the legal history of the United States is punctuated by the abridgment of rights among other racial and ethnic groups such as Asian Americans, and the country's changing demographics are mandating new perspectives based on the experiences of immigrants. Still, the black-white model is the regnant paradigm in both social and legal discussions of race.

How can Asian Americans fit within a black-white racial paradigm? Historian Gary Okihiro poses the question this way: "Is yellow black or white?" Okihiro suggests that Asian Americans have been "near-blacks" in the past and "near-whites" in the present, but that "[y]ellow is emphatically neither white nor black."⁴ Recognizing the dominance of the black-white paradigm in the law, Frank Wu adopts a similar view proposing that Asian Americans have been forced to fit within race relations discourse through analogy to either whites or blacks. He posits that American society and its legal system have conceived of racial groups as whites, blacks, honorary whites, or constructive (legal jargon for "implied") blacks.⁵

For most of the nation's history, Asian Americans have been treated primarily as constructive blacks. Asian Americans for decades endured many of the same disabilities of racial subordination of African Americans—racial violence, segregation, unequal access to public institutions and discrimination in housing, employment, and education. The courts even classified Asian Americans as if they were black. In the mid-nineteenth century, the California Supreme Court held in *People v. Hall* that Chinese immigrants were barred from testifying in court under a statute prohibiting the testimony of blacks, by reasoning that "black" was a generic term encompassing all nonwhites, including Chinese: "[T]he words 'Black person' . . . must be taken as contradistinguished from White, and necessarily excludes all races other than the Caucasian."⁶

Similarly, in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, decided twenty-seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of sending Asian American students to segregated schools. Comparing its earlier rulings on the "separate but equal" doctrine, the Court stated: "Most of the cases cited arose, it is true, over the establishment of separate schools as between white pupils and black pupils, but we can not think that the question is any different or that any different result can be reached . . . where the issue is as between white pupils and the pupils of the yellow races."⁷ In the eyes of the Supreme Court, yellow equaled black, and neither equaled white.

In more recent years, the inclusion of Asian Americans in civil rights laws and race-conscious remedial programs has relied on the historical parallels between the experiences of Asian Americans and African Americans. The civil rights protections available to Asian Americans are most often contingent upon the rights granted to African Americans. Civil rights laws that apply to Asian Americans, as constructive blacks, can usually trace their origins to a legislative intent to protect African Americans from racial discrimination.

The treatment of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” is more unusual. In the Reconstruction-era South, Asian Americans were initially afforded a status above blacks for a period of time during the nineteenth century; Louisiana, for example, counted Chinese as whites for census purposes before 1870.⁸ The status was short-lived; the Chinese were soon reduced to constructive black status under systems of racial segregation. More contemporary race relations controversies appear to have elevated Asian Americans to the status of honorary whites, particularly in the minds of those who opposed race-conscious remedies such as affirmative action. Asian Americans are often omitted from protection in affirmative action programs as a matter of course, lumped with whites even in contexts where Asian Americans still face racial discrimination and remain underrepresented.

The rigidity of the legal system’s treatment of race as either black or white is evident in civil rights litigation filed by Asian American plaintiffs in the earlier half of the twentieth century. Asian Americans sought, quite unsuccessfully, to be classified as white under the law, in recognition of the social and legal stigmas attached to being categorized as black. Gong Lum, for example, argued that his daughter Martha should not have to attend the school for colored children in Mississippi because “[c]olored’ describes only one race, and that is the negro.”⁹ Because his daughter was “pure Chinese,” Gong Lum argued that she ought to have been classified with whites rather than blacks. The Court rejected this reasoning and held that yellow was black when it came to segregation.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian Americans sought to be classified as white in attempts to become naturalized citizens.¹⁰ Congress enacted naturalization legislation in 1790 to limit citizenship to “free white persons.” After the Civil War, the law was amended to allow persons of “African nativity” or “African descent” to naturalize, but Congress rejected extending naturalization to Asian immigrants. Asian immigrants sought relief through the courts, but had little success arguing that they were white: Burmese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, and Korean plaintiffs were all held to be nonwhite; mixed-race plaintiffs who were half-white and half-Asian were also held to be nonwhite.¹¹ The United States Supreme Court laid to rest any questions about the racial bar in *Ozawa v. United States*, ruling that Japanese immigrants were not white, and in *United States v. Thind*, ruling that Asian Indian immigrants were not white.¹² Asian immigrants were prohibited by statute from naturalizing through the 1940s, and the racial bar on naturalization was not repealed until 1952.

From today’s vantage point, these attempts by Asian immigrants to be classified as white may seem absurd and even subordinative, because they symbolically pushed blacks down the social ladder relative to whites and Asians. But when the legal paradigm limits options to black or white and nothing else, curious and unseemly choices inevitably arise. The solution, of course, is to develop and rely on theories that comprehend the complexity of race relations, which includes discerning that the experiences of Asian Americans are not the same as the experiences of African Americans.

Notes

1. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995). Hacker even suggests that Asian Americans and Latinos, particularly second- and later-generation individuals, are “merging” into the white race, through intermarriage and assimilation (18–19).
2. Ishmael Reed. “O. J. Bias—Black and White,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 February 1997, p. A23.
3. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 1.
4. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 34.
5. Frank H. Wu, “Neither Black nor White: Asian Americans and Affirmative Action,” *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 15 (Summer 1995): 225, 249–251.
6. 4 Cal. 399, 404 (1954).
7. 275 U.S. 78, 87 (1927).
8. James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971).
9. *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78, 79 (1927).
10. Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996).
11. *Ibid.*, appendix A. As Haney Lopez notes, a legal strategy arguing for whiteness rather than blackness may have had some tactical advantage at the time, because the 1870 naturalization statute employed a geographic test rather than a racial test of eligibility for blacks: the law referred to persons of “African nativity, or African descent,” rather than to “black persons.” More likely, though, Asian American plaintiffs sought to distinguish themselves from blacks because of the stigmas attached to being black, and sought the only available alternative—to be classified as white.
12. 260 U.S. 178 (1922); 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

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Questions for Thinking, Writing, and Discussion for Part Two

1. According to Wander, Martin, and Nakayama, what role did science play in helping to justify conquest and slavery during the colonial period? Do you think a case can be made for the claim that science continues to play such a role today? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Erika Lee's essay explains how the racialization of Chinese immigrants provided a model for evaluating other immigrants—from Asia, Mexico, and Southern Europe. How did the perceptions of Chinese immigrants affect other immigrant groups?
3. Lee argues that new Asian immigrants were seen as a threat to the United States because of their race and their labor. How were Asians perceived by nativists, and why were they seen as racially threatening? How do the ideas behind this threat persist today, according to Angelo Ancheta's essay "Neither Black nor White"?
4. The third selection in Part Two is titled "How White People Became White." At least on first reading, this title appears puzzling. Explain the title.
5. How does Karen Brodtkin support her claim that educational and occupational GI benefits provided after World War II really constituted an affirmative action program for white males? Would George Lipsitz, whose article also appears in Part Two, agree or disagree with this claim? How about you? Do you agree or disagree—and why?
6. Drawing on the essays by Brodtkin and Lipsitz, construct the most powerful argument you can in support of the claim that white privilege has been institutionalized and protected by U.S. government policy over the years; then go on to agree or disagree with the argument you have made.
7. Does Neil Foley equate becoming Hispanic with becoming white? According to his essay, are all Mexican Americans currently considered white in the United States? Compare and contrast Foley's account of how some Mexican Americans came to be categorized as white with the accounts of how members of other ethnic groups (for example, Greeks and Poles) came to be included in this category.
8. Both Foley and Ancheta write about groups that do not fall into the black–white paradigm. How are Asian Americans viewed in the United States?

How is their relationship to whiteness similar to or different from the situation of Mexican Americans as described in the Foley article? How is their relationship to blackness similar or different?

9. Charles W. Mills makes a strong case for his view that white supremacy has been the unacknowledged operating political system in the world throughout recorded time. Evaluate this claim and indicate what you believe to be the strongest arguments in its favor.
10. If you learned some new information by reading Mills's piece, do some independent research to corroborate what you have learned and write an essay in which you lay out these new facts and speculate about why you were not taught or did not know them previously.
11. What does it mean to claim that whiteness has been socially constructed? Find examples in these readings to show how this process occurs.
12. Write about something that surprised you in the essays in this section. Were your ideas about whiteness challenged?

Part

3

Whiteness: The Power of Privilege

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Making Systems of Privilege Visible

Stephanie M. Wildman with Adrienne D. Davis

The notion of privilege, although part of the consciousness of popular culture, has not been recognized in legal language and doctrine. This failure to acknowledge privilege, to make it visible in legal doctrine, creates a serious gap in legal reasoning, rendering us unable to address issues of systemic unfairness.

The invisibility of privilege strengthens the power it creates and maintains. The invisible cannot be combated, and as a result privilege is allowed to perpetuate, regenerate, and re-create itself. Privilege is systemic, not an occasional occurrence. Privilege is invisible only until looked for, but silence in the face of privilege sustains its invisibility.

Silence is the lack of sound and voice. Silence may result from a desire for quiet; it may signify intense mental concentration; it may also arise from oppression or fear. Whatever the reason, when there is silence, no criticism is expressed. What we do not say, what we do not talk about, allows the status quo to continue. To describe these unspoken systems means we need to use language. But even when we try to talk about privilege, the language we use inhibits our ability to perceive the systems of privilege that constitute the status quo.

How Language Veils the Existence of Systems of Privilege

Language contributes to the invisibility and regeneration of privilege. To begin the conversation about subordination, we sort ideas into categories such as race and gender. These words are part of a system of categorization that we

use without thinking and that seems linguistically neutral. Race and gender are, after all, just words.

Yet when we learn that someone has had a child, our first question is usually “Is it a girl or a boy?” Why do we ask that, instead of something like “Are the mother and child healthy?” We ask, “Is it a girl or a boy?” according to philosopher Marilyn Frye, because we do not know how to relate to this new being without knowing its gender.¹ Imagine how long you could have a discussion with or about someone without knowing her or his gender. We place people into these categories because our world is gendered.

Similarly, our world is also raced, and it is hard for us to avoid taking mental notes as to race. We use our language to categorize by race, particularly, if we are white, when that race is other than white. Marge Shultz has written of calling on a Latino student in her class.² She called him Mr. Martínez, but his name was Rodríguez. The class tensed up at her error; earlier that same day another professor had called him Mr. Hernández, the name of the defendant in the criminal law case under discussion. Professor Shultz talked with her class, at its next session, about her error and how our thought processes lead us to categorize in order to think. She acknowledged how this process leads to stereotyping that causes pain to individuals. We all live in this raced and gendered world, inside these powerful categories, that make it hard to see each other as whole people.

But the problem does not stop with the general terms “race” and “gender.” Each of these categories contains the images, like an entrance to a tunnel with many passages and arrows pointing down each possible path, of subcategories. Race is often defined as Black and white; sometimes it is defined as white and “of color.” There are other races, and sometimes the categories are each listed, for example, as African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, Native American, and White American, if whiteness is mentioned at all. All these words, describing racial subcategories, seem neutral on their face, like equivalent titles. But however the subcategories are listed, however neutrally the words are expressed, these words mask a system of power, and that system privileges whiteness.

Gender, too, is a seemingly neutral category that leads us to imagine subcategories of male and female. A recent scientific article suggested that five genders might be a more accurate characterization of human anatomy, but there is a heavy systemic stake in our image of two genders.³ The apparently neutral categories male and female mask the privileging of males that is part of the gender power system. Try to think of equivalent gendered titles, like king and queen, prince and princess, and you will quickly see that male and female are not equal titles in our cultural imagination.

Poet and social critic Adrienne Rich has written convincingly about the compulsory heterosexuality that is part of this gender power system.⁴ Almost everywhere we look, heterosexuality is portrayed as the norm. In Olympic ice-skating and dancing, for example, a couple is defined as a man partnered with a woman.⁵ Heterosexuality is privileged over any other relationship. The words

we use, such as “marriage,” “husband,” and “wife,” are not neutral, but convey this privileging of heterosexuality. What is amazing, says Rich, is that there are any lesbians or gay men at all.⁶

Our culture suppresses conversation about class privilege as well as race and gender privileges. Although we must have money or access to money to obtain human necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, those fundamental needs are recognized only as an individual responsibility. The notion of privilege based on economic wealth is viewed as a radical, dangerous idea, or an idiosyncratic throwback to the past, conjuring up countries with monarchies, nobility, serfs, and peasants. Yet even the archaic vocabulary makes clear that no one wants to be categorized as a have-not. The economic power system is not invisible—everyone knows that money brings privilege. But the myth persists that all have access to that power through individual resourcefulness. This myth of potential economic equality supports the invisibility of the other power systems that prevent fulfillment of that ideal.

Other words we use to describe subordination also mask the operation of privilege. Increasingly, people use terms like “racism” and “sexism” to describe disparate treatment and the perpetuation of power. Yet this vocabulary of “isms” as a descriptive shorthand for undesirable, disadvantaging treatment creates several serious problems.

First, calling someone a racist individualizes the behavior and veils the fact that racism can occur only where it is culturally, socially, and legally supported. It lays the blame on the individual rather than the systemic forces that have shaped that individual and his or her society. White people know they do not want to be labeled racist; they become concerned with how to avoid that label, rather than worrying about systemic racism and how to change it.

Second, the isms language focuses on the larger category, such as race, gender, sexual preference. Isms language suggests that within these larger categories two seemingly neutral halves exist, equal parts in a mirror. Thus Black and white, male and female, heterosexual and gay/lesbian appear, through the linguistic juxtaposition, as equivalent subparts. In fact, although the category does not take note of it, Blacks and whites, men and women, heterosexuals and gays/lesbians are not equivalently situated in society. Thus the way we think and talk about the categories and subcategories that underlie the isms allows us to consider them parallel parts, and obscures the pattern of domination and subordination within each classification.

Similarly, the syllable “isms” itself gives the illusion that all patterns of domination and subordination are the same and interchangeable. The language suggests that someone subordinated under one form of oppression would be similarly situated to another person subordinated under another form. Thus, a person subordinated under one form may feel no need to view himself/herself as a possible oppressor, or beneficiary of oppression, within a different form. For example, white women, having an ism that defines their condition—sexism—may not look at the way they are privileged by racism. They have defined themselves as one of the oppressed.

Finally, the focus on individual behavior, the seemingly neutral subparts of categories, and the apparent interchangeability underlying the vocabulary of isms all obscure the existence of systems of privilege and power. It is difficult to see and talk about how oppression operates when the vocabulary itself makes these systems of privilege invisible. “White supremacy” is associated with a lunatic fringe, not with the everyday life of well-meaning white citizens. “Racism” is defined by whites in terms of specific, discriminatory racist actions by others. The vocabulary allows us to talk about discrimination and oppression, but it hides the mechanism that makes that oppression possible and efficient. It also hides the existence of specific, identifiable beneficiaries of oppression, who are not always the actual perpetrators of discrimination. The use of isms language, or any focus on discrimination, masks the privileging that is created by these systems of power.

Thus the very vocabulary we use to talk about discrimination obfuscates these power systems and the privilege that is their natural companion. To remedy discrimination effectively we must make the power systems and the privileges they create visible and part of the discourse. To move toward a unified theory of the dynamics of subordination, we have to find a way to talk about privilege. When we discuss race, sex, and sexual orientation, each needs to be described as a power system that creates privileges in some people as well as disadvantages in others. Most of the literature has focused on disadvantage or discrimination, ignoring the element of privilege. To really talk about these issues, privilege must be made visible.

What Is Privilege?

What then is privilege? We all recognize its most blatant forms. “Men only admitted to this club.” “We will not allow African Americans into that school.” Blatant exercises of privilege certainly exist, but they are not what most people think of as our way of life. They are only the tip of the iceberg, however.

When we try to look at privilege we see several elements. First, the characteristics of the privileged group define the societal norm, often benefiting those in the privileged group. Second, privileged group members can rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to oppression. Both the conflation of privilege with the societal norm and the implicit option to ignore oppression mean that privilege is rarely seen by the holder of the privilege.

A. The normalization of privilege

The characteristics and attributes of those who are privileged group members are described as societal norms—as the way things are and as what is normal in society.⁷ This normalization of privilege means that members of society are judged, and succeed or fail, measured against the characteristics that are held by those privileged. The privileged characteristic is the norm; those who stand outside are the aberrant or “alternative.”

For example, a thirteen-year-old girl who aspires to be a Major League ballplayer can have only a low expectation of achieving that goal, no matter

how superior a batter and fielder she is. Maleness is the foremost “qualification” of Major League baseball players.

I had an example of being outside the norm recently when I was called to jury service. Jurors are expected to serve until 5 P.M. During that year, my family’s life was set up so that I picked up my children after school at 2:40 and made sure that they got to various activities. If courtroom life were designed to privilege my needs, then there would have been an afternoon recess to honor children. But in this culture children’s lives and the lives of their caretakers are the alternative or other, and we must conform to the norm.

Even as these child care needs were outside the norm, I was privileged economically to be able to meet my children’s needs. What many would have described as mothering, not privilege—my ability to pick them up and be present in their after-school lives—was a benefit of my association with privilege.

Members of the privileged group gain many benefits by their affiliation with the dominant side of the power system. This affiliation with power is not identified as such; often it may be transformed into and presented as individual merit. Legacy admissions at elite colleges and professional schools are perceived to be merit-based, when this process of identification with power and transmutation into qualifications occurs. Achievements by members of the privileged group are viewed as the result of individual effort, rather than privilege. . . .

B. Choosing whether to struggle against oppression

Members of privileged groups can opt out of struggles against oppression if they choose. Often this privilege may be exercised by silence. At the same time that I was the outsider in jury service, I was also a privileged insider. During voir dire, each prospective juror was asked to introduce herself or himself. The plaintiff’s and defendant’s attorneys then asked additional questions. I watched the defense attorney, during voir dire, ask each Asian-looking male prospective juror if he spoke English. No one else was asked. The judge did nothing. The Asian American man sitting next to me smiled and flinched as he was asked the questions. I wondered how many times in his life he had been made to answer such a question. I considered beginning my own questioning by saying, “I’m Stephanie Wildman, I’m a professor of law, and yes, I speak English.” I wanted to focus attention on the subordinating conduct of the attorney, but I did not. I exercised my white privilege by my silence. I exercised my privilege to opt out of engagement, even though this choice may not always be consciously made by someone with privilege.

Depending on the number of privileges someone has, she or he may experience the power of choosing the types of struggles in which to engage. Even this choice may be masked as an identification with oppression, thereby making the privilege that enables the choice invisible.

. . . Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are. Others have a *lack*, an absence, a deficiency.

Systems of Privilege

Although different privileges bestow certain common characteristics (membership in the norm, the ability to choose whether to object to the power system, and the invisibility of its benefit), the form of a privilege may vary according to the power relationship that produces it. White privilege derives from the race power system of white supremacy. Male privilege⁸ and heterosexual privilege result from the gender hierarchy.⁹ Class privilege derives from an economic, wealth-based hierarchy.

* * *

Visualizing Privilege

For me the struggle to visualize privilege has most often taken the form of the struggle to see my white privilege. Even as I write about this struggle, I fear that my own racism will make things worse, causing me to do more harm than good. Some readers may be shocked to see a white person contritely acknowledge that she is racist. I do not say this with pride. I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see.

Whites do not look at the world through a filter of racial awareness, even though whites are, of course, members of a race. The power to ignore race, when white is the race, is a privilege, a societal advantage. The term “racism/white supremacy” emphasizes the link between discriminatory racism and the privilege held by whites to ignore their own race.

As bell hooks explains, liberal whites do not see themselves as prejudiced or interested in domination through coercion, yet “they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.”¹⁰ The perpetuation of white supremacy is racist.

All whites are racist in this use of the term, because we benefit from systemic white privilege. Generally whites think of racism as voluntary, intentional conduct, done by horrible others. Whites spend a lot of time trying to convince ourselves and each other that we are not racist. A big step would be for whites to admit that we are racist and then to consider what to do about it.¹¹

Notes

1. See Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* 19–34 (1983) (discussing sex marking, sex announcing, and the necessity to determine gender).

2. Angela Harris and Marge Shultz, “A(nother) Critique of Pure Reason”: *Toward Civic Virtue in Legal Education*, 45 Stan. L. Rev. 1773, 1796 (1993).

3. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough*, *Sciences*, Mar./Apr. 1993. (Thanks to Gregg Bryan for calling my attention to this article.) See also Frye, *supra* note 1, at 25.

4. Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, Selected Prose 1979–1985 (1986).

5. See Stephanie M. Wildman and Becky Wildman-Tobriner, *Sex Roles Iced Popular Team?* S.F. Chron., Feb. 25, 1994, at A23.

6. Rich, *supra* note 4, at 57 (“Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women”).

7. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Pornography and Harm to Women: “No Empirical Evidence?”* 53 Ohio St. L. J. 1037 (1992) (describing this “way things are.” Because the norm or reality is perceived as including these benefits, the privileges are not visible.)

8. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* 224 (1989).

9. Sylvia Law, *Homosexuality and the Social Meaning of Gender*, 1988 Wis. L. Rev. 187, 197 (1988); Marc Fajer, *Can Two Real Men Eat Quiche Together? Storytelling, Gender-Role Stereotypes, and Legal Protection for Lesbians and Gay Men*, 46 U. Miami L. Rev. 511, 617 (1992). Both articles describe heterosexism as a form of gender oppression.

10. bell hooks, *overcoming white supremacy: a comment*, in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* 113 (1989).

11. See also Jerome McCristal Culp Jr., *Water Buffalo and Diversity: Naming Names and Reclaiming the Racial Discourse*, 26 Conn. L. Rev. 209 (1993) (urging people to name racism as racism).

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Privilege as Paradox

| Allan G. Johnson

Regardless of which group we're talking about, privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and respect in the world, to operate within a relatively wide comfort zone. Privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they're applied. Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgments stick. It allows people to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience. Privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom and for what. And it grants a presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged.

Privilege as Paradox

Individuals are the ones who experience privilege or the lack of it, but individuals aren't what is actually privileged. Instead, privilege is defined in relation to a group or social category. In other words, race privilege is more about *white* people than it is about white *people*. I'm not race privileged because of who I am as a person. Whiteness is privileged in this society, and I have access to that privilege only when people identify me as belonging to the category "white." I do or don't receive race privilege based on which category people put me in without their knowing a single other thing about me.

This means that you don't actually have to be white or male or heterosexual to receive the privilege attached to those categories. All you have to do is convince people you belong to the appropriate category. The film *Shakespeare in Love*, for example, is set in Elizabethan England, where acting on the stage was a privilege reserved for men. The character Viola (the woman Shakespeare falls in love with) wants more than anything to act on the stage, and finally realizes her dream not by changing her sex and becoming a man, but by successfully presenting herself as one. That's all that it takes.

In similar ways, you can lose privilege if people think you don't belong to a particular category. My sexual orientation is heterosexual, for example, which entitles me to heterosexual privilege, but only if people identify me as heterosexual. If I were to announce to everyone that I'm gay, I would immediately lose my access to heterosexual privilege (unless people refused to believe me), even though I would still be, in fact, a heterosexual person. As Charlotte Bunch put it, "If you don't have a sense of what privilege is, I suggest that you go home and announce to everybody that you know—a roommate, your family, the people you work with—that you're a queer. Try being queer for a week."¹ When it comes to privilege, then, it doesn't really matter who we really are. What matters is who other people *think* we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in.

Several important consequences follow from this paradox of privileges. First, privilege is rooted in societies and organizations as much as it's rooted in people's personalities and how they perceive and react to one another. This means that doing something about the problem of privilege takes more than changing individuals. As Harry Brod wrote about gender privilege:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.²

Societies and organizations promote privilege in complicated ways. We don't have to be special or even feel special in order to have access to privilege, because privilege doesn't derive from who we are or what we've done. It is a social arrangement that depends on which category we happen to be sorted into by other people and how they treat us as a result.

The paradoxical experience of *being* privileged without *feeling* privileged is a second consequence of the fact that privilege is more about social categories than who people are. It has to do primarily with the people we use as standards of comparison—what sociologists call "reference groups." We use reference groups to construct a sense of how good or bad, high or low we are in the scheme of things. To do this, we usually don't look downward in the social hierarchy but to people we identify as being on the same level as or on a higher

level than our own. So pointing out to someone in the United States who lives in poverty that they're better off than impoverished people in India doesn't make them feel much better, because people in the United States don't use Indians as a reference group. Instead, they will compare themselves with those who seem like them in key respects and see if they're doing better or worse than *them*.

Since being white is valued in this society, whites will tend to compare themselves with other whites, not with people of color. In the same way, men will tend to compare themselves with other men and not with women. What this means, however, is that whites will tend not to feel privileged *by their race* when they compare themselves with their reference group, because their reference group is also white. In the same way, men won't feel privileged *by their gender* in comparison with other men, because gender doesn't elevate them above other *men*. A partial exception to this is the hierarchy that exists among men between heterosexuals and homosexuals: heterosexual men are more likely to consider themselves "real men" and therefore socially valued above gay men. But even here, the mere fact of being male isn't experienced as a form of privilege, because gay men are also male.

An exception to these patterns can occur for those who are privileged by gender or race but find themselves ranked low in terms of social class. To protect themselves from feeling and being seen as on the bottom of the ladder, they may go out of their way to compare themselves to women or people of color by emphasizing their supposed gender or racial superiority. This can appear as an exaggerated sense of masculinity, for example, or as overt attempts to put women or people of color "in their place," including by harassment, violence, or behavior that is openly contemptuous or demeaning.

A corollary to being privileged without knowing it is to be on the *other* side of privilege without necessarily feeling *that*. For example, I sometimes hear a woman say something like, "I've never been oppressed as a woman." Often this is said to challenge the idea that male privilege exists at all. But this confuses the social position of females and males as social categories with one woman's subjective experience of belonging to one of those categories. They aren't the same. For various reasons—including social-class privilege or an unusual family experience or simply being young—she may have avoided a direct confrontation with many of the consequences of being female in a society that privileges maleness. Or she may have managed to overcome them to a degree that she doesn't feel hampered by them. Or she may be engaging in denial. Or she may be unaware of how she is discriminated against (unaware, perhaps, that being a woman is the reason her professors ignore her in class) or may have so internalized her subordinate status that she doesn't see it as a problem (thinking, perhaps, that women are ignored because they aren't intelligent enough to say anything worth listening to). Regardless of what her experience is based on, it is just that—her experience—and it doesn't have to square with the larger social reality that everyone (including her) must deal with one way or another. It's like

living in a rainy climate and somehow avoiding being rained on yourself. It's still a rainy place to be and getting wet is something most people have to deal with. . . .

Oppression: The Flip Side of Privilege

For every social category that is privileged, one or more other categories are oppressed in relation to it. The concept of oppression points to social forces that tend to “press” upon people and hold them down, to hem them in and block their pursuit of a good life. Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity, oppression tends to slam them shut.³

Like privilege, oppression results from the social relationship between privileged and oppressed categories, which makes it possible for individuals to vary in their personal experience of being oppressed (“I’ve never been oppressed as a woman”). This also means, however, that in order to have the experience of being oppressed, it is necessary to belong to an oppressed category. In other words, men cannot be oppressed *as men*, just as whites cannot be oppressed as whites or heterosexuals as heterosexuals because a group can be oppressed only if there exists another group that has the power to oppress them.

As we saw earlier, people in privileged categories can certainly feel bad in ways that can resemble oppression. Men, for example, can feel burdened by what they take to be their responsibility to provide for their families. Or they can feel limited and even damaged by the requirement that “real men” must avoid expressing feelings other than anger. But although belonging to a privileged category costs them something that may *feel* oppressive, to call it oppression distorts the nature of what is happening to them and why.

It ignores, for example, the fact that the cost of male privilege is far outweighed by the benefits, while the oppressive cost of being female is not outweighed by corresponding benefits. Misapplying the label of “oppression” also tempts us into the false argument that if men and women are *both* oppressed because of gender, then one oppression balances out the other and no privilege can be said to exist. So when we try to label the pain that men feel because of gender (or that whites feel because of racism, and so on), whether we call it “oppression” or simply “pain” makes a huge difference in how we perceive the world and how it works.

The complexity of systems of privilege makes it possible, of course, for men to experience oppression if they also happen to be people of color or gay or in a lower social class, but not because they are male. In the same way, whites can experience oppression as women, homosexuals, or members of lower social classes, but not because they’re white.

Note also that because oppression results from relations between social categories, it is not possible to be oppressed by society itself. Living in a particular society can make people feel miserable, but we can’t call that misery “oppression” unless it arises from being on the losing end in a system of privilege. That can’t happen in relation to society as a whole, because a society isn’t something that can be the recipient of privilege. Only people can

do this by belonging to privileged categories in relation to other categories that aren't.

Finally, it's important to point out that belonging to a privileged category that has an oppressive relationship with another isn't the same as being an oppressive *person* who behaves in oppressive ways. That whites as a social category oppress people of color as a social category, for example, is a social fact. That doesn't, however, tell us how a particular white *person* thinks or feels about particular people of color or behaves toward them. This can be a subtle distinction to hang on to, but hang on to it we must if we're going to maintain a clear idea of what oppression is and how it works.

Notes

1. Charlotte Bunch, "Not for Lesbians Only," *Quest* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1975).
2. Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement," in Michael Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (eds.), *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 280. Italics in original.
3. For a classic discussion of the meaning of oppression, see Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 1–16.C

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White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

Peggy McIntosh

Through work to bring materials from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials which amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their

power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow "them" to be more like "us."

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case *attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege* than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my African American co-workers, friends and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.

10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life

is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience which I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions which were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. *My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make.* I could think of myself as belonging in major ways, and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work to systematically overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply *confers dominance* because of one's race or sex.

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantages which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an *unearned entitlement*. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power which I originally saw as attendant on being a human being in the U.S. consisted in *unearned advantage* and *conferred dominance*.

I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred

dominance and if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the U.S. think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantaging associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage which rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977 continues to remind us eloquently.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes. [But] a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that *systems* of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Though systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

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White Privilege/White Supremacy

Robert Jensen

White Supremacy

The United States of America at the beginning of the twenty-first century—a century and a half after the end of slavery, four decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act—is a white-supremacist society.

By “white supremacist,” I mean a society whose founding is based in an ideology of the inherent superiority of white Europeans over non-whites, an ideology that was used to justify the crimes against indigenous people and Africans that created the nation. That ideology also has justified legal and extralegal exploitation of every non-white immigrant group, and is used to this day to rationalize the racialized disparities in the distribution of wealth and well-being in this society. It is a society in which white people occupy most of the top positions in powerful institutions, with similar privileges available in limited ways to non-white people who fit themselves into white society.

That claim will strike many as ludicrous. Yes, we may have some remnants of racial inequality, and of course there are lingering racial tensions, and it’s true that there are still some white people who hold openly racist beliefs. But white supremacist? The entire society? How can one make such a claim?

It’s easy. We can start with the numbers. President Bill Clinton promised us a national conversation on race in the 1990s. The conversation didn’t get very far, but his Council of Economic Advisors for the President’s Initiative

on Race did gather a large amount of data.¹ They detailed how, on average, whites are more likely than members of racial/ethnic minorities to:

- Attend primary and secondary schools with smaller class sizes.
- Have access to computer technology in public schools and at home during primary and secondary schooling.
- Attend and graduate from a four-year college or university.
- Earn higher salaries.
- Retain employment during a downturn in the economy.
- Be covered by health insurance and consequently gain access to health care.
- Survive certain life-threatening illnesses.
- Experience more favorable housing conditions (less crowding, less crime, less litter and deterioration, and fewer problems with public services).
- Spend a smaller percentage of household income on housing.
- Have unimpeded access to home mortgage loans and home ownership.
- Own stocks, mutual funds, and IRA accounts.
- Gain a substantial net worth.

If we look just at the statistics about blacks and whites, the numbers are stark. According to a 2004 study by United for a Fair Economy, on some measures black Americans had fallen behind white Americans in recent decades:²

- The typical black family had 60 percent as much income as a white family in 1968, but only 58 percent as much in 2002.
- One in nine African Americans cannot find a job. Black unemployment is more than twice the white race, a wider gap than in 1972.
- Black infants are almost two and a half times as likely as white infants to die before age one, a greater gap than in 1970.
- White households had an average net worth of \$468,200 in 2001, more than six times the \$75,700 of black households. In 1989 (the oldest comparable data available), average white wealth was five and a half times that of black wealth.

On many measures, closing the gap between black and white is decades, or centuries, away:

- At the slow rate that the black-white poverty gap has been narrowing since 1968, it would take 150 years, until 2152, to close.
- For every dollar of white per-capita income, African Americans had fifty-five cents in 1968 and only fifty-seven cents in 2001. At this pace, it would take blacks 581 years to get the remaining forty-three cents.

- Although white home-ownership has jumped from 65 percent to 75 percent since 1970, black home-ownership has only risen from 42 percent to 48 percent. At this rate, it would take 1,664 years to close the gap, after fifty-five generations.
- If current rates of incarceration continue, one out of three African-American males born today will be imprisoned at some point during their lifetimes.
- At the current pace, blacks and whites will reach high school graduation parity in 2013, six decades after the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision. And college graduation parity would not be reached until 2075, more than 200 years after the end of slavery.

What does white supremacy mean in day-to-day life? In the United States, a black applicant with no criminal record is less likely to receive a callback from a potential employer than a white applicant with a felony conviction.³ In other words, being black is more of a liability in finding a job than being a convicted criminal. Studies show that from the mid-1990s through the beginning of the new century, such discrimination in low-wage jobs has remained constant. These statistics led the researcher to conclude that even if employers are not consciously discriminating against black applicants, “there are a lot of unconscious processes that come into play that bias or distort employers’ perceptions of the quality or suitability of minority applicants.”⁴

But numbers can never tell the whole story. The statistics have to be made real through the experiences and stories of people who live with the consequences of white supremacy. Such testimony of non-white people is readily available to anyone who wants to take the time to listen or read. If you aren’t sure where to start, try something simple: Pick up a book or go online. Are you interested in the history and reality behind those statistics about black America? Try an anthology of important African-American writing, such as *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal*.⁵ Or just type “driving while black” into an Internet search engine and read a few of the stories.

White Privilege

In a white-supremacist society, white people will have privilege. That’s hardly a radical claim, yet it continues to be controversial in many sectors of U.S. society. In 1986, Peggy McIntosh presented a paper that pointed out that although many white people were willing to acknowledge that racism put others at a disadvantage, they were less forthright about how that same system gives whites advantages of various kinds. Widely anthologized and republished,⁶ the essay prompted discussion of white privilege in some circles, but such a simple assertion sparks considerable resistance from many white people.

White privilege, like any social phenomenon, is complex. In a white-supremacist society, however, all white people have some sort of privilege in

some settings. There are general patterns, but such privilege plays out differently depending on context and other aspects of one's identity. So, it's true that a non-white manager can have power over a white employee who is in a subordinate position, and that a non-white person living in the upper-middle class enjoys a higher standard of living than a working-class white person. Class affects people's lives. It's also true that in this society men have power over women, and that power can cross racial lines. Gender affects people's lives.

But none of that derails a simple observation: In this white-supremacist society, whiteness consistently conveys certain privileges. A simple illustration of this was broadcast on the ABC News program *Primetime*.⁷ Using a hidden camera, the producers conducted a standard experiment to determine whether a white and black man would be treated differently in the world. Two men who worked for the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities in Chicago (a nonprofit group that works to ensure equal opportunity in housing) temporarily relocated to St. Louis, where they looked for an apartment, hunted for a job, shopped for shoes and cars, and went about the day-to-day business of living. The two men were alike in most every respect—age, education, background, work history—except race. In some situations, the men were treated equally. But a pattern of disparate treatment emerged, captured on video:

- The black man was ignored by salespeople in stores or tailed as a possible shoplifter, while the white man was greeted warmly and allowed to browse without suspicion.
- When both pretended to have locked their keys in their cars, the white man was showered with offers to help by passersby while the black man was ignored.
- At a used car lot, the white man was quoted more favorable terms for purchasing the same car.
- The white man was shown an apartment at a complex where the black man was told there were no vacancies.
- While the black man walked down the street in a predominantly white part of town, a white man leaned out of a passing car and said “Little far south, ain’t it?” to let him know that he was in the wrong part of town.

All of that is evidence of white privilege. The anecdotal evidence of the program is backed up by statistics. But the real core of white privilege is revealed in the reaction of many white people to such a claim. When I showed the program to a class at the University of Texas, for example, a white student said, “The program isn’t balanced. It shows the black guy getting harassed in a white neighborhood, but what would happen to me if I went to a black neighborhood?” Well, what would happen? Maybe a white man walking in a predominantly black part of town late at night would be at greater risk of being

robbed or attacked than if he were black. Maybe. But even if that were the case, there are a few important differences. In most cases, white people can decide whether or not they want to go into a predominantly black neighborhood. In most cases, black people have no choice but to deal with a predominantly white world. If they want to get a job or secure a bank loan or buy a car, they will have to deal routinely with white people in a white world. The program we had just finished watching had detailed all the places where the black man had faced varying levels of discrimination or hostility. It was a difficult program to watch; the black man in the segment described the pain he felt, even though he knew it was “just a test.” Yet instead of dealing with that, this white student in class had immediately raced to the one example he could think of—feeling unsafe walking in a black neighborhood—to begin the discussion. Or, more accurately, to try to end the discussion. That’s part of white privilege—the privilege to ignore the reality of a white-supremacist society when it makes us uncomfortable, to rationalize why it’s not really so bad, to deny one’s own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected.

There’s one other disturbing aspect of that program, which I didn’t notice until I had watched it several times. The show ends with one final illustration of discrimination: The two men go out on a New York street to catch a cab, with the black man standing in the foreground and the white man farther down the street. Both have their arms outstretched to hail a cab. Diane Sawyer, the reporter for this segment, points out that the first cab that pulls over glides past the black man and stops for the white man. The message is clear: In virtually every aspect of life—from the risk of racist violence, to getting a job, to finding a place to live, to the simple act of hailing a cab—the black person will face struggles and threats that the white person will not.

Cut back to the studio. Sawyer is at the desk, smiling happily. “We’re going to motor on off ourselves,” she says.

Such is television news; everything has to end on an upbeat note. But there was something incredibly depraved about the ending. After such a painful segment in which the white supremacy of the society was revealed, how could she smile? Even if such inanity is part of the script, how could she smile? How could she talk about “motoring off,” making a bad joke that played on what we had just seen? Yes, I know, that’s how television news operates. They smile, even when they have just finished reporting on a tragedy. But isn’t there something sick about a white person delivering an indictment of white supremacy and then smiling? That’s white privilege, too.

Notes

1. Council of Economic Advisors, “Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin,” September 1998. <http://w3.access.gpo.gov/eop/ca/index.html>.

2. United for a Fair Economy, "The State of the Dream 2004: Enduring Disparities in Black and White," January 2004. <http://www.faireconomy.org/press/2004/StateoftheDream2004.pdf>
3. Devah Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology*, 108:5 (March 2003): 937–975.
4. Interview with Devah Pager, November 20, 2003. <http://www.northwestern.edu/observer/issues/2003-11-20/newsfeed.html>.
5. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
6. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, eds. *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2004); Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, eds., *Privilege: A Reader* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2003).
7. "True Colors," aired September 26, 1991.

Membership Has Its Privileges: Thoughts on Acknowledging and Challenging Whiteness

Tim Wise

Being white means never having to think about it. James Baldwin said that many years ago, and it's perhaps the truest thing ever said about race in America. That's why I get looks of bewilderment whenever I ask, as I do when lecturing to a mostly white audience: "what do you like about being white?" Never having contemplated the question, folks take a while to come up with anything.

We're used to talking about race as a Black issue, or Latino, Asian, or Indian problem. We're used to books written about "them," but few that analyze what it means to be white in this culture. Statistics tell of the disadvantages of "blackness" or "brownness" but few examine the flipside: namely, the advantages whites receive as a result.

When we hear about things like racial profiling, we think of it in terms of what people of color go through, never contemplating what it means for whites and what we don't have to put up with. We might know that a book like *The Bell Curve* denigrates the intellect of blacks, but we ignore the fact that in so doing, it elevates the same in whites, much to our advantage in the job market and schools, where those in authority will likely view us as more competent than persons of color.

That which keeps people of color off-balance in a racist society is that which keeps whites in control: a truism that must be discussed if whites are to understand our responsibility to work for change. Each thing with which "they" have to contend as they navigate the waters of American life is one less thing whites have to sweat: and that makes everything easier, from finding jobs, to getting loans, to attending college.

On a personal level, it has been made clear to me repeatedly. Like the time I attended a party in a white suburb and one of the few black men there announced he had to leave before midnight, fearing his trip home—which required that he travel through all-white neighborhoods—would likely result in being pulled over by police, who would wonder what he was doing out so late in the “wrong” part of town.

He would have to be cognizant—in a way I would not—of every lane change, every blinker he did or didn’t remember to use, whether his lights were too bright, or too dim, and whether he was going even 5 miles an hour over the limit, as any of those could serve as pretexts for pulling one over, and those pretexts are used regularly for certain folks, and not others.

The virtual invisibility that whiteness affords those of us who have it is like psychological money in the bank, the proceeds of which we cash in every day while others are in a state of perpetual overdraft.

Yet, it isn’t enough to see these things, or think about them, or come to appreciate what whiteness means: though important, this enlightenment is no end in itself. Rather, it is what we do with the knowledge and understanding that matters.

If we recognize our privileges, yet fail to challenge them, what good is our insight? If we intuit discrimination, yet fail to speak against it, what have we done to rectify the injustice? And that’s the hard part, because privilege tastes good and we’re loath to relinquish it. Or even if willing, we often wonder how to resist: how to attack unfairness and make a difference.

As to why we should want to end racial privilege—aside from the moral argument—the answer is straightforward: the price we pay to stay one step ahead of others is enormous. In the labor market, we benefit from racial discrimination in the relative sense, but in absolute terms this discrimination holds down most of our wages and living standards by keeping working people divided and creating a surplus labor pool of “others” to whom employers can turn when the labor market gets tight or workers demand too much in wages or benefits.

We benefit in relative terms from discrimination against people of color in education, by receiving, on average, better resources and class offerings. But in absolute terms, can anyone deny that the creation and perpetuation of miseducated persons of color harms us all?

And even disparate treatment in the justice system has its blowback on the white community. We may think little of the racist growth of the prison-industrial complex, as it snares far fewer of our children. But considering that the prisons warehousing black and brown bodies compete for the same dollars needed to build colleges for everyone, the impact is far from negligible.

In California, since 1980, nearly 30 new prisons have opened, compared to two four-year colleges, with the effect that the space available for people of color and whites to receive a good education has been curtailed. So folks fight over the pieces of a diminishing pie—as with Proposition 209 to end affirmative action—instead of uniting against their common problem: the mostly white lawmakers who prioritize jails and slashing taxes on the wealthy over meeting the needs of most people.

As for how whites can challenge the system—other than by joining the occasional demonstration or voting for candidates with a decent record on race issues—this is where we'll need creativity.

Imagine, for example, that groups of whites and people of color started going to local department stores as discrimination “tester” teams. And imagine the whites spent a few hours, in shifts, observing how they were treated relative to the black and brown folks who came with them. And imagine what would happen if every white person on the team approached a different white clerk and returned just-purchased merchandise, if and when they observed disparate treatment, explaining they weren't going to shop in a store that profiled or otherwise racially discriminated. Imagine the faces of the clerks, confronted by other whites demanding equal treatment for persons of color.

Far from insignificant, if this happened often enough, it could have a serious effect on behavior and the institutional mistreatment of people of color in at least this one setting: after all, white clerks could no longer be sure if the white shopper in ladies' lingerie was an ally who would wink at unequal treatment, or whether they might be one of “those” whites: the kind that would call them out for doing what they always assumed was acceptable.

Or what about setting up “cop watch” programs like those already in place in a few cities? White folks, following police, filming officers' interactions with people of color, and making their presence known when and if they observe officers engaged in abusive behavior.

Or contingents of white parents, speaking out in a school board meeting against racial tracking in class assignments: a process through which kids of color are much more likely to be placed in basic classes, while whites are elevated to honors and advanced placement, irrespective of ability. Protesting this kind of privilege—especially when it might be working to the advantage of one's own children—is the sort of thing we'll need to do if we hope to alter the system we swear we're against.

We'll have to stop moving from neighborhoods when “too many” people of color move in.

We'll have to stop running to private schools, or suburban public ones, and instead fight to make the schools serving all children in our community better. We'll need to consider taking advantage of the push for publicly funded charter schools by joining with parents of color to start institutions of our own, similar to the “Freedom Schools” established in Mississippi by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1964. These schools would teach not only traditional subject matter, but also the importance of critical thinking, and social and economic justice. If these are things we say we care about, yet we haven't at present the outlets to demonstrate our commitment, we'll have to create those institutions ourselves.

And we must protest the privileging of elite, white male perspectives in school textbooks. We have to demand that the stories of all who have struggled to radically transform society be told: and if the existing texts don't do that, we must dip into our own pockets and pay for supplemental materials that teachers could use to make the classes they teach meaningful. And if we're in

a position to make a hiring decision, we should go out of our way to recruit, identify and hire a person of color.

What these suggestions have in common—and they’re hardly an exhaustive list—is that they require whites to leave the comfort zone to which we have grown accustomed. They require time, perhaps money, and above all else, courage; and they ask us to focus a little less on the relatively easy, though important, goal of “fixing” racism’s victims (with a bit more money for this or that, or a little more affirmative action), and instead to pay attention to the need to challenge and change the perpetrators of and collaborators with the system of racial privilege. And those are the people we work with, live with, and wake up to every day. It’s time to revoke the privileges of whiteness.

Are Iranians People of Color? Persian, Muslim, and Model Minority Race Politics

Alex Shams

In the lead up to the 2010 US National Census, campaigns emerged across the country calling for Iranian-Americans to stand up and be counted. One of the most memorable of these was “Check it right, you ain’t white,” a movement that targeted Arab- and Iranian-Americans, urging them to write in their ethnic identification instead of checking the box for “White,” as forms generally ask those of “Middle Eastern” descent to do.

Awkwardly, the campaign somehow backfired, and the number of Iranian-Americans who wrote in “Iranian,” “Persian,” or “Iranian-American” in the census was 289,465, significantly less than 10 years before. Given that unofficial estimates of the current Iranian-American population run between 1 and 1.5 million, the vast majority of Iranians probably identified themselves as “White,” or else didn’t bother turning their forms in.

The Iranian-American voting campaigns of 2010 US Census speak volumes about the complexities of race and racial politics, not only in the Iranian-American community but also of Iranians more broadly. Iranians in Iran and elsewhere tend to identify with Whiteness as a result of the history of race formation and ethnicity politics back in Iran, particularly as developed under the Pahlavi regime until 1979. Those Iranians who immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and onward, meanwhile, have had this identification with Whiteness drilled into them as a result of the experiences of discrimination they have faced in this country since the 1979 Hostage Crisis.

And yet, identifying as White does not erase the problems of discrimination faced by generations of Iranians in the United States, and has instead merely

led to a perplexing situation whereby Iranians are discriminated against based on their ethnic background but continue clinging to the myth of Whiteness with the desperate hope that claiming Whiteness will somehow save them.

The material success that many Iranians have enjoyed in this country, meanwhile, has obscured their connections with other discriminated groups, and instead fostered an attitude of “lay low, don’t make trouble,” that idealizes financial success as the key to realizing the American Dream. “We’re good Persians,” community leaders seem to say, not like those “Bad Iranians” over there that we all hate so much. Despite the racial discrimination Iranians regularly face as a community in the United States, many continue to insist upon their own Whiteness, refusing to even consider the question, “Are Iranians People of Color?”

Are Iranian-Americans People of Color?

“Person of Color” (POC) is a phrase that emerged out of political struggles against ethnic and racial discrimination in the United States, and exists in contrast to the identity “White” and the racial privileges that identity carries. POC explicitly recognizes the commonalities of experience shared by those who are not of the dominant racial group in this country, and expresses the need for solidarity among these groups in order to dismantle the existing system of racial privilege and hierarchy. Importantly, the term POC does not suggest that the experiences of all people of color are similar, but instead it recognizes the diversity of experiences of racial discrimination between groups. Using the term POC, however, insists upon the importance of recognizing the shared struggle of peoples of color for an equality and liberation that is predicated upon the equality and liberation of all.

As a light-skinned, biracial Iranian-American, however, the supposedly clear lines dividing White from POC are a bit difficult for me to parse. On one hand, I almost always pass as just White, and rarely if ever experience the feeling of being targeted, singled out, or discriminated against based on my looks alone. Despite increasingly bushy eyebrows, my light skin tone has long ensured that I enjoy substantial racial privilege for my ability to pass as (fully) White.

Passing as White meant I looked like “the norm” and was never made to feel out of place, saw people who looked like me whenever I turned on the television, and never had to fear or suspect that negative experiences I had were a result of racism (among many other privileges I enjoyed). I knew for certain that my father’s ability to pass as a well-tanned White man had ensured his own ability to succeed professionally at a time when his Iranian name had closed many doors. I was sure of this because his ability to pass, as well as my own, meant that we were both “privileged” to hear the secret racist and Islamophobic comments directed toward others that happened in the lily-white boardrooms and classrooms that we each navigated.

And yet the more I spoke with White folks about race, the more I began to understand that many of my experiences of bullying throughout childhood were directly tied to my ethnicity in ways I hadn’t previously realized. As obvious as it now sounds, it had never occurred to me before that being harassed

for supposedly being a terrorist or being called “Saddam” or “Osama” in middle-school hallways was not a universal experience for American children, and that these experiences were not merely unpleasant but were in fact definitively racist.

As an Iranian-American, my visits to see Grandma crossed “enemy” frontiers and my bags were thoroughly inspected by US customs officials to ensure I did not bring back too many pistachios, lest I incur a \$250,000 fine for violating US sanctions on Iran. The desire to send back money to purchase Grandma’s medicine or help a cousin in dire financial straits had to always be weighed against the possibility of jail time in a US prison for engaging in financial transactions with the “enemy.”

US President Obama’s admission of the existence of a domestic spying apparatus far more widespread and pervasive than previously thought came as a major surprise to many Americans. Few of the surprised, however, were Middle Eastern Americans, for whom the announcement came as less of a shock and more of a “well, duh” kind of moment. After 9/11, elders whispered about being rounded up and put in concentration camps like the Japanese during World War II, and the childhood diary of my 11-year-old self merely noted at the time that things seemed to have gotten “worse.”

When thousands of men of Middle Eastern descent were called up for questioning a month after 9/11 and subsequently scheduled to be deported en masse, many of us breathed a collective sigh of relief that we still had some time to prepare before our turn came. Since the community has been on the receiving end of a great deal of attention from the various branches of the government’s spying apparatuses for years, and especially since 9/11, the fact that the United States spies on its citizens and residents and suspends their constitutional rights for reasons they are not required to disclose had practically become common knowledge in Middle Eastern communities.

Although “flying while brown” (a riff on the classic, “driving while black”) has become an increasingly visible form of discrimination faced by Americans of Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds, few realize that other forms of targeting are extremely pervasive.

The first great wave of Iranian immigrants to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s did little to prepare the next generation for the rise of anti-Iranian racism and Islamophobia in the years following 9/11. Many of this generation never quite got over the collective trauma of becoming “terrorist sympathizers” overnight following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis. For over a year, Walter Cronkite ended every single segment of the *CBS Evening News* by telling Americans how many days had transpired since Iranians had taken the over the US Embassy in Tehran, reminding Iranians in the United States on a nightly basis just how much the marker “Iranian” had become a liability.

And yet, many members of the generation of Iranian-Americans who experienced the wave of discrimination following 1979 continue to remain silent about their experiences. Some Iranians were beaten up on the street and called “sand niggers” and “towel heads,” while others experienced the racism and xenophobia in more insidious ways, like discrimination in job hiring practices.

Even today, a 2008 survey indicated that nearly half of Iranian-Americans surveyed have experienced personally or personally know victims of discrimination due to country of origin. And through it all, community members by and large sought to keep their heads down and doggedly pursue the American dream, their lives collateral damage in a war between Iran and the United States that they had never asked to be a part of. It is difficult to bring up the memories of those years among Iranian families without provoking embittered silences and harsh rejoinders to not reopen the wounds of a fading nightmare.

The Aryan Myth and the History of Race Formation in Iran

One of the hardest aspects of discussion about racial discrimination against Iranian-Americans is how wound up in embarrassment and shame the whole topic is due to the history of racial discourse in Iran.

The specific form of nationalism formulated by the Pahlavi regime until 1979 insisted upon the racial superiority of the Iranian Persian people over their neighbors of all ethnic stripes. The regime aligned itself closely with the racist White European-superiority politics espoused by colonial empires, and generations of Iranians were taught to be pleased with themselves for occupying a low rung of the Aryan race ladder.

Although Iran is a multiethnic nation of Persians, Azeri Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Armenians, and many other groups, Iranians were taught to pride themselves for their Aryan blood and white skin and to look down on the supposedly “stupid” Turks and “backward” Arabs. As educated Iranians widely bought into this European system of racial hierarchy, Iranians began to see themselves as White in a global perspective and many carried this identification with them into the United States.

This narrative of race formation in Iran makes it extremely difficult for many Iranians to recognize themselves in the racist and Islamophobic discrimination they experience, often faulting Americans for being ignorant in ways that implicitly support racist and xenophobic targeting of non-Iranians.

This is probably best exemplified in the common assertion that Iranian-Americans should not be targeted because they are not Arab or because they are generally lax in their Islamic practice, and thus do not pose a “real” threat to Americans. The implicit argument, of course, is that Arabs and practicing Muslims should in fact be subject to surveillance and targeting because they do constitute a “real” threat.

The Safe Kind of Brown

Alas, informed discussions of race and racial privilege among Iranians and other Middle Eastern-Americans often gloss over how histories of racial formation in our homeland as well as White-passing privilege for many of us complicated attempts to subsume ourselves into the People of Color label. Many

accounts of race politics and discrimination fail to recognize how for many Middle Eastern Americans, the ability to pass as White shields them from the forms of discrimination based on visible difference from Whites that are an integral part of daily life for many People of Color.

Although this passing privilege is by no means the rule for Middle Easterners in this country, it does inform the experiences of broad swathes of the various communities that fall under this umbrella. The experience of a dark-skinned, southern Iranian racialized by Americans as Black can hardly be compared with that of a light-skinned, green-eyed northern Iranian racialized by Americans as White.

These ambiguities and complexities are by no means limited to the Middle Eastern-American or Iranian-American communities, but instead are an integral part of any identity politics based on a binary.

As Janani Balasubramanian brilliantly argues in relation to the South Asian diaspora in the article, "I'm the Safe Kind of Brown," the category Person of Color is not predicated on a uniformity of experience among those who take this label, and attempts to erase or ignore the differences among and between People of Color will without fail merely reify hierarchies of racial privilege and oppression that are much more complex than just national origin or visible markers of race or shade. As the author explains:

Let's stop buying into this narrative that our families all got here because we "worked hard and made it to the America." Especially since those of us who came to the US in that first wave of professional South Asian (largely Indian) immigrants largely benefited from our caste and class positions in South Asia. Our families had access to the education and capital it took to enter those professional spheres.

Similar arguments can be made for the Iranian-American community, as well.

Solidarity is not predicated on sameness, but instead must be informed by an open and honest acknowledgment of difference. This difference must also include an understanding of how contextual all of these phrases are; in the United States, I may be a mixed person of color who passes as White, while in Iran I am a member of the dominant ethnic group and enjoy the privilege of American citizenship that sets me apart even further.

The complex legacies of race politics in the United States and Iran, as well as the very specific history of Iranian migration to the United States and discrimination against the Iranian-American community have combined to lead us directly into the model minority trap. While *Shahs of Sunset* and the "Persian palaces" of Beverly Hills are celebrated as emblems of Iranian success, the very real struggles faced by Iranians in this country are swept under the proverbial Persian carpet in an effort to give others and ourselves the most perfect, idealized image of Iranians possible.

When the only mainstream American television show starring Iranian-Americans depicts us as a bunch of rich idiots whose biggest goal in life is picking out the right plastic surgeon, we cringe a little but say to one another,

“Well, at least in this show we’re not terrorists.” Is this really how we measure our success and well-being as a community?

Identifying as White does not erase the problems of discrimination faced by generations of Iranian-Americans, nor does it aid in the struggle to dismantle the systems of oppression that structure US society as a whole. Iranian-Americans in this country today are a diverse lot and are confronted by a wide variety of pressing issues, ranging from legal status to poverty and religious discrimination. The issues of race and racial discrimination outlined in this article are but two lenses with which to understand and interpret the position of the Iranian community in the United States today.

But the failure of Iranian-Americans to recognize their own complicated racial position in the United States risks doing our community a great disservice. We must be brutally honest with ourselves and with one another about systems of race and racial oppression in this country as well as how we fit into them, both in terms of privilege and oppression.

Only through this honest discussion can we begin to imagine more clearly how solidarities can emerge among Iranian-Americans and other communities of color in this country in the struggle to confront and dismantle institutionalized racism.

My Class Didn't Trump My Race: Using Oppression to Face Privilege

Robin J. DiAngelo

I was born to working class parents; my father was a construction worker and my mother was a switchboard operator. When I was 2, my parents divorced and my mother began to raise us on her own; at that point we entered into poverty. I have never understood people who say, “we were poor but we didn’t know it because we had lots of love.” Poverty hurts. It isn’t romantic, or some form of “living simply.” Poor people are not innocent and child-like. The lack of medical and dental care, the hunger, and the ostracization, are concrete. The stress of poverty made my household much more chaotic than loving.

We were evicted frequently, and moved four to five times a year. There were periods when oatmeal was the only food in our house. I had no health or dental care during my childhood, and today all of my front teeth are filled because by the time I was 10 they were rotten. If we got sick, my mother would beat us, screaming that we could not get sick because she could not afford to take us to the doctor. We occasionally had to live in our car, and I was left with relatives for 8 months while my mother tried to secure housing for us. My teacher once held my hands up to my fourth-grade class as an example of poor hygiene and with the class as her audience, told me to go home and tell my mother to wash me.

I used to stare at the girls in my class and ache to be like them; to have a father, to wear pretty clothes, to go to camp, to be clean and get to sit with them. I knew we didn’t have enough money and that meant that I couldn’t join them in school or go to their houses or have the same things they had. But the moment the real meaning of poverty crystallized for me came when

we were visiting another family. As we were leaving I heard one of their daughters ask her mother, “What is wrong with them?” I stopped, riveted. I too, wanted to know. Her mother held her finger to her lips and whispered, “Shhh, they’re *poor*.” This was a revelatory moment for me. The shock came not just in the knowledge that we were poor, but that it was exposed. There was something wrong with us, indeed, and it was something that was obvious to others and that we couldn’t hide, something shameful that could be seen but should not be named. It took me many years to gain a structural analysis of class that would help shift this sense of shame.

I begin this narrative with my class background because it so deeply informs my understanding of race. From an early age I had the sense of being an outsider; I was acutely aware that I was poor, that I was dirty, that I was not normal, and that there was something “wrong” with me. But I also knew that I was *not* Black. We were at the lower rungs of society, but there was always someone on the periphery, just below us. I knew that “colored” people existed and that they should be avoided. I can remember many occasions when I reached for candy or uneaten food laying on the street and was admonished by my grandmother not to touch it because a “colored person” may have touched it. The message was clear to me; if a colored person touched something it became dirty. The irony here is that the marks of poverty were clearly visible on me: poor hygiene, torn clothes, homelessness, hunger. Yet through comments such as my grandmother’s, a racial Other was formed in my consciousness, an Other through whom I became clean. Race was the one identity that aligned me with the other girls in my school.

I left home as a teenager and struggled to survive. As I looked at what lay ahead, I could see no path out of poverty other than education. The decision to take that path was frightening for me; I had never gotten the message that I was smart and academia was a completely foreign social context. But once I was in academia, I understood that a college degree is not conferred upon those who are smarter or who try harder than others, it comes through a complex web of intersecting systems of privileges that include internal expectations as well as external resources. In academia, racism, a key system that I benefit from, helped to mediate my class-based disadvantages.

Since those early days, I have led dialogues on race with police officers, social workers, teachers, and in both the private and government sectors. I recently completed my dissertation on how White student teachers reproduce racism in interracial dialogues about race. As I look at the world now, I see racism as ever-present and multidimensional. I realize that poor and working class White people don’t necessarily have any less racism than middle or upper class White people, our racism is just conveyed in different ways and we enact it from a different social location than the middle or upper classes.

As I reflect back on the early messages I received about being poor and being White, I now realize that my grandmother and I *needed* people of color to cleanse and realign us with the dominant White culture that our poverty had separated us from. I now ask myself how the classist messages I internalized growing up lead me to collude in racism. For example, as a child who grew up in poverty, I received constant reminders that I was stupid, lazy, dirty,

and a drain on the resources of hardworking people. I internalized these messages, and they work to silence me. Unless I work to uproot them, I am less likely to trust my own perceptions or feel like I have a “right” to speak up. I may not attempt to interrupt racism because the social context in which it is occurring intimidates me. My fear on these occasions may be coming from a place of internalized class inferiority, but in practice my silence colludes with racism and ultimately benefits me by protecting my White privilege and maintaining racial solidarity with other White people. This solidarity connects and realigns me with White people across other lines of difference, such as the very class locations that have silenced me in the first place. I am also prone to use others to elevate me, as in the example with my grandmother. So although my specific class background mediated the way I learned racism and how I enact it, in the end it still socialized me to collude with the overall structure.

It is my observation that class dictates proximity between Whites and people of color. Poor Whites are most often in closest proximity to people of color because they tend to share poverty. I hear the term “White trash” frequently. It is not without significance that this is one of the few expressions in which race is named for Whites. I think the proximity of the people labeled as White trash to people of color is why; race becomes marked or “exposed” by virtue of a closeness to people of color. In a racist society, this closeness both highlights and pollutes Whiteness. Owning class people also have people of color near them because people of color are often their domestics and gardeners—their servants. But they do not interact socially with people of color in the same way that poor Whites do. Middle class Whites are generally the furthest away from people of color. They are the most likely to say that, “there were no people of color in my neighborhood or school. I didn’t meet a Black person until I went to college” (often adding, “so I was lucky because I didn’t learn anything about racism”). Looking specifically at how class shaped my racial identity has been very helpful to me in attempting to unravel the specific way I manifest my internalized racial superiority.

I am no longer poor. Although I still carry the marks of poverty, those marks are now only internal. But these marks limit me in more than what I believe I deserve or where I think I belong; they also interfere with my ability to stand up against injustice, for as long as I believe that I am not as smart or as valuable as other White people, I won’t challenge racism. I believe that in order for Whites to unravel our internalized racial dominance, we have two interwoven tasks. One is to work on our own internalized oppression—the ways in which we impose limitations on ourselves based on the societal messages we receive about the inferiority of the lower status groups we belong to. The other task is to face the internalized dominance that results from being socialized in a racist society—the ways in which we consciously or unconsciously believe that we are more important, more valuable, more intelligent, and more deserving than people of color. I cannot address the interwoven complexity of other White people’s social locations. However, after years facilitating dialogues on race with thousands of White people from a range of class positions (as well as varied gender, sexual orientation, religious, and ability positions), and bearing witness to countless stories and challenges from people of color about my own racism

and that of other Whites, I have come to see some very common patterns of internalized dominance. These patterns are shared across other social positions due to the bottom line nature of racism: Regardless of one's other locations, White people know on some level that being White in this society is "better" than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors Whiteness opens, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations. In the next section of this article, I will identify several of these patterns of internalized dominance that are generally shared among Whites.

We Live Segregated Lives

Growing up in segregated environments (schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, media images, historical perspectives, etc.), we are given the message that our experiences and perspectives are the only ones that matter. We receive this message day in and day out, and it is not limited to a single moment, it is a *relentless experience*. Virtually all of our teachers, history books, role models, movie and book characters, are White like us. Further, as White people, we are taught not to feel any loss about the absence of people of color in our lives. In fact, the absence of people of color is what defines our schools and neighborhoods as "good." And we get this message regardless of where we are oppressed in other areas of our lives. Because we live primarily segregated lives in a White-dominated society, we receive little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think critically or complexly about it. Although segregation is often mediated somewhat for poor urban (and other) Whites who may live near and have friendships with people of color on the microlevel, segregation is still operating on the macrolevel and informing our collective perspectives and what is deemed the most valuable or "official" knowledge.

Whites from the lower classes who may have more integrated lives on the microlevel still receive the message that achievement means moving out of poverty and away from the neighborhoods and schools that define us. Upward mobility is the great class goal in the United States, and the social environment gets tangibly Whiter the higher up one goes, whether it be in academia or management. Whiter environments, in turn, are marked as the most socially and economically valuable. Reaching towards the most valuable places in society thus entails leaving people of color behind.

We Are Raised to Value the Individual and to See Ourselves as Individuals, Rather Than as Part of a Socialized Group

Individuality allows us to present ourselves as having "just arrived on the scene," unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages we receive. This also allows us to distance ourselves from the actions of our group and demand that we be granted the benefit of the doubt (because we are individuals) in all cases. Thus we get very irate when we are "accused" of racism, because as individuals, we are "different" from

other White people and expect to be seen as such. We find intolerable any suggestion that our behavior or perspectives are typical of our group as a whole, and this ensures that we cannot deepen our understanding of racism.

Seeing ourselves as individuals erases our history and hides the way in which wealth has accumulated over generations and benefits us, *as a group*, today. Further, being an individual is a privilege only afforded to White people. By focusing on ourselves as individuals, Whites are able to conceptualize the racist patterns in our behavior as “just our personality” and not connected to inter-group dynamics. For example, I might be an extrovert and cut people off when I am engaged in a discussion. I can say, “that is just my personality, I do that to everyone. That is how we talked at the dinner table in my family.” But the moment I cut off a person of color, it becomes racism because the history and the impact of that behavior for both of us is different. The freedom to remain oblivious to that fact, with no sense that this obliviousness has any consequences of importance, is White privilege (racism).

If we use the line of reasoning that we are all individuals and social categories such as race, class, and gender don't matter and are just “labels” that stereotype us, then it follows that we all end up in our own “natural” places. Those at the top are merely a collection of individuals who rose under their own individual merits, and those at the bottom are there due to individual lack. Group membership is thereby rendered inoperative and racial disparities are seen as essential rather than structural. Thus the discourse of individuality is not only connected to the discourse of meritocracy, but also with the Darwinism of the “bell curve.” It behooves those of us oppressed in other places to understand group membership, for the discourse of individuality may benefit us in terms of racial privilege but ultimately holds all of our oppressions in place.

We Feel That We Should Be Judged by Our Intentions Rather Than the Effects of Our Behavior

A common White reasoning is that as long as we didn't intend to perpetuate racism, then our actions don't count as racism. We focus on our intentions and discount the impact, thereby invalidating people of color's experiences and communicating that the effects of our behavior on them are unimportant. We then spend great energy explaining to people of color why our behavior is not racism at all. This invalidates their perspectives while enabling us to deny responsibility for making the effort to understand enough about racism to see our behavior's impact in both the immediate interaction and the broader, historical context.

We Believe That if We Can't Feel Our Social Power, Then We Don't Have Any

White social power is so normalized that it is outside of our conscious awareness. Yet we often expect that power is something that one can feel, rather than something one takes for granted. The issue of social power is where a lower

class location often becomes confused with a lack of racial privilege. For example, in discussions on race I often hear White working class men protest that they don't have any social power. They work long and grueling hours, often in jobs in which they have no long-term security, and come home feeling beaten and quite disempowered. These men can often not relate to the concept of holding social power. But if being able to feel racial privilege is required before Whites can acknowledge its reality, we will not be able to see (and thus change) it. The key to recognizing power is in recognizing normalcy—what is not attended to or in need of constant navigation. These men are indeed struggling against social and economic barriers, but race is simply not one of them; in fact, race is a major social current running in their direction and not only moving them along, but helping them navigate their other social struggles. Not feeling power is not necessarily aligned with how others perceive or respond to us, or our relationship to social and institutional networks.

We Think It Is Important Not to Notice Race

The underlying assumption of a colorblind discourse is that race is a defect and it is best to pretend that we don't notice it. But if we pretend we don't notice race, we cannot notice racism. If we don't notice racism, we can't understand or interrupt it in ourselves or others. We have to start being honest about the fact that we do notice race (when it isn't White) and then pay attention to what race means in our everyday lives. White people and people of color do not have the same racial experience, and this has profound and tangible consequences that need to be understood if we want to stop colluding with racism.

Racism Has Been Constructed as Belonging to Extremists and Being Very Bad

Racism is a deeply embedded, multidimensional, and internalized system that all members of this society are shaped by. Yet dominant culture constructs racism as primarily in the past and only currently occurring as isolated acts relegated to individual bad people (usually living somewhere in the South, or "old"). Although many White people today sincerely believe that racism is a bad thing, our abhorrence of racism coupled with a superficial conceptualization of it causes us to be highly defensive about any suggestion that we perpetuate it. Many Whites (and liberal Whites in particular) think that we can deal with racism in our heads (and without ever interacting with people of color) by deciding that we have not been affected because we don't want to have been affected.

A superficial understanding of racism coupled with a desire to distance ourselves from being perceived as "bad" is further complicated by resentments we may feel about places in our lives where we suffer from other forms of social injustice. It is often very difficult for Whites who have not been validated for

the oppression they experience elsewhere to keep their attention on a form of oppression from which they benefit. But I have found that when I explore how classism and other oppressions I experience set me up to participate in racism, I am more able to interrupt the manifestation of both in my life. By placing racism in the center of my analysis, I have been able to begin to unravel my other group socializations and how they work together to support social hierarchies.

Interrupting Internalized Dominance

I have found that a key to interrupting my internalized racial dominance is to defer to the knowledge of people whom I have been taught, in countless ways, are less knowledgeable and less valuable than I am. I must reach for humility and be willing to *not know*. I may never fully understand the workings of racism, as I have been trained my entire life to perpetuate racism while denying its reality. I do not have to understand racism for it to be real, and my expectation that I could is part of my internalized dominance. Reaching for racial humility as a White person is not the same for me as being mired in class shame.

My class position is only one social location from which I learned to collude with racism. For example, I have also asked myself how I learned to collude with racism as a Catholic and a woman. How did it shape my sense of racial belonging, of racial *correctness*, to be presented with God, the ultimate and universal authority, as White? How did the active erasure of Jesus' race and ethnicity shape my racial consciousness? How did the universalization of Catholicism as the true religion for all peoples of the world engender racial superiority within me when all the authorities within that religion were White like myself? At the same time, how did my conditioning under Catholicism not to question authority lead me to silently collude with the racism of other Whites?

As a White woman, how did I internalize racial superiority through the culture's representation of White women as the embodiment of ultimate beauty? What has it meant for me to have a key signifier of female perfection—Whiteness—available to me? How have images of White women in the careers deemed valuable for woman shaped my goals? How has mainstream feminism's articulation of White women's issues as universal women's issues shaped what I care about? At the same time, what has it meant to live under patriarchy and to be taught that as a woman I am less intelligent, that I should not speak up, that I should defer to others, and at all times be nice and polite? How have all of these messages ultimately set me up to collude in the oppression of people of color? By asking questions such as these I have been able to gain a much deeper and more useful analysis of racism, and rather than finding that centering racism denies my other oppressions, I find that centering racism has been a profound way to address the complexity of all my social locations.

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I Taught My Black Kids That Their Elite Upbringing Would Protect Them from Discrimination. I Was Wrong.

Lawrence Otis Graham

I knew the day would come, but I didn't know how it would happen, where I would be, or how I would respond. It is the moment that every black parent fears: the day their child is called a nigger.

My wife and I, both African Americans, constitute one of those Type A couples with Ivy League undergraduate and graduate degrees who, for many years, believed that if we worked hard and maintained great jobs, we could insulate our children from the blatant manifestations of bigotry that we experienced as children in the 1960s and '70s.

We divided our lives between a house in a liberal New York suburb and an apartment on Park Avenue, sent our three kids to a diverse New York City private school, and outfitted them with the accoutrements of success: preppy clothes, perfect diction and that air of quiet graciousness. We convinced ourselves that the economic privilege we bestowed on them could buffer these adolescents against what so many black and Latino children face while living in mostly white settings: being profiled by neighbors, followed in stores and stopped by police simply because their race makes them suspect.

But it happened nevertheless in July, when I was 100 miles away.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when my 15-year-old son called from his academic summer program at a leafy New England boarding school and told me that as he was walking across campus, a gray Acura with a broken rear taillight pulled up beside him. Two men leaned out of the car and glared at him.

“Are you the only nigger at Mellon Academy*?” one shouted.

Certain that he had not heard them correctly, my son moved closer to the curb, and asked politely, “I’m sorry; I didn’t hear you.”

But he had heard correctly. And this time the man spoke more clearly. “Only . . . nigger,” he said with added emphasis.

My son froze. He dropped his backpack in alarm and stepped back from the idling car. The men honked the horn loudly and drove off, their laughter echoing behind them.

By the time he recounted his experience a few minutes later, my son was back in his dorm room, ensconced on the third floor of a red-brick fortress. He tried to grasp the meaning of the story as he told it: why the men chose to stop him, why they did it in broad daylight, why they were so calm and deliberate. “Why would they do that—to me?” he whispered breathlessly into the phone. “Dad, they don’t know me. And they weren’t acting drunk. It’s just 3:30 in the afternoon. They could see me, and I could see them!”

My son rambled on, describing the car and the men, asking questions that I couldn’t completely answer. One very clear and cogent query was why, in Connecticut in 2014, grown men would target a student who wasn’t bothering them to harass in broad daylight. The men intended to be menacing. “They got so close—like they were trying to ask directions. . . . They were definitely trying to scare me,” he said.

“Are you okay?” I interrupted. “Are you—”

“Yeah,” he continued anxiously. “I’m okay. I guess. . . . Do you think they saw which dorm I went back to? Maybe I shouldn’t have told my roommate. Should I stay in my dorm and not go to the library tonight?”

Despite his reluctance, I insisted that he report the incident to the school. His chief concern was not wanting the white students and administrators to think of him as being special, different, or “racial.” That was his word. “If the other kids around here find out that I was called a nigger, and that I complained about it,” my son pleaded, “then they will call me ‘racial,’ and will be thinking about race every time they see me. I can’t have that.” For the next four weeks of the summer program, my son remained leery of cars that slowed in his proximity (he’s still leery today). He avoided sidewalks, choosing instead to walk on campus lawns. And he worried continually about being perceived as racially odd or different.

* * *

Herein lay the difference between my son’s black childhood and my own. Not only was I assaulted by the n-word so much earlier in life—at age 7, while visiting relatives in Memphis—but I also had many other experiences that differentiated my life from the lives of my white childhood friends. There was no way that they would “forget” that I was different. The times, in fact, dictated that they should not forget; our situation would be unavoidably “racial.”

*The name of the boarding school has been fictionalized. This essay is adapted from a story in the Oct. 8 edition of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*.

When my family moved into our home in an all-white neighborhood in suburban New York in December 1967, at the height of the black-power movement and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil-rights marches, integration did not—at all—mean assimilation. So my small Afro, the three African dashiki-style shirts that I wore to school every other week, and the Southern-style deep-fried chicken and watermelon slices that my Southern-born mother placed lovingly in my school lunchbox all elicited surprise and questions from the white kids who regarded me suspiciously as they walked to school or sat with me in the cafeteria. After all, in the 1960s, it was an “event”—and generally not a trouble-free one—when a black family integrated a white neighborhood. Our welcome was nothing like the comically naive portrayal carried off by Sidney Poitier and his white fiancée's liberal family members in the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which had opened the very month that we moved in.

It wasn't about awkward pauses, lingering stares and subtle attempts of “throwing shade” our way. It was often blatant and sometimes ugly. Brokers openly refused to show houses to my parents in any of the neighborhoods that we requested, and once we found a house in the *New York Times* Sunday classifieds, the seller demanded a price almost 25 percent higher than listed in the paper. (My parents paid it.) A day after Mom and Dad signed the contract, a small band of neighbors circulated a petition that outlined their desire to preemptively buy the house from the seller to circumvent its sale to us. My parents were so uncertain of this new racial adventure that they held onto our prior house for another four years—renting it on a year-to-year lease—“just in case,” as my mother always warned, with trepidation on her tongue.

Referred to as “that black family that moved onto Soundview,” we never quite felt in step with our surroundings. A year after moving in, my 9-year-old brother was pulling me down our quiet street in his red-and-white Radio Flyer wagon when we were accosted by a siren-screaming police car. An officer stepped out shouting, “Now, where did you boys steal that wagon?” Pointing breathlessly to our house a few yards away, we tried to explain that it was my brother's new wagon, but the officer ushered us into the back seat. Our anguished mother heard the siren and ran across three lawns to intervene. What I remember most is how it captured the powerlessness and racial isolation that defined our childhood in that neighborhood.

We never encountered drawn or discharged guns like those faced by unarmed black teenagers Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, or Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. But I was followed, stopped and questioned in local stores and on local streets frequently enough that I wondered whether my parents would have been better able to protect us from these racial brushes had they been rich, famous, or powerful—or if they had been better acquainted with the white world in which they immersed us. Perhaps I was naive to think that if they had been raised outside segregated Southern neighborhoods and schools, they would have been better able to help us navigate the life we were living. In the 1970s, I imagined that the privileged children of rich and famous blacks like Diana Ross, Bill Cosby or Sidney Poitier were untouched by the insults and stops that we faced.

Even though the idea wasn't fully formed, I somehow assumed that privilege would insulate a person from discrimination. This was years before I would learn of the research by Peggy McIntosh, the Wellesley College professor who coined the phrase "white male privilege," to describe the inherent advantages one group in our society has over others in terms of freedom from discriminatory stops, profiling and arrests. As a teenager, I didn't have such a sophisticated view, other than to wish I were privileged enough to escape the bias I encountered.

And that was the goal we had in mind as my wife and I raised our kids. We both had careers in white firms that represented the best in law, banking and consulting; we attended schools and shared dorm rooms with white friends and had strong ties to our community (including my service, for the last 12 years, as chairman of the county police board). I was certain that my Princeton and Harvard Law degrees and economic privilege not only would empower me to navigate the mostly white neighborhoods and institutions that my kids inhabited, but would provide a cocoon to protect them from the bias I had encountered growing up. My wife and I used our knowledge of white upper-class life to envelop our sons and daughter in a social armor that we felt would repel discriminatory attacks. We outfitted them in uniforms that we hoped would help them escape profiling in stores and public areas: pastel-colored, non-hooded sweatshirts; cleanly pressed, belted, non-baggy khaki pants; tightly-laced white tennis sneakers; Top-Sider shoes; conservative blazers; rep ties; closely cropped hair; and no sunglasses. Never any sunglasses.

No overzealous police officer or store owner was going to profile our child as a neighborhood shoplifter. With our son's flawless diction and deferential demeanor, no neighbor or play date parent would ever worry that he was casing their home or yard. Seeing the unwillingness of taxis to stop for him in our East Side Manhattan neighborhood, and noting how some white women clutched their purses when he walked by or entered an elevator, we came up with even more rules for our three children:

1. Never run while in the view of a police officer or security person unless it is apparent that you are jogging for exercise, because a cynical observer might think you are fleeing a crime or about to assault someone.
2. Carry a small tape recorder in the car, and when you are the driver or passenger (even in the back seat) and the vehicle has been stopped by the police, keep your hands high where they can be seen, and maintain a friendly and non-questioning demeanor.
3. Always zip your backpack firmly closed or leave it in the car or with the cashier so that you will not be suspected of shoplifting.
4. Never leave a shop without a receipt, no matter how small the purchase, so that you can't be accused unfairly of theft.
5. If going separate ways after a get-together with friends and you are using taxis, ask your white friend to hail your cab first, so that you will not be left stranded without transportation.

6. When unsure about the proper attire for a play date or party, err on the side of being more formal in your clothing selection.
7. Do not go for pleasure walks in any residential neighborhood after sundown, and never carry any dark-colored or metallic object that could be mistaken as a weapon, even a non-illuminated flashlight.
8. If you must wear a T-shirt to an outdoor play event or on a public street, it should have the name of a respected and recognizable school emblazoned on its front.
9. When entering a small store of any type, immediately make friendly eye contact with the shopkeeper or cashier, smile, and say “good morning” or “good afternoon.”

These are just a few of the humbling rules that my wife and I have enforced to keep our children safer while living integrated lives. For years, our kids—who have heard stories of officers mistakenly arresting or shooting black teens who the officers “thought” were reaching for a weapon or running toward them in a menacing way—have registered their annoyance at having to follow them. (My 12-year-old daughter saw the importance of the rules when, in late August, she and I were stopped by a county police officer who apparently was curious about a black man driving an expensive car. He later apologized.)

Not many months ago, my children and I sat in the sprawling living room of two black bankers in Rye, N.Y., who had brought together three dozen affluent African American parents and their children for a workshop on how to interact with law enforcement in their mostly white communities. Two police detectives and two criminal-court judges—all African American—provided practical suggestions on how to minimize the likelihood of the adolescents being profiled or mistakenly Tasered or shot by inexperienced security guards or police officers. Some of the parents and most of the kids sat smugly, passing around platters of vegetables and smoked salmon—while it helped to have the lessons reinforced by police officers, we had all heard it many times before.

My kids and I had it all figured out.

Or so we thought.

* * *

The boarding-school incident this summer was a turning point for us—particularly for my son and his younger siblings. Being called a nigger was, of course, a depressing moment for us all. But it was also a moment that helped bring our surroundings into clearer focus. The fact that it happened just days before the police shooting of Michael Brown increased its resonance for our family. Our teenage son no longer makes eye contact with pedestrians or drivers who pass on the street or sidewalk. He ceased visiting the school library this summer after sundown, and now refuses to visit the neighborhood library, just one block away, unless accompanied. He asks us to bear with him because, as he explains, he knows that the experience is unlikely to happen again, but

he doesn't like the uncertainty. He says he now feels both vulnerable and resentful whenever he is required to walk unaccompanied.

It also was a lesson for us to grasp that some white men may believe such acts are really no big deal. I called a dean at the boarding school, who seemed to justify the incident as something that "just happens" in a place where "town-and-gown relations" are strained, but he had little else to say. My son's school adviser never contacted me about the incident, acting with the same indifference that so many black parents have come to expect. After I reached out to them, I never heard from either man again. Like so many whites who observe our experiences, these two privileged white males treated the incident like a "one-off" that demanded no follow-up and that quickly would be forgotten.

Through no fault of their own, many white men, I think, are unaware or unappreciative of the white male privilege that they enjoy every day, which Wellesley professor McIntosh wrote about in her studies of race, gender, class and privilege. They have no idea how much they take for granted, or know of the burdens endured daily by many people in their own communities. Nor do they appreciate the lingering effects of such burdens and daily traumas. Perhaps many feel that racism is inconsequential, if not altogether dead. After all, as some of my white colleagues have pointed out cynically, how much racism can there be if the country elected a black president?

Let me say that to acknowledge that white male privilege exists does not mean that white privileged men are hostile or racist—or that all bad things that happen to black people are occurring only because of racial bigotry. But I am no better able to explain the lackadaisical response of the two white men to whom I reported the incident than I am able to explain the motives of the two white men who called my son a nigger in the first place.

And perhaps this is why it is so difficult to fairly and productively discuss the privilege (or burdens) that are enjoyed (or endured) by groups to which we don't belong. Try as I may to see things from the perspective of a white person, I can see them only from the experience that I have as a black man and had as a black boy. As we observe each other and think that we have a close understanding of what it means to be black, white, Hispanic, Asian, male, female, rich or poor, we really don't—and very often we find ourselves gazing at each other through the wrong end of the telescope. We see things that we think are there but really aren't. And the relevant subtleties linger just outside our view, eluding us.

Where Do We Go After Ferguson?

Michael Eric Dyson

When Ferguson flared up this week after a grand jury failed to indict the white police officer Darren Wilson for killing the unarmed black youth Michael Brown, two realities were illuminated: Black and white people rarely view race in the same way or agree about how to resolve racial conflicts, and black people have furious moral debates among ourselves out of white earshot.

These colliding worlds of racial perception are why many Americans view the world so differently, and why recent comments by President Obama and the former New York City mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani cut to the quick of black identity in America.

From the start, most African-Americans were convinced that Michael Brown's death wouldn't be fairly considered by Ferguson's criminal justice system. There were doubts that the prosecution and defense were really on different teams. The prosecutor, Robert McCulloch, looked as if he were coaching an intramural scrimmage with the goal of keeping Officer Wilson from being tackled by indictment.

The trove of documents released after the grand jury's decision included Officer Wilson's four-hour testimony, in which the 6-foot 4-inch, 210-pound cop said that his encounter with the 6-foot 4-inch, 292-pound teenager left him feeling like "a 5-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan." He used the impersonal pronoun "it" when he said that Michael Brown looked like a "demon" rushing him. To the police officer and to many whites, Michael Brown was the black menace writ large, the terrorizing phantom that stalks the white imagination.

These clashing perceptions underscore the physics of race, in which an observer effect operates: The instrument through which one perceives race—one's culture, one's experiences, one's fears and fantasies—alters in crucial ways what it measures.

The novelist Ann Petry vividly captured this observer effect in her 1946 novel *The Street*, in which the African-American protagonist, Lutie Johnson, remarks that racial perceptions of blacks "depended on where you sat." She explains that if "you looked at them from inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then you didn't really see what any Negro looked like," because "the Negro was never an individual" but "a threat, or an animal, or a curse."

After a black man is killed in a failed robbery, she notes that a reporter "saw a dead Negro who had attempted to hold up a store, and so he couldn't really see what the man lying on the sidewalk looked like." Instead, he saw "the picture he already had in his mind: a huge, brawny, blustering, ignorant, criminally disposed black man."

Our American culture's fearful dehumanizing of black men materialized once again when Officer Wilson saw Michael Brown as a demonic force who had to be vanquished in a hail of bullets.

* * *

It is nearly impossible to convey the fear that strikes at the heart of black Americans every time a cop car pulls up. When I was 17, my brother and I and a childhood friend were pulled over by four Detroit cops in an unmarked police vehicle. This was in the mid '70s, in the shadow of the infamous Detroit Police Department task force called Stress (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets), which was initiated after the 1967 riots. The unit lived up to its name and routinely targeted black people.

As we assumed the position against the car, I announced to one of the plainclothes officers that I was reaching into my back pocket to fish the car's registration from my wallet. He brought the butt of his gun sharply across my back and knocked me to the ground, promising, with a racial epithet, that he'd put a bullet through my head if I moved again. When I rose to my feet, cowering, showing complete deference, the officer permitted me to show the car's registration. When the cops ran the tags, they concluded what we already knew: The car wasn't stolen and we weren't thieves. They sent us on without a hint of an apology.

My recent dust-up with Mr. Giuliani on national television tapped a deep vein of racially charged perception. In a discussion on *Meet the Press* of Ferguson and its racial fallout, Mr. Giuliani steered the conversation down the path of a conservative shibboleth: that the real problem facing black communities is not brutality at the hands of white cops but brutality in the grips of black thugs. He cited the fact that 93 percent of black homicide victims are killed by black people; I argued that these murderers often go to jail, unlike the white cops who kill blacks with the backing of the government. What I didn't have time to say was that 84 percent of white homicide victims are killed

by white people, and yet no language of condemnation exists to frame a white-on-white malady that begs relief by violent policing.

This doesn't mean that black people aren't weary of death ravaging our communities. I witnessed it personally as I sat in a Detroit courtroom 25 years ago during the trial of my brother Everett for second-degree murder, and though I believe to this day that he is innocent, I watched him convicted by an all-black jury and sentenced to prison for the rest of his life.

Many whites who point to blacks killing blacks are moved less by concern for black communities than by a desire to fend off criticism of unjust white cops. They have the earnest belief that they are offering new ideas to black folk about the peril we foment in our own neighborhoods. However, the politics of respectability—the belief that good behavior and stern chiding will cure black ills and uplift black people and convince white people that we're human and worthy of respect—don't work.

President Obama is the most eloquent reminder of this: that no matter how smart, sophisticated, or upstanding one is, and no matter how much chastising black people pleases white ears, the suspicions about black identity persist. Despite his accomplishments and charisma, he is for millions the unalterable "other" of national life, the opposite of what they mean when they think of America.

Barack Obama, like Michael Brown, is changed before our eyes into a monstrous thing that lacks humanity: a monkey, a cipher, a black hole that kills light. One might expect the ultimate target of this black otherness to have sympathy for its lesser targets, who also have lesser standing and lesser protection, like the people in Ferguson, in Ohio, in New York, in Florida, and all around the country, who can't keep their unarmed children from being cut down in the street by callous cops who leave their bodies to stiffen into rigor mortis in the presence of horrified onlookers.

President Obama's clinical approach to race was cemented after the 2009 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., incident—in which the Harvard professor and the white police officer who arrested him for breaking into his own house were invited to the White House to commune over a beer—convinced him that he should talk race only when his hand was forced.

He has employed a twin strategy: the "heroic explicit," in which he deliberately and clearly assails black moral failure and poor cultural habits, and the "noble implicit," in which he avoids linking whites to social distress or pathology and speaks in the broadest terms possible, in grammar both tentative and tortured, about the problems we all confront. It's an effort that hinges on false equivalencies between black and white and the mistaken identification of effect for cause.

President Obama spoke twice in the aftermath of the Ferguson grand jury's decision. He spoke on a Monday night about America as a nation of laws and said that we must respect the jury's conclusion, even if we don't agree with it, and make progress by working together—not by throwing bottles, smashing car windows, or using anger as an excuse to vandalize property or hurt anyone.

On Tuesday, the president doubled down on his indictment of “criminal acts” and declared, “I do not have any sympathy” for those who destroy “your own communities.” While he avoided saying so, it was clear that his remarks were directed at the black people who looted and rioted in Ferguson. But their criminal activity is the effect of going unrecognized by the state for decades, a crime in itself. As for the plague of white cops who kill unarmed black youth, the facts of which are tediously and sickeningly repetitive and impose a psychological tariff on black minds, the president was vague, halting, and sincerely noncommittal.

Instead, he lauded the racial progress that he said he had witnessed “in my own life,” substituting his life for ours, and signaled again how his story of advancement was ours, suggesting, sadly, that the sum of our political fortunes in his presidency may be lesser than the parts of our persistent suffering. Even when he sidled up to the truth and nudged it gently—“these are real issues,” the president acknowledged—he slipped back into an emotional blandness that underplayed the searing divide, saying there was “an impression that folks have” about unjust policing and “there are issues in which the law too often feels as if it is being applied in discriminatory fashion.”

Whose *impression* is it, though that word hardly captures the fierce facts of the case? Who feels it? Who is the subject? Who is the recipient of the action? President Obama’s treacherous balancing act between white and black, left and right, obscures who has held the power for the longest amount of time to make things the way they are. This is something, of course, he can never admit, but which nevertheless strains his words and turns an often eloquent word artist into a faltering, fumbling linguist. President Obama said that our nation was built on the rule of law. That is true, but incomplete. His life, and his career, too, are the products of broken laws: His parents would have committed a crime in most states at the time of their interracial union, and without Martin Luther King, Jr., breaking what he deemed to be unjust laws, Mr. Obama wouldn’t be president today. He is the ultimate paradox: the product of a churning assault on the realm of power that he now represents.

No wonder he turns to his own body and story and life to narrate our bodies, our stories, and our lives. The problem is that the ordinary black person possesses neither his protections against peril nor his triumphant trajectory that will continue long after he leaves office.

More than 45 years ago, the Kerner Commission concluded that we still lived in two societies, one white, one black, separate and still unequal. President Lyndon B. Johnson convened that commission while the flames that engulfed my native Detroit in the riot of 1967 still burned. If our President and our nation don’t show the will and courage to speak the truth and remake the destinies of millions of beleaguered citizens, then we are doomed to watch the same sparks reignite, whenever and wherever injustice meets desperation.

Questions for Thinking, Writing, and Discussion for Part Three

1. According to the essay by Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis, what is a privilege? What forms or systems of privilege operate in U.S. society and how do they relate to each other?
2. The Wildman/Davis essay reports on an incident that occurred in a college class taught by a professor named Marge Shultz. Why did Professor Shultz call Mr. Rodríguez “Mr. Martínez”? Why is it important to know that earlier in the day another professor had called him “Mr. Hernández”? Is it a big deal?
3. Select several sites or institutions in which you participate and analyze how privilege operates within each of them. For example, you might choose to examine several different classroom situations in which you have found yourself, both in college and in earlier grades; you might look at privilege within your family and the families of friends or relatives; you might examine how privilege operates within a religious community to which you belong.
4. What does Allan G. Johnson mean when he refers to the “paradox of privilege”? How does this paradox help explain why it is possible to be privileged without feeling privileged?
5. Peggy McIntosh wrote her classic essay on white privilege in 1988. In it she provides a listing of some of the privileges she “enjoys” as a white woman. Have things changed since she wrote her essays? How would you modify her list if you were making up a list of privileges that white people currently enjoy? Now create other versions of your list of privileges—versions that factor in class privilege and gender privilege. How about a listing of privileges people enjoy by virtue of their sexual orientation, their age, or their physical condition? After having made up these lists, go back and discuss your answer to question 1.
6. In his essay, Tim Wise frequently uses the pronouns “we” and “our.” Analyze his use of these words and the implications of defining “we” in the way he does.
7. Peggy McIntosh, Robert Jensen, and Tim Wise all discuss the privileges they enjoy as white people in contemporary U.S. society. How did you feel

about each of these selections? Did you find any one of them more or less persuasive than the others? Why?

8. What does it mean to be a “safe kind of brown”? How does Alex Shams apply this idea to his own story about Iranian-Americans and his relationship to whiteness?
9. According to Shams’ essay, how can the term “people of color” be useful and how can it be harmful?
10. Shams’ essay discusses the politics of solidarity as achieved not when everyone is the same, but when people have an open and honest understanding of their differences, work together, and support one another. Write about a time that you experienced solidarity with others. What was successful about that experience and what challenges did you face?
11. Compare Robin DiAngelo’s story with the one that Lawrence Otis Graham tells. What are the privileges that they each enjoy? Where are they unable to access privilege? What do these two pieces teach us about the relationship between race and class in the United States?
12. How has economic privilege benefited Graham and his children? What are the limits of this privilege?
13. In her essay, DiAngelo writes about her experience of being poor and feeling like an outsider while simultaneously being aware of her white privilege. Write about a time when you had a similar experience of feeling like an outsider but still experiencing privilege. Which feelings were stronger and why?
14. DiAngelo reflects that sometimes the internal marks that she carries from growing up poor have prevented her from feeling like she can stand up for justice. Why does she feel this way? How do those internal marks affect how she relates to whiteness? What does she believe is the solution?
15. DiAngelo makes the point that viewing ourselves as individuals and not as part of a social group can make white privilege harder to see. How does this work? Can you think of any examples from your own life in which you have observed this dynamic?
16. Why does Dyson believe that the politics of respectability are not an effective strategy to counter racial discrimination? Do you agree or disagree? Draw from other readings in this book to support your argument.
17. According to Dyson, the instruments through which we perceive race—culture, experiences, fears, fantasies—inform what we see. What instruments have shaped your perceptions of race?

Part

4

Whiteness: The Power of Resistance

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Breaking the Silence

Beverly Tatum

Some people say there is too much talk about race and racism in the United States. I say that there is not enough. In recent years, news headlines have highlighted the pervasiveness of the problem. There have been race riots in Los Angeles and St. Petersburg, Florida. A thirteen-year-old Black boy was beaten into a coma by White youths who caught him riding his bicycle in their Chicago neighborhood. Anti-immigrant legislation in California has led to the public harassment of Latino citizens. Anti-Asian violence has increased dramatically. Precipitated by the damaging publicity incurred by the release of tape recordings in which Texaco officials used racial slurs to describe Black employees, Texaco agreed to pay \$176.1 million to settle a race discrimination lawsuit, the largest such settlement in history.¹ Carl Rowan, a respected Black journalist, authored a book titled *The Coming Race War in America: A Wake-Up Call* in which he warns of the growing threat of White supremacist militia groups plotting to ignite racial conflict.²

What is happening here? We need to continually break the silence about racism whenever we can.³ We need to talk about it at home, at school, in our houses of worship, in our workplaces, in our community groups. But talk does not mean idle chatter. It means meaningful, productive dialogue to raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change. But how do we start? This is the question my students ask me. “How do I engage in meaningful dialogue about racial issues? How do I get past my fear? How do I get past my anger? Am I willing to take the risk of speaking up? Can I trust that there will be others to listen and support me? Will it make a difference anyway? Is it worth the effort?”

The Paralysis of Fear

Fear is a powerful emotion, one that immobilizes, traps words in our throats, and stills our tongues. Like a deer on the highway, frozen in the panic induced by the lights of an oncoming car, when we are afraid it seems that we cannot think, we cannot speak, we cannot move.

What do we fear? Isolation from friends and family, ostracism for speaking of things that generate discomfort, rejection by those who may be offended by what we have to say, the loss of privilege or status for speaking in support of those who have been marginalized by society, physical harm caused by the irrational wrath of those who disagree with your stance? My students readily admit their fears in their journals and essays. Some White students are afraid of their own ignorance, afraid that because of their limited experience with people of color they will ask a naive question or make an offensive remark that will provoke the wrath of the people of color around them.

"Yes, there is fear," one White woman writes, "the fear of speaking is overwhelming. I do not feel, for me, that it is fear of rejection from people of my race, but anger and disdain from people of color, the ones who I am fighting for." In my response to this woman's comment, I explain that she needs to fight for herself, not for people of color. After all, she has been damaged by the cycle of racism, too, though perhaps this is less obvious. If she speaks because *she* needs to speak, perhaps then it would be less important whether the people of color are appreciative of her comments. She seems to understand my comment, but the fear remains.

Another student, a White woman in her late thirties, writes about her fears when trying to speak honestly about her understanding of racism.

Fear requires us to be honest with not only others, but with ourselves. Often this much honesty is difficult for many of us, for it would permit our insecurities and ignorances to surface, thus opening the floodgate to our vulnerabilities. This position is difficult for most of us when [we are] in the company of entrusted friends and family. I can imagine fear heightening when [we are] in the company of those we hardly know. Hence, rather than publicly admit our weaknesses, we remain silent.

These students are not alone in their fear-induced silence. Christine Sleeter, a White woman who has written extensively about multicultural education and antiracist teaching, writes:

I first noticed White silence about racism about 15 years ago, although I was not able to name it as such. I recall realizing after having shared many meals with African American friends while teaching in Seattle, that racism and race-related issues were fairly common topics of dinner-table conversation, which African Americans talked about quite openly. It struck me that I could not think of a single instance in which racism had been a topic of dinner-table conversation in White contexts. Race-related issues sometimes came up, but not *racism*.⁴

Instead, Sleeter argues, White people often speak in a kind of racial code, using communication patterns with each other that encourage a kind of White racial bonding. These communication patterns include race-related asides in conversations, strategic eye contact, jokes, and other comments that assert an “us–them” boundary. Sleeter observes,

These kinds of interactions seem to serve the purpose of defining racial lines, and inviting individuals to either declare their solidarity or mark themselves as deviant. Depending on the degree of deviance, one runs the risk of losing the other individual’s approval, friendship and company.⁵

The fear of the isolation that comes from this kind of deviance is a powerful silencer. My students, young and old, often talk about this kind of fear, experienced not only with friends but with colleagues or employers in work settings. For instance, Lynn struggled when her employer casually used racial slurs in conversation with her. It was especially troubling to Lynn because her employer’s young children were listening to their conversation. Though she was disturbed by the interaction, Lynn was afraid and then embarrassed by her own silence:

I was completely silent following her comment. I knew that I should say something, to point out that she was being completely inappropriate (especially in front of her children) and that she had really offended me. But I just sat there with a stupid forced half-smile on my face.

How could she respond to this, she asked? What would it cost her to speak? Would it mean momentary discomfort or could it really mean losing her job? And what did her silence cost her on a personal level?

Because of the White culture of silence about racism, my White students often have little experience engaging in dialogue about racial issues. They have not had much practice at overcoming their inhibitions to speak. They notice that the students of color speak about racism more frequently, and they assume they do so more easily. One White woman observed,

In our class discussion when White students were speaking, we sounded so naive and so “young” about what we were discussing. It was almost like we were struggling for the words to explain ourselves and were even speaking much slower than the students of color. The students of color, on the other hand, were extremely well aware of what to say and of what they wanted to express. It dawned on me that these students had dealt with this long before I ever thought about racism. Since last fall, racism has been a totally new concept to me, almost like I was hearing about it for the first time. For these students, however, the feelings, attitudes and terminology came so easily.

This woman is correct in her observation that most of the people of color in that classroom are more fluent in the discourse of racism, and more aware

of its personal impact on their lives than perhaps she has been. But she is wrong that their participation is easy. They are also afraid.

I am reminded of an article written by Kirsten Mullen, a Black parent who needed to speak to her child's White teachers about issues of racial insensitivity at his school. She wrote, "I was terrified the first time I brought up the subject of race at my son's school. My palms were clammy, my heart was racing, and I could not have done it without rehearsing in the bathroom mirror."⁶ She was afraid, but who would advocate for her son if she didn't? She could not afford the cost of silence.

An Asian American woman in my class writes about the difficulty of speaking:

The process of talking about this issue is not easy. We people of color can't always make it easier for White people to talk about race relations because sometimes they need to break away from that familiar and safe ground of being neutral or silent. . . . I understand that [some are] trying but sometimes they need to take bigger steps and more risks. As an Asian in America, I am always taking risks when I share my experiences of racism; however, the dominant culture expects it of me. They think I like talking about how my parents are laughed at at work or how my older sister is forced to take [cancer-causing] birth control pills because she is on welfare. Even though I am embarrassed and sometimes get too emotional about these issues, I talk about them because I want to be honest about how I feel.

She has fears, but who will tell her story if she doesn't? For many people of color, learning to break the silence is a survival issue. To remain silent would be to disconnect from her own experience, to swallow and internalize her own oppression. The cost of silence is too high.

Sometimes we fear our own anger and frustration, the chance of losing control or perhaps collapsing into despair should our words, yet again, fall on deaf ears. A Black woman writes:

One thing that I struggle with as an individual when it comes to discussions about race is the fact that I tend to give up. When I start to think, "He or she will never understand me. What is the point?" I have practically defeated myself. No human can ever fully understand the experiences and feelings of another, and I must remind myself that progress, although often slow and painful, can be made.

A very powerful example of racial dialogue between a multiracial group of men can be seen in the award-winning video *The Color of Fear*.⁷ One of the most memorable moments in the film is when Victor, an African American man, begins to shout angrily at David, a White man, who continually invalidates what Victor has said about his experiences with racism. After viewing the video in my class, several students of color wrote about how much they identified with Victor's anger and how relieved they were to see that it could

be expressed without disastrous consequences. An Asian American woman wrote:

I don't know if I'll ever see a more powerful, moving, on-the-money movie in my life! . . . Victor really said it all. He verbalized all I've ever felt or will feel so eloquently and so convincingly. When he first started speaking, he was so calm and I did not expect anything remotely close to what he exhibited. When he started shouting, my initial reaction was of discomfort. Part of that discomfort stemmed from watching him just going nuts on David. But there was something else that was embedded inside of me. I kept thinking throughout the whole movie and I finally figured it out at the end. Victor's rage and anger was mine as well. Those emotions that I had hoped to keep inside forever and ever because I didn't know if I was justified in feeling that way. I had no words or evidence, solid evidence, to prove to myself or others that I had an absolute RIGHT to scream and yell and be angry for so many things.

The anger and frustration of people of color, even when received in smaller doses, is hard for some White people to tolerate. One White woman needed to vent her own frustrations before she could listen to the frustration and anger of people of color. She wrote:

Often I feel that because I am White, my feelings are disregarded or looked down upon in racial dialogues. I feel that my efforts are unappreciated. . . . I also realize that it is these feelings which make me want to withdraw from the fight against racism altogether. . . . [However,] I acknowledge the need for White students to listen to minority students when they express anger against the system which has failed them without taking this communication as a personal attack.

Indeed, this is what one young woman of color hoped for:

When I'm participating in a cross-racial dialogue, I prefer that the people I'm interacting with understand why I react the way that I do. When I say that I want understanding, it does not mean that I'm looking for sympathy. I merely want people to know why I'm angry and not to be offended by it.

In order for there to be meaningful dialogue, fear, whether of anger or isolation, must eventually give way to risk and trust. A leap of faith must be made. It is not easy, and it requires being willing to push past one's fear. Wrote one student,

At times it feels too risky . . . but I think if people remain equally committed, it can get easier. It's a very stressful process, but I think the consequences of not exploring racial issues are ultimately far more damaging. . . .

Notes

1. S. Walsh, "Texaco settles race suit," *Washington Post* (November 16, 1996).
2. C. A. Rowan, *The coming race war in America: A wake-up call* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996).
3. In the same way, we need to break the silence about sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism and homophobia, classism, ageism, and ableism. In my experience, once we learn to break the silence about one ism, the lessons learned transfer to other isms.
4. C. Sleeter, "White racism," *Multicultural Education* (Spring 1994): 6.
5. Ibid., p. 8.
6. K. Mullen, "Subtle lessons in racism," *USA Weekend* (November 6–8, 1992): 10–11.
7. L. M. Wah (Producer/director), *The color of fear* [Video] (Oakland, CA: Stir-Fry Productions, 1994).

Confronting One's Own Racism

Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera

Most white Americans have absorbed racist attitudes from parents, friends, or the mass media. In this sense, racist views are a “normal” part of being a white American. Yet all whites can confront their racist views and propensities and seek to become egalitarian and antiracist. To understand the processes and dynamics of such change we and our students have conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with whites who have taken antiracist steps or positions. In these interviews antiracist whites often acknowledge their own antiblack racism. The paradox of white antiracists openly acknowledging their personal racism is related to another paradox: that this realistic consciousness of a racist self liberates their expression of empathy for the oppression of black people.

For her research project in a racism seminar with Joe Feagin, graduate student Holly Hanson explored the racial attitudes of whites working to overcome racism.¹ One of the white women Hanson interviewed was once tied up by black thieves who robbed a store she was in. Yet she has refused to stereotype black people in general. She explained:

I had spent many years before the incident nurturing friendships with black friends. So by the time the incident occurred, I had many black friends with whom I could talk intimately and honestly about my feelings. . . . We have to insulate ourselves with healthy relationships with people of other races to protect ourselves from the racist thought that is all around.

This woman had not come to her liberal views from a life of isolation. Rather, she and her husband have long made great efforts to develop friendships across the color line. Real friendships across the racial barrier have enabled her to withstand the daily drumbeat of racism all around her. In fighting the parochialism of white racism, antiracist whites actively seek out interaction with people in other racial groups. Most of the antiracist whites with whom we and our students have talked have cultivated close friendships with black people in a variety of personal, church, and community settings.

The paradox that it is the antiracists who are most aware of their own racism and the racism of others can be seen in an answer this same respondent gave when she was asked if she considered herself colorblind:

[I am] definitely aware of color. I think it is a superficial, comfortable response to, to denying one's own racism, and the problem of racism in society, to say that one has become colorblind. . . . The analogy that I frequently use is that, when people say, "Well, I just treat everybody the same and na-na-na," I say, If you know that a woman has been raped, you are liable to be careful, speaking to her. You are liable to be somewhat sensitive about how you approach certain things and really, when you think about it, your behavior at the end of your encounter with this woman probably is such that you should use it with everyone, you know, in a way. It is not ridiculous behavior. You are just going to be conscious of not wanting to put salt in wounds that you recognize probably are there because of that person's experience. . . . That is frequently the way I feel about interactions between blacks and whites in America. I think black people have been raped. I think they are raped, regularly, in a variety of ways.

Antiracist whites are not certain they can really understand the black experience, but many make an honest attempt. They admit that it is hard to understand the pain and anger. In another interview, a white male educator commented on the difficulty of understanding black anger:

I think, yes, it is easy to accept a certain amount of anger. . . . I'm trying to construct explanations that help me understand, but I don't presume to understand from the point of view of having experienced in the same way as certain blacks who are angry might have experienced. So in that sense, no, I don't think it is easy to understand. . . . It takes a lot of effort, and a lot of time, and a lot of self-criticism on the part of the nonblack person.

This educator considers self-criticism a crucial part of the process of understanding. It is never easy, but, as he went on to explain, without it one becomes prey to wrongheaded assumptions about what is natural: "I think people who are in positions of power who are white and who are male need to learn . . . the subtle ways in which they convey messages of inequality and unequalness to others." Being white in this society almost by definition means rarely having to think about it. Whites must exert a special effort to become deeply aware of their own and others' racism. This educator was the victim of violence at

the hands of blacks when he was younger, yet, like the woman above, he was able to process those incidents so the skin color of his assailants did not tint his larger view of the racism that afflicts U.S. society.

How do antiracists come to recognize and understand their own racism? For many a critical event or experience seems to catapult the matter of racism to the front of their minds. In an interview conducted by Hanson, a white teacher talked about what happened when she realized she gave support and attention to Latino toddlers and not to black toddlers where she once worked:

And it was like I got hit with a bucket of cold water. And I thought, "Replay that one, Susan." And I replayed it in my mind, and I started to cry. And I cried and I cried, because I realized that *I had a prejudice*. And I thought I was without it. . . . So I went back, and I picked him up, and I played with him. I don't know, I sat him on my lap, and we did these little cutey games, patty-cake or whatever. And I had to work myself into it, because it was hard to do. It wasn't just a mental decision. "O.K., now I'm not going to be prejudiced any more." I did make a very strong effort, a concerted effort, to interact equally with all the children there. But I had to do it, I had to *make myself* do it. Because not only was I aware that it wasn't easy to do, once I knew that I was acting in a way that was prejudiced, I had to work very hard to overcome that.

A single important incident had focused her analysis of her own racist practice.

We have explored these critical incidents and events in our own research on antiracist whites. For two focus-group interview sessions, we invited several whites who had participated in at least one antiracist protest event. They had marched against the Ku Klux Klan, demonstrated against apartheid and racism, or appeared before city and county commissions in support of ordinances and policies designed to further human rights. They had taken a public stand against racism. A common thread uniting the focus group participants appears at first paradoxical: At one time or another, they all had to face the fact that they were themselves racist in thought or action. Most of the focus group participants associated their internal confrontation with their own racism with a triggering event or series of events in their lives.

One young woman related that she was raised by a father who was an official in the Ku Klux Klan. Her mother's marriage to this man was terminated when she was young, but not before she had adopted many racial dogmas of her father's group. Then, while still a teenager, she became pregnant by a white boyfriend and found herself ostracized by her white friends. Ironically, only the black students at school would associate and sympathize with her. When school officials barred her from attending classes because of her pregnancy, her black friends brought their notes and homework so she could graduate. This white woman's approximating experience of being ostracized because of her pregnancy not only gave her some experience with the pain of the "other" but also information that refuted her negative learned notions about blacks. Some years later, these critical experiences led her to become an active antiracist.

The events that led another participant, also a white woman, to an awareness of her own racism occurred when, as the wife of a U.S. soldier, she was forced to live in integrated housing for the first time in her life. She found a job in a place where most of the other workers were black. As a white southerner, these were dramatically new experiences for her. She developed a close relationship with her black neighbors and coworkers and came to know their pain from racial discrimination firsthand. She and her husband came to reflect on their role in inflicting pain on African Americans in the past. As a result, she became an antiracist activist. Working in Hawaii for a time, another focus group participant, a blond southerner, found himself in a community where most people were native Hawaiians. Some of the latter stereotyped him as a typical white Californian surfer, which he was not. Suffering from this stigma, he resisted anti-Hawaiian stereotypes and tried to establish close relations with some in the local community. As he struggled, he came to the realization that his position in Hawaii had some similarities to the condition of people of color in the whitewashed world of U.S. society. Once back in the United States, this reflection played a role in triggering his antiracist activities. All of these respondents belong to the group of whites who have gone beyond empathy for and understanding of what African Americans face and taken proactive stances to confront their own internalized racism and the racist views and actions of other whites.

Taking Antiracist Action

These responses make it very clear that an egalitarian and antiracist U.S. society is possible. There are already many antiracist whites in this country. Although they are usually not organized into antiracist societies, some whites do actively work to end racism. These include the people in our focus groups discussed above. All have worked for antiracist causes or participated in antiracist protests. Whether in protest demonstrations or in the workplace or neighborhood, such actions can mean risking one's privileges or resources. One of Hanson's white respondents described an incident at a store where she once worked:

It was a simple matter of, well, I mean, it is my suspicion, that that is what happened. A black person was not hired for this job, and a white person was, and I challenged my boss about it because I was suspicious, and she said it was just schedules, it had nothing to do with that. But I noticed that in the next year she hired two black people whereas before that she had never hired anyone black before.

The willingness to risk one's job shows a strong commitment to a nonracist society. In another interview a white teacher discussed what whites should do for black coworkers who experience discrimination:

The [black] social worker at the [social] services department that was my liaison person went through a real rough time, and I was an encourager, and I think a mentor, saying, "This is something that you do

not have to just accept. You have options. Let's take a look at those options. Let's get as much information as we can." It is like, like a good friend, willing to advocate for justice, or rights, or what's best for the person.

Antiracist whites have a different view of racial discrimination and of racial change than other white Americans. If they can come to a deeper understanding of racism, it is possible for many other whites to come to a similar understanding. The experiences of one of Hanson's interviewees led him to the strong conclusion that existing government programs are inadequate for changing racism in the United States. In his view, a realistic program of education for whites could get rid of racism in one generation:

All prejudice could be removed in one generation if we had an education system that was completely united . . . to that end. Whose priority was not just . . . the increase in intellectual knowledge but the increase in spiritual knowledge. And what I mean by spiritual is not necessarily religious, but in knowledge of the true reality of human beings. And if we taught racial equality in the schools, if we taught it from the earliest age, and if we taught it in our churches, then obviously it would be removed in one generation.

One critical question is: How do we increase the number of these antiracist whites? Or, more generally, how do we go about getting rid of white racism in the United States? There are white Americans and black Americans currently working hard on these problems. For example, working with other antiracist activists, Nathan Rutstein, a white man, has set up more than one hundred local Institutes for the Healing of Racism. Rutstein utilizes a medical model in his work with community groups. He approaches racism as a white mental disease that leads to discrimination against people of color. Whites have a superiority complex covered up by denial and are afraid of exposing the deep prejudices most know are wrong. In his view whites are also victims of racism. Rutstein's approach emphasizes the oneness of all human beings. Multicultural training is not enough, for all Americans must come to see themselves as brothers and sisters. Every human being is in fact related to every other human being; each person is at least a fiftieth cousin of any other person on the globe. One major step forward in the antiracist cause is to integrate into all U.S. educational systems new courses on the oneness of all humankind.²

Notes

1. We are indebted to Holly Hanson for permission to use excerpts from several interviews she conducted (in the Northeast and the Southeast) for her important work on the racial attitudes of people working to overcome racism.

2. Nathan Rutstein, *Healing Racism in America* (Springfield, Mass.: Whitcomb Publishing, 1993), pp. 1–51, 121–129.

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How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism

Paul Kivel

What Does an Ally Do?

Acting as an ally to people of color is one of the most important things that white people can do. Ally is not an identity, it is a practice. An ally is someone who not only shows up, but one who stays around for the long term. Acting as an ally means living each day in alliance with people of color in the struggle for racial justice because we recognize that we are interdependent.

The lives of all people are intimately intertwined, no matter how invisible those connections may be. The daily benefits I enjoy are directly related to the exploitation and violence directed at people of color both in my neighbourhood and in other countries. We are all in the same boat, and racism is a huge hole in our aspiration to create a democratic, multicultural ship. I may have the benefit of being on a higher deck. People of color may literally drown before me. But ultimately, we will all go down together.¹

However, there is no simple formula, no one correct way to act as an ally because each of us is different and we have different relationships to social organizations, political processes and economic structures. Acting as an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and, working together with people of color and other white allies, decide what needs to be done.

What is a priority today may not be tomorrow. What is effective or strategic right now may not be next year. We need to be thinking with others

and noticing what is going on around us so we will know how to put our attention, energy and money toward strategic priorities within a long-term vision.

This includes listening to people of color so that we can support the actions they take, the risks they bear in defending their lives and challenging white hegemony. It includes analyzing the struggle of white people to maintain dominance and the struggle of people of color to gain equal opportunity and justice.

We don't need to believe or accept as true everything people of color say. There is no one voice in any community, much less in the complex and diverse communities of color spanning our country. We do need to listen carefully to many voices so we understand and give credence to their experience. We can then evaluate the content of what others are saying by what we know about how racism works and by our own critical thinking and progressive political analysis.

It is important to emphasize this point because often white people become paralyzed when people of color talk about racism. We are afraid to challenge what they say. We will be ineffective as allies if we give up our ability to analyze and think critically.

Listening to people of color and giving critical credence to their experience is not easy because of the training we have received. Most of us were taught that people of color are not as intelligent or as competent as white people and that it is natural that white people be in charge. Nevertheless, it is an important first step. When we hear statements about racism that make us want to react defensively, we can instead keep the following points in mind:

We have seen how racism is a pervasive part of our culture. Therefore we should always assume that racism is at least part of the picture. In light of this assumption, we should look for the *patterns* rather than treating events as isolated occurrences.

Since we know that racism is involved, we know our whiteness is also a factor. We should look for *ways we are acting from assumptions* of white power or privilege. This will help us acknowledge any fear or confusion we may feel. It will allow us to see our tendency to defend ourselves or to assume we should be in control. Then we may want to talk with other white people both to express our feelings and to get support so our tendency toward defensiveness or controlling behavior doesn't get in the way of our acting as effective allies.

People of color will always be on the front lines fighting racism because their lives are at stake. How do we act and support them effectively, both when they are in the room with us and when they are not?

* * *

It can be difficult for those of us who are white to know how to respond when discrimination occurs. In the following interaction, imagine that Roberto is a young Latino student just coming out of a job interview with a white recruiter

from a computer company. Roberto is angry, not sure what to do next. He walks down the hall and meets a white teacher who wants to help.²

Teacher: Hey, Roberto, how's it going?

Roberto: That son of a bitch! He wasn't going to give me a job. That was really messed up.

Teacher: Hold on there, don't be so angry. It was probably a mistake or something.

Roberto: There was no mistake. The racist bastard. He wants to keep me from getting a good job. Rather have us all on welfare or doing maintenance work.

Teacher: Calm down now or you'll get yourself in more trouble. Don't go digging a hole for yourself. Maybe I could help you if you weren't so angry.

Roberto: That's easy for you to say. This man was discriminating against me. White folks are all the same. They talk about equal opportunity, but it's the same old shit.

Teacher: Wait a minute. I didn't have anything to do with this. Don't blame me, I'm not responsible. If you wouldn't be so angry maybe I could help you. You probably took what he said the wrong way. Maybe you were too sensitive.

Roberto: I could tell. He was racist. That's all. (He storms off.)

The teacher is concerned and is trying to help, but his intervention is not very effective. The teacher is clearly uncomfortable with Roberto's anger. He begins to defend himself, the job recruiter and white people. He ends up feeling attacked for being white. Rather than talking about what happened, he focuses on Roberto's anger and his generalizations about white people. He threatens to get Roberto in trouble himself if Roberto doesn't calm down. As he walks away, he may be thinking "It's no wonder Roberto didn't get hired for the job" or "I tried to help but he was too angry." The teacher leaves having reaffirmed his own innocence and good intentions, withdrawn his compassion and blaming Roberto for his ineffectiveness as an ally.

You probably recognize some of the tactics. The teacher denies or minimizes the likelihood of racism, blames Roberto and eventually counterattacks, claiming to be a victim of Roberto's anger and racial generalizations.

This interaction illustrates some of the common feelings that can get in the way of intervening effectively where discrimination is occurring:

1. The feeling that we are being personally attacked. It is difficult to hear the phrases "all white people" or "you white people." We want to defend ourselves and other whites. We don't want to believe that white people could intentionally hurt others. Or we may want to say, "Not me, I'm different."

Remember these things when you feel attacked. First, this is a question of injustice. You need to focus on what happened and what you can do about it, not on your feelings of being attacked.

2. Someone who has been the victim of *injustice* is legitimately angry and may or may not express that *anger* in ways we like. Criticizing the way people express their anger deflects attention and action away from the injustice that was committed. Often, because white people are complacent about injustice that doesn't affect us directly, it takes a lot of anger and aggressive action to bring attention to a problem. If we were more proactive about identifying and intervening in situations of injustice, people would not have to be so "loud" to get our attention in the first place.
3. Part of the harm of racism is that it forces people of color to be wary and mistrustful of all white people, just as sexism forces women to mistrust all men. People of color face racism every day, often from unexpected quarters. They never know when a white friend, co-worker, teacher, police officer, doctor or passerby may discriminate, act hostile or say something offensive. They may make statements about all white people based on hurtful previous experiences. We should remind ourselves that, although we want to be trusted, trust is not the issue. We are not fighting racism so that people of color will *trust* us. Trust builds over time through our visible efforts to act as allies by fighting racism.

When people are discriminated against, they may feel unseen, stereotyped, attacked—as if a door has been slammed in their face. They may feel frustrated, helpless or angry. They are probably reminded of other similar experiences. They may want to hurt someone in return, or hide their pain or simply forget about the whole experience. Whatever the response, the experience is deeply wounding and painful. It is an act of emotional violence.

It's also an act of economic violence to be denied access to a job, housing, educational program, pay raise or promotion that one deserves. It is a practice that keeps economic resources in the hands of one group and denies them to another.

When a person is discriminated against, it is a serious event and we need to treat it seriously. It is also a common event. For instance, the US government conservatively estimates that there are nearly 1.2 million acts of race-based housing discrimination every year—12 million every decade.³ Each year African Americans alone lose more than \$120 billion in wages due to discrimination in job markets.⁴

We know that during their lifetime, every person of color will probably have to face many such discriminatory experiences in school, work, housing and community settings.

People of color do not protest discrimination lightly. They know that when they do, white people routinely deny or minimize it, blame them for causing trouble and then counterattack.

How could the teacher in the above scenario be a better ally to Roberto? First, he needs to listen much more carefully to what Roberto is saying. He should assume that Roberto is intelligent, and if he says there was racism involved then there probably was. The teacher should be aware of his own power and position, his tendency to be defensive and his desire to defend other white people or presume their innocence. It would also be worthwhile for him to consider that such occurrences are usually not isolated instances, but a pattern within an organization or institution.

Let's see how these suggestions might operate in a replay of this scene:

- Teacher:** Hey, Roberto, what's happening?
- Roberto:** That son of a bitch! He wasn't going to give me a job. That was really messed up.
- Teacher:** You're really upset. Tell me what happened.
- Roberto:** He was discriminating against me. Wasn't going to hire me cause I'm Latino. White folks are all alike. Always playing games.
- Teacher:** This is serious. Why don't you come into my office and tell me exactly what happened.
- Roberto:** Okay. This company is advertising for computer programmers, and I'm qualified for the job. But this man tells me there aren't any computer jobs, and then he tries to steer me toward a janitor job. He was a racist bastard.
- Teacher:** That's tough. I know you would be good in that job. This sounds like a case of job discrimination. Let's write down exactly what happened, and then you can decide what you want to do about it.
- Roberto:** I want to get that job.
- Teacher:** If you want to challenge it, I'll help you. Maybe there's something we can do.

This time the teacher was being a strong, supportive ally to Roberto. He did not deny or minimize what happened or defend white people. He did not try to take over, protect or save Roberto. Instead he believed him and offered his support in trying to figure out what to do about the situation.

Basic Tactics

Although every situation is different, I have compiled some general guidelines.

1. *Assume racism is everywhere, every day.* Just as economics influences everything we do, just as our gender and gender politics influences

everything we do, assume that racism is affecting whatever is going on. We assume this because it's true and because one of the privileges of being white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who is not present. Notice code words for race and the implications of the policies, patterns and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet and interact with—now notice what difference it makes.

2. *Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.* Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.
3. *Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified.*
4. *Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.* Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.
5. *Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice.*
6. *Take a stand against injustice.* Take risks. It is scary, difficult and may bring up feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, indecision or fear of making mistakes—but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.
7. *Be strategic.* Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power.
8. *Don't confuse a battle with the war.* Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.
9. *Don't call names or be personally abusive.* We usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.
10. *Support the leadership of people of color.*
11. *Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.* This is a long history. Their stories can inspire and sustain you.
12. *Don't do it alone.* You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks and work with already established groups.
13. *Talk with your children and other young people about racism.*

Notes

1. My appreciation to Victor Lewis and Hugh Vasquez for the boat metaphor which is developed more fully in Part V.

2. Adapted from Paul Kivel. *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart*, rev. ed. Hazelden/Ballantine, 1998.

3. National Fair Housing Alliance. *A Step in the Right Direction: 2010 Fair Housing Trends Report*, May 26, 2010. [online]. [cited February 16, 2011]. Nationalfairhousing.org/FairHousingResources/ReportsandResearch/tabid/3917/Default.aspx.

4. Urban Institute Study Cited by Tim Wise, *Speaking Treason Fluently*, p. 267.

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Questions for Thinking, Writing, and Discussion for Part Four

1. What kinds of reasons do the people quoted in Beverly Tatum's article give for being afraid to talk about race? Do you think these fears are broadly held in contemporary U.S. society?
2. If you are a white person, adopt the perspective of a person of color, and if you are person of color, adopt the perspective of a white person, and write an essay in which you discuss the fears and concerns that you believe such a person would bring to a discussion of race and privilege. Write your essay in the first person singular.
3. What do Feagin and Vera mean when they assert that "racist views are a 'normal' part of being a white American"? Do you agree or disagree?
4. In their selection, Feagin and Vera report on interviews with some white people who are working to overcome their racism. Select the example you find most interesting or most disturbing, and talk about why you find it interesting or disturbing.
5. Using as a model the scene between the student and teacher described in "What Does an Ally Do?", describe a racial incident in which you or a friend were involved, or one that happened on your campus, or you heard about from the news media, and write a scenario in which you explore what it would mean for a white person to serve as an ally to the person or people of color who were discriminated against.
6. Following basic tactic number 6 in Kivel's essay—Take a stand against injustice—write about a scenario in which racism is being passed on. What could you do to intervene in this situation? What parts of this intervention would you find challenging and how could you overcome these challenges?
7. In ten years, what do you think race relations will be like in the United States?
8. Identify five ways in which people on your campus could challenge or undermine the ways white privilege operates there. Do the same with

respect to the community in which you live and/or the workplace in which you work.

9. Do some independent research to learn more about a racial justice organization in your area. What types of strategies do they use to pursue social change?
10. What do you think are the most compelling interests that people of color and white people share? Can they serve as the basis for people coming together across race difference and privilege to work for a common good?

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PUBLISHERS

www.macmillanhighered.com



ISBN-13: 978-1-4292-4220-2
ISBN-10: 1-4292-4220-5

