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GETTING
REAL
ABOUT
RACE

THIRD EDITION



GETTING REAL ABOUT RACE

Third edition

To my students, current and former, whose passion and curiosity continually inspire me. And to my coeditor, whose courage, patience, and determination continually humble me.

—Stephanie M. McClure

To my precious daughter and my amazing nephews—may you inherit a world that is a little kinder and understanding toward kids that look like you. To my students over the years who have fought the good fight and decided to do the hard work of understanding and fighting against inequality. And finally, to my coeditor, Steph, for her brilliance and inspiring passion.

—Cherise A. Harris

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GETTING REAL ABOUT RACE

Edited by

Stephanie M. McClure

Georgia College

Cherise A. Harris

Connecticut College

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PREFACE

Professors teaching introductory courses in race and ethnicity or “diversity” must not only communicate the long and complicated history, psychology, and sociology of these topics in just one semester but must also repeatedly respond to the myths and misperceptions of race that students bring with them into these courses. Some of these include the idea that race and racial classification systems are based on human biology or genetic variation; that systematic disenfranchisement by race ended with the culmination of the Civil War, the civil rights movement, or the election of the nation’s first Black president; or that evidence for the persistence of racial discrimination is difficult to establish or does not exist. In teaching these topics semester after semester, it can become difficult for professors to summon the patience and empathy needed to engage students in early stages of critical awareness, particularly given how often we hear the same misperceptions. Furthermore, for instructors who may be wary of broaching these questions and discussing them in the classroom, a text that places the latest research at their fingertips can lead to essential learning in an area of society too often fraught with controversy and silence.

Drawing from our experience of teaching race for over 25 years, we believe professors will find it useful to have an engaging text that comprehensively and succinctly addresses the most common misconceptions about race held by students (and by many in the United States, in general). In this book, we have put together a collection of short essays that draw on the latest sociological research on these topics. It is a “one-stop-shopping” reader on the racial topics most often pondered by students and derived from their interests, questions, and concerns. Many scholars write on these topics in various places (e.g., journal articles, books, readers), but what is often lacking is a systematic deconstruction of specific, widely shared myths believed by students. Moreover, with other

readers, the professor is left to pull out the key pieces of information in each reading, provide the additional supporting information to debunk a particular myth, and create consistency in a format that is understandable to students. The concise and topic-specific, short-essay format we use here aims to facilitate quicker movement from acknowledging misperceptions about race to examining and discussing the sociological evidence. Each of our contributors has also provided excellent follow-up discussion questions for in-class work and suggested out-of-class activities that can help students apply their new knowledge to their everyday lives.

What we saw as necessary, and what drove us to put this collection together, is the work of “translation.” The information contained in these essays is available in many other places, and given our space constraints, we point to those outside sources at the end of each essay. What we saw happen in our own courses was that students often had difficulty connecting the primary text readings to the specific kinds of misinformation and misunderstanding they brought with them. We have tried to build a reader that speaks both languages—the language of commonly held myths and the language of social science—so that the two are together in one book. Our contributors are those who have written books and articles on these topics or who have been “in the trenches” teaching these topics on a regular basis. As scholars who consistently cover these issues in the classroom and in their scholarship, they are well versed in the latest scholarly literature on controversial racial topics such as these.

The primary target audience for this text is lower-level or introductory race and ethnicity or diversity courses, especially those in the core or general education curriculum. Courses of this kind are taught every semester in colleges and universities across the country; class sizes are usually between 30 and 60 students. Other courses where this text might be useful include education courses, social psychology of race or racism courses, introduction to higher education courses, and ethnic studies courses.

Our hope is that this reader makes the work of translation less difficult for the many excellent instructors all across the country engaging these important topics in their classes every semester.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Fox, H. (2009). *“When race breaks out”: Conversations about race and racism in college classrooms*. Peter Lang.

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Putting together a new edition of an edited volume is no small task and requires the assistance of many. This is especially the case if you attempt to do so in the middle of a historic election and a global pandemic. As we were deciding on which topics would be covered for the first edition of this book, we sought the advice of treasured colleagues and friends who gave us the benefit of their many years of experience in the classroom. We would like to thank Nikki Khanna, Keisha Edwards Tassie, Michelle Petrie, Ronald J. O. Flores, Afshan Jafar, Michallene McDaniel, Kelly Manley, Victoria Bruce, Michael Ramirez, and E. M. “Woody” Beck for their input early on, their support during the early stages of our project, and the advice and wisdom they offered along the way which sustains us even into this third edition. Also, Stephanie would like to thank Jeff Turner for his ongoing patience and willingness to always do the next thing, no matter how tedious; nothing good that I have would be possible without you. Also, Sara Doude, Stacey Milner, and Erin Weston offered support at key moments and I stay thankful for your ongoing wisdom, friendship and support. Cherise would like to thank Jennifer Domino Rudolph, Andrea Baldwin, and Ayesha Abdullah for their unwavering support of all her professional endeavors and for keeping her relatively sane in the midst of some very difficult years. She’d also like to thank the amazing Laura Todorov who keeps things at work running like a well-oiled machine so that she has some bandwidth left to write and edit. Finally, Cherise would like to thank her beautiful daughter who had to homeschool and be quarantined during a pandemic with an exhausted and cranky mom while she worked four jobs and completed two edited volumes; these last couple of years have nearly broken us, but thank you for hanging in with me, Bug. Together, we thank Jeff Lasser, Tiara Beatty, Colleen Brennan, Rebecca Lee, and the rest of the team at SAGE who worked so hard to get this edition across the finish line. Thanks go also to the reviewers for the previous editions of this book.

This project is the product of teaching these topics to thousands of students in race and ethnicity courses over many years. In that time, we have witnessed and moderated many challenging discussions—discussions that remind us just how much there is left to know in this area and how important it is that instructors continue to do this difficult work, while having the tools to do so. We thank all the students we have had over the years, as it is their questions and insights that fueled this anthology.

Finally, we would like to express our continuing appreciation and gratitude to the contributing authors for lending us their expertise and for writing essays that were better than we could have even hoped for when we first envisioned this project. The fact that you did it as a pandemic and the rest of the social world raged around you speaks volumes about your dedication to students and to this anthology. We are honored and humbled to have you as colleagues and are beyond grateful for all you did to make this third edition come to life during such a challenging time.

PART I LAYING THE FOUNDATION

ESSAY 1 “TALKING ABOUT RACE JUST MAKES EVERYONE UNCOMFORTABLE” : WHY WE NEED TO DISCUSS RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

Cherise A. Harris *Connecticut College*
Stephanie M. McClure *Georgia College*

In spite of our hesitance to seriously discuss them, racial myths permeate our social world. They are frequently present in the mass media and public discourse, as well as in our everyday conversations with each other. Perhaps in your dorm rooms, dining halls, workplaces, or on social media, you have heard variations on the following statements:

- We elected a Black president twice, which means racism doesn't exist anymore.
- We need to look out for “real Americans” first, not immigrants.
- Native American/Indian, Asian/Oriental, Latino/Hispanic—why does it matter what we call them?
- Asian Americans are doing very well. If other racial groups had similar values, they would do well also.
- I know a minority who got worse scores than me and got into a better college!
- When people come here, they should learn the language.
- Taking down Confederate statues just erases history.

These kinds of statements reflect a great deal of the conventional wisdom around race. We define *conventional wisdom* as the received body of knowledge informally shared by a group or society that is often unstated, internally inconsistent, and resistant to change. This conventional wisdom is full of racial myths and misunderstandings. In this reader, we look at common racial and ethnic myths that we and many sociology professors and race scholars have heard from students in race courses. In this essay, we will give you some of the tools necessary to use this reader and introduce some key ideas and questions to help you navigate discussions about race and ethnicity both inside and outside the classroom.

Early in our schooling, we learn a simplified history of the founding of the United States that ignores the significant levels of racial conflict and inequality that have existed. For instance, we are taught that the United States was founded on ideals of freedom and equality for all; this narrative ignores the many groups who were excluded from that freedom and equality—namely, Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC). As Blauner (2001) reminds us, “along with settlers and immigrants there have always been conquered Indians and black slaves, and later defeated Mexicans—that is, colonial subjects—on the national soil. Such a reminder is not pleasant to a society that represses those aspects of its history that do not fit the collective self-image of a democracy of all men” (p. 46). We also tend to think that racial or ethnic strife happened sometime *after* that idealized founding. However, as sociologist Joe Feagin (2020) notes in his book *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, “racial oppression was not added later on in the development of this society, but was the foundation of the original colonial and U.S. social systems, and it still remains as a U.S. foundation” (pp. 2–3). Yet there is a tendency in U.S. society to gloss over this history or in other ways minimize the import of race and ethnicity.

When President Barack Obama was elected in 2008, we began to hear that perhaps we had moved beyond race and that we were “post-racial,” despite much evidence to the contrary. To be sure, the election of the nation’s first Black president signaled a significant shift in the tenor of race relations in the United States, but not always for the positive. It is clear in the years since 2008, that the election of President Obama was something of a miner’s canary, signaling that perhaps we hadn’t come as far on the issue of race as we would like to think. Unique occurrences during his presidency, such as the “birtherism” movement, which many mark as the beginning of former President Donald Trump’s political career, or his being called a liar by a congressman during a televised congressional address, suggested early on that we were far from post-racial. The reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in modern political discourse and the power of the White nationalist movement in the form of the “alt-right” (including groups like the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo Boys/Bois) in the United States (and abroad), culminating in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, reaffirm evidence that a “post-racial” diagnosis was premature.

The discourse around post-racialism and an emphasis on color blindness are what Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have referred to as *racial projects*. They are “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56). U.S. history is replete with racial projects that have resulted in negative outcomes for people of color. The defining of Native Americans as *savages* that coincided with the violent removal of groups from their land; the current dehumanizing construct of Latinx people (and Mexican Americans, specifically) as “illegal immigrants,” thus prompting calls for stringent legislation and policy and even the caging of children; and the branding of Black women as *welfare queens* undeserving of public assistance are all examples of racial projects and policies that have disenfranchised BIPOC groups. More recently, we have seen the racialization of Muslims as a racial project designed to mark Muslims as threatening

(see Bayoumi in this volume); decades of this framing led to Trump's "Muslim Ban" where shortly after he took office, people from countries with large numbers of Muslim people weren't allowed to travel to the United States. As sociologist Ted Thornhill explains in greater detail in his essay, the post-racial/color-blind discourse also seems to be a racial project designed to convince people in the United States that thinking or talking about the reality of race as it plays out in their day-to-day lives is itself a problem and that we can solve these problems just by pretending they don't exist.

That is, although empirical information about unequal outcomes in education, the criminal justice system, health, and the labor market clearly indicates how our lives are affected by race and ethnicity, when people even mention these topics, they are often subject to silencing and even ridicule. You may have heard the statement, "Why can't people just stop talking about race? If they stopped talking about it, it would go away!" Perhaps you've even said it yourself. As difficult as it is to talk about, our ability to move toward greater social justice is severely limited by the silencing around race. Moreover, as Thornhill explains in his essay in this book, "differences in skin color are not the problem; racism, racial discrimination, White racial privilege, and racial inequality are." Silence only begets further misunderstanding and inhibits progress.

To get the discussion started, let's talk about the role race plays in the college experience and why you might be hearing more about race than you have at other points in your life.

THE IMPACT OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE ON RACIAL THINKING AND EXPERIENCES

As Stephanie McClure (one of the editors of this volume) points out in her essay with Kaílah Jeffries on campus organizations, the college experience has the potential to bring about a great deal of intellectual and personal growth and is an opportunity for students to

obtain a degree while also learning more about who they are as individuals and who they would like to become (see also Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Sociologist Mary C. Waters (2013) writes that the college experience also often puts race in stark relief, where students find themselves thinking about race more than they did when they were younger:

Sociologists and psychologists note that at the time people leave home and begin to live independently from their parents . . . they report a heightened sense of racial and ethnic identity as they sort through how much of their beliefs and behaviors are idiosyncratic to their families and how much are shared with other people. It is not until one comes into close contact with many people who are different from oneself that individuals realize the ways in which their backgrounds may influence their individual personality. (p. 212; see also Aries, 2008; Tatum, 2017)

The effect of this experience may be even greater if a student has had very limited previous exposure to people of different races or ethnicities, which is often the case given the segregation that happens in our nation's schools (Orfield et al., 2016). Moreover, as Waters (2013) argues, prior to the college experience, many White students' relationship to their ethnicity is mostly symbolic, meaning that it is a voluntary relationship that is often enjoyable and expressed only intermittently (see also Gans, 1979). For instance, they may celebrate their distant Irish heritage on St. Patrick's Day, but otherwise rarely acknowledge it. Thus, their relationship to their race or ethnicity is fairly tenuous.

But "for all of the ways in which ethnicity [and race] does not matter for White Americans, it does matter for non-Whites" (Waters, 2013, p. 210). For students of color, and particularly those at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), race and ethnicity play a key role in their

college experience. For example, in Elizabeth Aries's (2008, p. 36) study of race and class at an elite college, she found that race was something that almost every Black student in the study had thought about before arriving, while only half of the White students in the study had (see also Tatum, 2017). In addition, many of the White students in her study seemed unaware of the privileges they possessed as a result of their race. One of those privileges is that college campuses are essentially built around White students' interests and needs; the food served in the dining halls, the membership and leadership of student organizations, the music played in dorm rooms and at campus parties, and even the course offerings at the college frequently center on the desires and interests of White students (see also Feagin & Sikes, 1995). In other words, the overall culture of the institution frequently reflects the things that White people value. However, because Whiteness and White privilege is often made invisible (DiAngelo, 2016; McIntosh, 2013; Rothenberg, 2012), it is difficult for some White students to see.

Meanwhile, it is within this context that BIPOC students must function. They may have grown up in cultures with different music, foods, and languages, for example, or have different life histories, experiences, and concerns that they find difficult to have validated in the context of a White-dominated institution. Thus, it is challenging for these students to enjoy the full college experience. As Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) writes, they also frequently find themselves the target of racial prejudice, discrimination, and isolation on campus and in the classroom:

Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the "Black perspective" in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors, the insult of racist jokes circulated through campus e-mail, or the injury

inflicted by racial epithets (and sometimes beer bottles) hurled from a passing car, Black students [and other students of color] on predominantly White campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity. (p. 168; see also Feagin, 2020; Feagin & Sikes, 1994)

The continued occurrence of racist theme parties on college campuses, including ghetto themes, “illegals” themes, and students in Blackface, bear out the nature of this hostility (Fausset & Robertson, 2019). For example, in 2012, a White fraternity at a prestigious university allegedly held an Asian-themed party, complete with conical hats, geisha outfits, and misspellings on the invitation designed to convey an Asian accent (Quan, 2013; see also Kingkade, 2013; Wade, 2015).

As a result of these hostilities, Black, Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Native American students may find solace in hanging out with other students who belong to their racial or ethnic group. They may even join a racial or ethnic affinity group such as an Asian Student Union, a MeChA group (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán) representing Chicanx students, or a Black Greek-letter organization (BGLO) as a way of feeling safe and valued while also feeling connected to the wider campus community. As McClure and Jeffries discuss, this process is known as *social integration* and is not only necessary for identity development but also plays a key role in successful college completion. Yet when White students enter a college campus and see racial affinity groups, they wonder why such things exist, because their race or ethnicity has never been very important in their lives. They may even feel a sense of being left out when they see BIPOC students gathering together (Aries, 2008) or in organizations built around their interests. This is one of the many ways the college experience highlights the salience of race.

Race is also highlighted in college classrooms in a way that it often isn't in high school classrooms. For example, college is frequently

the first time students are exposed to a history of the United States that analyzes race and ethnicity in a critical way. This is particularly the case now as local school districts are passing legislation that restricts nearly any mention of race/ethnicity, diversity, equity, or inclusion. As Feagin (2020) says, “Powerful whites and their acolytes have long tried to sanitize the country’s collective racial memories and to downplay or eliminate truthful understandings of our extremely racist history” (p. 28). For example, through the lens of White supremacy, the story of contact between Native Americans and European settlers is often told (and represented in films such as Disney’s *Pocahontas*) as two communities who struggled to respect each other’s differences, rather than as a story of violent conflict and ultimate domination, colonization, and genocide on the part of White settlers. In another example, we are taught that true Black oppression ended with enslavement or with the end of Jim Crow segregation, without looking at the legacy of systemic oppression and the destruction both of these systems left in their wake. In many cases, the college classroom is the first opportunity an individual has to seriously consider the true implications of race and ethnicity, as well as the United States’ complicated and painful racial history. This can be a jarring and difficult experience.

Nonetheless, understanding the legacies of our racial history is a key emphasis of this book, for in understanding the history we can disprove many common racial myths and move toward greater social justice. For instance, in her essay, race scholar Paula Ioannide disproves the commonly held myth that the United States is a meritocracy where anyone who works hard enough can get ahead. As Ioannide explains, Blacks and Whites with similar incomes, work histories, and family structures have “radically different relationships to wealth and inheritance,” which is largely a function of Black people’s difficulty in accumulating wealth under restrictive social structures such as enslavement, Jim Crow, and FHA redlining. Thus, “hard work” isn’t enough to overcome disparities that began long ago. The history of Jim Crow is also connected to persistent educational segregation and inequality, as discussed by Hersheda

Patel, Emily Meanwell, and Stephanie McClure in this volume. Knowledge of these historical racial inequities in the U.S. educational system is also necessary for understanding questions of affirmative action in higher education, as you'll read in the essay by OiYan Poon, Nikki Ka-healani Chun, Joanne Song Engler, and Douglas H. Lee and in the labor market, a topic analyzed by Wendy Leo Moore.

Legacies of oppression also affect individual attitudes and interpersonal interactions. For example, when Black men are perceived as inherently criminal, every Black man becomes a suspect, as Sara Buck Doude and Vanessa Rodriguez explain in their essay on bias in perceptions of crime and criminals. Stereotypical thinking and what social psychologists refer to as "ultimate attribution error" contribute to how the same behaviors are perceived very differently depending on the race and ethnicity of the actor, and how that contributes to often deadly interactions individuals have with police, a topic examined by Rashawn Ray and Jasmón Bailey. Legacies of racial oppression don't just impact contemporary realities in the United States, as Nikki Khanna (2020), author of *Whiter: Asian American Women on Skin Color and Colorism*, discusses in her essay on global anti-Blackness. Khanna demonstrates how pervasive and widespread attitudes of White supremacy impact the interactions of individuals and the actions of governments all over the world. In all these ways, legacies of racial struggles resonate decades and even centuries later.

When White students are first exposed to the history of White oppression, some feel guilty or ashamed that the racial group to which they belong has been historically responsible for colonization, domination, and global hegemony. They sometimes become anxious to present themselves as "one of the good ones" and may even say things like, "I'm not racist! Some of my best friends are [Black, Asian, Latinx, Native American, etc.]." In reviewing the evidence from prominent sociologists such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Joe Feagin, Cherise Harris (coeditor of this volume) points out that often when people claim to have friends of other racial or ethnic

backgrounds, their “friendships” lack depth. They may not even know their “friend’s” name, or the friendship disintegrates when the activity in which they have participated is over. They may also still harbor racist ideas despite their supposed friendship. While the friends defense is often an attempt by well-meaning Whites to present themselves as racial allies, as Harris points out, being an ally (or accomplice) is a far more complicated process that, among other things, involves taking proactive steps to confront one’s own racism and the racist views and actions of other Whites. Through clearer understandings of our racial history and the nature of our racial and ethnic dynamics and interactions, we have a far better chance of moving toward a society with greater social justice. That is one of several goals of this book.

OUR JOB AND YOUR JOB

Given the United States’ varied, complicated, and difficult racial history, it is no great surprise that race is a challenging sociological topic. This is the case for three important reasons: (1) A good deal of our information about race and ethnicity includes conventional (or “folk”) wisdom that is frequently incorrect; (2) much of that conventional wisdom has been handed down to us by agents of socialization (e.g., parents, extended family, peers, the church, communities, and media) whose opinions tend to weigh heavily on us; and (3) there is an overall culture of silence around race that permeates the United States (see Tatum, 2017), thus prompting little critical analysis of that conventional wisdom. None of these should be underestimated in terms of their overall impact; it is problematic that conventional wisdom tends to reflect a sanitized racial history where our ugliest chapters are reimagined or deleted altogether (Feagin, 2020) yet repeated over and over again as truth in the media and in our everyday conversations. That the conventional wisdom is repeated by our agents of socialization is problematic because our tendency is to uncritically accept what they say in their role as significant others to whom we are closest and who have

taught us many other important and meaningful life lessons. It is from them that we get many important cues about race and ethnicity. For example, perhaps there were points in your life when a parent, teacher, or friend suggested it was rude to mention race, let alone discuss it as a serious topic. The cue you might have gotten then is to silence any discussion about race. At other times, perhaps you received messages that minimized or dismissed its significance. If you are from a BIPOC group, the cue you might have gotten is not to mention race or racism for fear that you would be accused of being “angry” or “playing the race card”; perhaps worse, you remain silent because you fear that no one will care about your experience. For all of the previously mentioned reasons, both White and BIPOC Americans remain silent on racial issues, and some are loathe to acknowledge its very existence. This is consistent with contemporary color-blind rhetoric, which leads to a dysfunctional national discourse on race.

The task of this volume is to open up critical discussions about racial topics and debunk many of the commonly held myths that college students often bring with them to race courses. Debunking involves unmasking and deconstructing some of our most commonly held notions and beliefs. As Peter Berger (1963) writes in *Invitation to Sociology*,

The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which [people] cloak their actions with each other. (p. 38)

A central premise of this reader is that debunking myths with accurate information and evidence can be an antidote to racism and racial prejudices. This is not an easy task, however, Liz Grauerholz (2007), former editor of the journal *Teaching Sociology*, states, “All

information that students learn is filtered through their prior understandings of the world and these preconceptions can present major barriers to gaining new knowledge about the social world” (p. 15).

To be clear, mere exposure to the information isn’t sufficient. For good information to change attitudes, there must be a willingness to deeply consider new information and an openness to change. In *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley (2001) explain,

We bring lots of personal baggage to every decision we make—experiences, dreams, values, training, and cultural habits. If you are to grow, however, you need to recognize these feelings, and, as much as you are able, put them on the shelf for a bit. (p. 9)

Barriers to change exist for individuals in terms of their own ego and sense of identity, as well as their sense of the state of justice and fairness in the world. Indeed, we often perceive that we are being personally attacked when someone presents a position opposite to our own. The danger here is that “being emotionally involved in an issue prior to any active thought about it [means] that you may fail to consider potential good reasons for other positions—reasons that might be sufficient to change your mind on the issue if you would only listen to them” (Browne & Keeley, 2001, p. 9). Instead, part of what you will need to do when considering the essays in this volume is engage your critical thinking skills. Critical thinking involves, among other things, identifying assumptions and value conflicts, evaluating evidence, assessing logic, identifying significant omitted information, coming up with alternative positions and ideas, and developing a reasonable conclusion (Browne & Keeley, 2001). It is through this process that many of our conventional notions about race are debunked.

Early in this volume, we debunk perhaps one of the most commonly held myths about race: that it is a biological entity that is fixed and unchangeable and that can even explain why, for instance, Black folks excel at particular sports. As Daniel Buffington explains, citing scientific evidence where genotype is concerned, human beings are 99.9% identical when looking at nucleotide pairs, one of the building blocks of DNA. Indeed, genetic research suggests great similarity across racial and ethnic groups. When looking at this and other scientific research, Buffington (like most social scientists) concludes that race is mostly a social construct, where “the assignment of social importance to physical features occurred through social relations—such as migration and conquest, competition for scarce resources, and political challenges against the state.” This is a key claim of this volume: *Race is a social construct*. Because it is a social construct, the explanations for racial dynamics are located in the social as well. Thus, the overrepresentation of Black Americans in certain sports, such as basketball, can be more directly attributed to social factors, such as ampler opportunity in those sports (e.g., access to basketball courts in neighborhoods and schools), coupled with limited opportunities in the occupational structure of the United States (e.g., limited employment opportunities, particularly for Blacks located in neighborhoods with underfunded and underresourced schools).

The essays in this volume similarly reflect critical perspectives on commonly held racial myths. As you read each essay, in addition to the questions raised by the author, consider the following questions: Where or from whom have you heard this myth? Do you believe it yourself? Why or why not? What evidence have you heard in support of this kind of conventional wisdom? How is the myth debunked by the author of the essay? What other information do you think would be useful for considering the questions raised in the essay, and where could you locate this information? Finally, ask yourself, why is this myth so often perpetuated? In other words, whose purposes are served by keeping this myth alive, and who is ultimately hurt by it? By considering these questions, you are deciding to make the effort

to understand race and ethnicity in a critical fashion, as opposed to blindly accepting the multitude of racial/ethnic myths that dominate U.S. society.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The essays in this volume share several key assumptions:

1. **History matters.** What are the historical events that have led to the racialized outcomes that the author(s) is(are) discussing? To what extent have these events been historicized through a lens of White supremacy? How does that affect how we perceive present-day racial/ethnic outcomes?
2. **Context matters.** Where and how does this social phenomenon take place? In which social spaces? How does it manifest on the (1) macro-level of social institutions (e.g., education, politics, the legal system, etc.), (2) micro-level of social interactions, and/or (3) meso-level of groups and organizations? How do our understandings of race and ethnicity intersect with issues of gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, religion, and other categories of difference?
3. **Dialogue matters.** In order to have constructive dialogue on race and ethnicity, we need critically informed understandings. In other words, we must strive to disabuse ourselves of racial misinformation, so that we can have more constructive dialogue around the dynamics of race and ethnicity and how they manifest in everyday life.

Regarding the last point, as students of U.S. racial history and racial dynamics, you have the opportunity to change the nature of the dialogue around race. That requires not only a comprehensive understanding of the context in which we live, but also the courage, honesty, and good information needed to dispel conventional racial wisdom.

Some of you may have been exposed to the information in this book already and may have done the work necessary to modify your ideas and beliefs to fit this reality. As such, it may be difficult to watch your classmates and peers encounter information about race for the first time and not become frustrated and angry. Our hope is that having so much of the information needed to debunk some of the most common myths about race and ethnicity in the United States in one place will be useful to you as you engage your classmates and peers in important conversation.

Finally, there are several essays in the book that speak to specific issues related to language (Koch, Harkness) or, in the context of the myth, address choices about language (Tatum). In general, we have chosen to use the term *BIPOC*, which refers to Black, Indigenous and people of color over the phrase *people of color* as we agree with those who suggest it helps to address the issue of anti-Blackness and the invisibility of Indigenous groups (Grady 2020). Relatedly, we chose the term *Indigenous* over *Native*, and where possible, have replaced the use of the generic term *American* to refer to people from the United States specifically. We have also chosen to use the term *Latinx*, given the inclusivity it provides, although we are aware this is far from a settled issue (de Onís, 2017). In addition, we capitalize both Black and White throughout, as is consistent with the APA style guide used by the publisher. While we understand the recent decision of the Associated Press (2020) to no longer capitalize White, we believe it is important to draw attention to the issue of Whites as a racial group with a history that ought to be subject to critical scrutiny (Nguyễn & Pendleton, 2020).

Not all of these preferences are consistent throughout the text, however. Some of those inconsistencies have to do with original source material, or are specific to the content addressed in the essay, or are because the contributing authors had a different preference. As we have discussed, issues of race are intimately interconnected with issues of power, privilege, and inequality. Language reflects these issues and is always evolving to reflect new

knowledge about the limits of our ideas and our language (Collins, 2013). When in doubt, we believe it is best to defer to the stated preferences of people to whom the language applies and those preferences, just like the people, are not homogenous. It will not always be possible to get it exactly right. Instead, it is necessary to think critically, to listen humbly, and to stay open to change.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Prior to beginning college, how often had you thought about your race or ethnicity? When you did think about it, which events or occurrences prompted it?
2. How would you characterize what you learned early on about the racial and ethnic history of the United States? For example, what is the conventional wisdom you have heard surrounding White, Black, Latinx, Asian American, Indigenous, and Middle Eastern people?
3. As you begin this course, what are some of your questions surrounding race and ethnicity? If they are not covered in this book, write them down and bring them to class to discuss with

your classmates. What can the essays in this book tell you about the answer(s) to your question(s)?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

Examining Your Attitudes Toward Race and Ethnicity: A Pretest and Posttest

Directions: At the beginning of the term, answer the following questionnaire. It is important to answer the questions as HONESTLY as possible, no matter how you think your answers may be perceived. After you have completed the course, look at your answers again to see if any have changed or if you think of these questions in a different way. What do you now know about race and ethnicity that you didn't know before?

1. When you were a child, did your parents talk about race? What messages about race did you receive from them? What messages did you receive from other relatives or agents of socialization (e.g., media, teachers, peers, community, religious figures)? What would you teach your children about race?
2. Do you think race is mostly about biology? Why or why not?
3. How do you define *racism*? Can anyone be racist?
4. Do you think Islamophobia should be considered a type of racism? Why or why not?
5. How have your views about race changed in the past 10 years? How have they changed in the past 5 years? Have they changed at all since you began college? In what ways and why?
6. What comes to mind when you think of #BlackLivesMatter?
7. Do you think it's time for people to stop talking about racism? Explain your answer.
8. Do you believe it is okay to make judgments about people based on how they dress, like whether they are wearing a hoodie,

hijab, or turban? Can making judgments based on people's appearance ever be justified?

9. Consider our use of cultural items typically associated with groups of color, such as hip-hop music and Native American or (ostensibly) Asian symbols. Where is the line between respecting or celebrating these cultures and appropriating or exploiting them?
10. How do you explain the large numbers of Black men in prison? Is this the result of bad choices or something else?
11. Do you think racism is something that is still experienced by Black Americans who have achieved financial success? Why or why not?
12. Do you believe that all parents should do whatever they can to provide the best possible outcomes for their kids, even if it means other kids suffer?
13. What do you think accounts for health disparities across different racial and ethnic groups?
14. Do Asian Americans value education more than other racial or ethnic groups? Is this a positive stereotype, or is it harmful to Asian Americans or other racial and ethnic groups in some way?
15. Why do you think people who come to this country don't immediately learn English?
16. U.S. culture subscribes heavily to the idea that with hard work, anyone can succeed. Do you think this is true? What should we glean from the successes of people like Barack Obama, Kobe Bryant (i.e., "the Mamba mentality"), or Oprah Winfrey? When figures like this promote meritocratic ideals, do you think that makes the U.S. public cling harder to this notion? Why or why not?
17. Do you think that affirmative action is a good way to deal with racial or ethnic disparities in education or employment? Why or why not?
18. Consider the current debates over citizenship. What things might shape our understanding of who is and isn't a citizen or who should or shouldn't be a citizen? What do you believe is the

right response to individuals who are seeking access to this country?

19. Do you believe people are overly concerned with how we refer to racial or ethnic groups? Does it matter whether or not we use *African American* or *Black*, *Indian* or *Native American*, *Hispanic* or *Latino/a* or *Latinx*?
20. Is it ever okay for non-Black groups to use the N-word? Why or why not?
21. Consider your campus community. Do students of different racial groups socialize with one another? Do you witness deep friendships across racial and ethnic lines? Why or why not?
22. Is it possible to be friends with, date, or marry someone of a different race and still be racist? Explain your answer.
23. What other questions would you add to this list?

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ESSAY 2 “WHAT IS RACISM ANYWAY?” : UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF RACISM AND PREJUDICE

Beverly Daniel Tatum *Spelman College*

Early in my teaching career, a White student I knew asked me what I would be teaching the following semester. I mentioned that I would be teaching a course on racism. She replied, with some surprise in her voice, “Oh, is there still racism?” I assured her that indeed there was and suggested that she sign up for my course. Years later, after exhaustive media coverage of events such as the Trayvon Martin shooting, the Ferguson unrest and the Department of Justice report on the Ferguson Police Department, the Charleston church massacre, the Walter Scott trial, the appeal to racial prejudices in electoral politics, and the bitter debates about affirmative action and immigration reform, it seems hard to imagine that anyone would still be unaware of the reality of racism in our society. But in fact, in almost every audience I address, there is someone who suggests that racism is a thing of the past. There is always someone who hasn’t noticed the stereotypical images of people of color in the media, who hasn’t observed the housing discrimination in their community, who hasn’t read the newspaper articles about documented racial bias in lending practices among well-known banks, who isn’t aware of the racial tracking pattern at the local school, who hasn’t seen the reports of rising incidents of racially motivated hate crimes in the United States—in short, someone who hasn’t been paying attention to issues of race. But if you are paying attention, the legacy of racism is not hard to see, and we are all affected by it.

The impact of racism begins early. Even in our preschool years, we are exposed to misinformation about people different from ourselves. Many of us grew up in neighborhoods where we had limited

opportunities to interact with people different from our own families. When I ask my audiences, “How many of you grew up in neighborhoods where most of the people were from the same racial group as your own?” almost every hand goes up. There is still a great deal of social segregation in our communities. Consequently, most of the early information we receive about “others”—people racially, religiously, or socioeconomically different from ourselves—does not come as the result of firsthand experience. The secondhand information we do receive has often been distorted, shaped by cultural stereotypes, and left incomplete.

From *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly D. Tatum, copyright © 1997. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Some examples will highlight this process. When I was teaching at Mount Holyoke College, one of my students conducted a research project investigating preschoolers’ conceptions of Native Americans (O’Toole, 1990). Using children at a local day-care center as her participants, she asked these 3- and 4-year-olds to draw a picture of a Native American. Most children were stumped by her request. They didn’t know what a Native American was. But when she rephrased the question and asked them to draw a picture of an Indian, they readily complied. Almost every picture included one central feature: feathers. In fact, many of them also included a weapon—a knife or tomahawk—and depicted the person in violent or aggressive terms. Though this group of children, almost all of whom were White, did not live near a large Native population and probably had had little if any personal interaction with American Indians, they all had internalized an image of what Indians were like. How did they know? Cartoon images, in particular the Disney movie *Peter Pan*, were cited by the children as their number-one source of information. At the age of 3, these children already had a set of stereotypes in place. Though I would not describe 3-year-olds as prejudiced, the stereotypes to which they have been exposed become the foundation for the adult prejudices so many of us have.

Sometimes the assumptions we make about others come not from what we have been told or what we have seen on television or in books but rather from what we have *not* been told. The distortion of historical information about people of color leads young people (and older people, too) to make assumptions that may go unchallenged for a long time.

Consider this conversation between two White students following a discussion about the cultural transmission of racism:

“Yeah, I just found out that Cleopatra was actually a Black woman.”

“What?”

The first student went on to explain the source of her newly learned information. The second student exclaimed in disbelief, “That can’t be true. Cleopatra was beautiful!”

While scholars still argue the question of Cleopatra’s ancestry, what is most important in this example is what this young woman had learned about who in our society is considered beautiful and who is not. Had she conjured up images of Hollywood icon Elizabeth Taylor when she thought of Cleopatra? The new information her classmate had shared and her own deeply ingrained assumptions about who is beautiful and who is not were too incongruous to allow her to assimilate the information at that moment.

Omitted information can have similar effects. For example, another young woman, preparing to be a high school English teacher, expressed her dismay that she had never learned about any Black authors in any of her English courses. How was she to teach about them to her future students when she hadn’t learned about them herself? A White male student in the class responded to this discussion with frustration in his response journal, writing, “It’s not my fault that Blacks don’t write books.” Had one of his elementary, high school, or college teachers ever told him that there were no Black writers? Probably not. Yet because he had never been

exposed to Black authors, he had drawn his own conclusion that there were none.

Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice. *Prejudice* is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information. I assume that we all have prejudices, not because we want them but simply because we are so continually exposed to misinformation about others. Though I have often heard students or workshop participants describe someone as not having “a prejudiced bone in his body,” I usually suggest that they look again. Prejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society. Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as “smog breathers” (and most of us don’t want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air? If we live in an environment in which we are bombarded with stereotypical images in the media, are frequently exposed to the ethnic jokes of friends and family members, and are rarely informed of the accomplishments of oppressed groups, we will develop the negative categorizations of those groups that form the basis of prejudice.

People of color as well as Whites develop these categorizations. Even a member of the stereotyped group may internalize the stereotypical categories about his or her own group to some degree. In fact, this process happens so frequently that it has a name, *internalized oppression*. There are serious consequences of believing the distorted messages about one’s own group.

Certainly some people are more prejudiced than others, actively embracing and perpetuating negative and hateful images of those who are different from themselves. When we claim to be free of prejudice, perhaps what we are really saying is that we are not

hatemongers. But none of us is completely innocent. Prejudice is an integral part of our socialization, and it is not our fault. Just as the preschoolers my student interviewed are not to blame for the negative messages they internalized, we are not at fault for the stereotypes, distortions, and omissions that shaped our thinking as we grew up.

To say that it is not our fault does not relieve us of responsibility, however. We may not have polluted the air, but we need to take responsibility, along with others, for cleaning it up. Each of us needs to look at our own behavior. Am I perpetuating and reinforcing the negative messages so pervasive in our culture, or am I seeking to challenge them? If I have not been exposed to positive images of marginalized groups, am I seeking them out, expanding my own knowledge base for myself and my children? Am I acknowledging and examining my own prejudices, my own rigid categorizations of others, thereby minimizing the adverse impact they might have on my interactions with those I have categorized? Unless we engage in these and other conscious acts of reflection and reeducation, we easily repeat the process with our children. We teach what we were taught. The unexamined prejudices of the parents are passed on to the children. It is not our fault, but it is our responsibility to interrupt this cycle.

RACISM: A SYSTEM OF ADVANTAGE BASED ON RACE

Many people use the terms *prejudice* and *racism* interchangeably. I do not, and I think it is important to make a distinction. In his book *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman (1993) argues convincingly that limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice does not offer a sufficient explanation for the persistence of racism. He defines racism as a “system of advantage based on race” (see also Bonilla-Silva, 2017). In illustrating this definition, he provides example after example of how Whites defend their racial advantage

—access to better schools, housing, jobs—even when they do not embrace overtly prejudicial thinking. Racism cannot be fully explained as an expression of prejudice alone.

This definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. Another related definition of racism, commonly used by anti-racist educators and consultants, is “prejudice plus power.” Racial prejudice combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making—leads to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices. While I think this definition also captures the idea that racism is more than individual beliefs and attitudes, I prefer Wellman’s definition because the idea of systematic advantage and disadvantage is critical to an understanding of how racism operates in U.S. society.

In addition, I find that many of my White students and workshop participants do not feel powerful. Defining racism as prejudice plus power has little personal relevance. For some, their response to this definition is the following: “I’m not really prejudiced, and I have no power, so racism has nothing to do with me.” However, most White people, if they are really being honest with themselves, can see that there are advantages to being White in the United States. Despite the current rhetoric about affirmative action and “reverse racism,” every social indicator, from salary to life expectancy, reveals the advantages of being White (Sullivan, 2012).

The systematic advantages of being White are often referred to as *White privilege*. In a now well-known article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh (1989), a White feminist scholar, identified a long list of societal privileges that she

received simply because she was White. She did not ask for them, and it is important to note that she hadn't always noticed that she was receiving them. They included major and minor advantages. Of course she enjoyed greater access to jobs and housing. But she also was able to shop in department stores without being followed by suspicious salespeople and could always find appropriate hair-care products and makeup in any drugstore. She could send her child to school confident that the teacher would not discriminate against him on the basis of race. She could also be late for meetings and talk with her mouth full, fairly confident that these behaviors would not be attributed to the fact that she was White. She could express an opinion in a meeting or in print and not have it labeled the "White" viewpoint. In other words, she was more often than not viewed as an individual, rather than as a member of a racial group.

This article rings true for most White readers, many of whom may have never considered the benefits of being White. It's one thing to have enough awareness of racism to describe the ways that people of color are disadvantaged by it. But this new understanding of racism is more elusive. In very concrete terms, it means that if a person of color is the victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person. The White tenant is, knowingly or unknowingly, the beneficiary of racism, a system of advantage based on race. The unsuspecting tenant is not to blame for the prior discrimination, but she benefits from it anyway.

For many Whites, this new awareness of the benefits of a racist system elicits considerable pain, often accompanied by feelings of anger and guilt. These uncomfortable emotions can hinder further discussion. We all like to think that we deserve the good things we have received and that others, too, get what they deserve. Social psychologists call this tendency a "belief in a just world" (Lerner, 1974). Racism directly contradicts such notions of justice.

Understanding racism as a system of advantage based on race is antithetical to traditional notions of an American meritocracy. For those who have internalized this myth, this definition generates considerable discomfort. It is more comfortable simply to think of racism as a particular form of prejudice. Notions of power or privilege do not have to be addressed when our understanding of racism is constructed in that way.

The discomfort generated when a systemic definition of racism is introduced is usually quite visible in the workshops I lead. Someone in the group is usually quick to point out that this is not the definition you will find in most dictionaries. I reply, “Who wrote the dictionary?” I am not being facetious with this response. Whose interests are served by a “prejudice only” definition of racism? It is important to understand that the system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence.

RACISM: FOR WHITES ONLY?

Frequently someone will say, “You keep talking about White people. People of color can be racist, too.” I once asked a White teacher what it would mean to her if a student or parent of color accused her of being racist. She said she would feel as though she had been punched in the stomach or called a “low-life scum.” She is not alone in this feeling. The word *racist* holds a lot of emotional power. For many White people, to be called racist is the ultimate insult. The idea that this term might only be applied to Whites becomes highly problematic, for after all, can’t people of color be “low-life scum” too?

Of course, people of any racial group can hold hateful attitudes and behave in racially discriminatory and bigoted ways. We can all cite examples of horrible hate crimes that have been perpetrated by people of color as well as Whites. Hateful behavior is hateful behavior no matter who does it. But when I am asked, “Can people of color be racist?” I reply, “The answer depends on your definition of

racism.” If one defines racism as racial prejudice, the answer is yes. People of color can and do have racial prejudices. However, if one defines racism as a system of advantage based on race, the answer is no. People of color are not racist because they do not systematically benefit from racism. And, equally important, there is no systematic cultural and institutional support or sanction for the racial bigotry of people of color. In my view, reserving the term *racist* only for behaviors committed by Whites in the context of a White-dominated society is a way of acknowledging the ever-present power differential afforded Whites by the culture and institutions that make up the system of advantage and continue to reinforce notions of White superiority. (Using the same logic, I reserve the word *sexist* for men. Though women can and do have gender-based prejudices, only men systematically benefit from sexism.)

Despite my best efforts to explain my thinking on this point, there are some who will be troubled, perhaps even incensed, by my response. To call the racially motivated acts of a person of color “acts of racial bigotry” and to describe similar acts committed by Whites as “racist” will make no sense to some people, including some people of color. To them, I respectfully say, “We can agree to disagree.” At moments like these, it is not agreement that is essential but clarity. Even if you don’t like the definition of racism I am using, hopefully you are now clear about what it is. If I also understand how you are using the term, our conversation can continue—despite our disagreement.

Another provocative question I’m often asked is, “Are you saying all Whites are racist?” When asked this question, I again remember that White teacher’s response, and I am conscious that perhaps the question I am really being asked is, “Are you saying all Whites are bad people?”

The answer to that question is of course not. However, all White people, intentionally or unintentionally, do benefit from racism. A more relevant question is, “What are White people as individuals doing to interrupt racism?” For many White people, the image of a

racist is a hood-wearing Klan member or a name-calling Archie Bunker figure. These images represent what might be called *active racism*—blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination. *Passive racism* is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and avoiding difficult race-related issues. Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating (Roithmayr, 2014; Rothenberg, 2014). All that is required to maintain it is to go about business as usual.

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively anti-racist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.

So, not all Whites are actively racist. Many are passively racist. Some, though not enough, are actively anti-racist. The relevant question is not whether all Whites are racist but how we can move more White people from a position of active or passive racism to one of active anti-racism. The task of interrupting racism is obviously not the task of Whites alone. But the fact of White privilege means that Whites have greater access to the societal institutions in need of transformation. To whom much is given, much is required.

It is important to acknowledge that while all Whites benefit from racism, they do not all benefit equally. Other factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and mental and physical ability, also play a role in our access to social influence and power. A White woman on welfare is not privileged to the same extent as a wealthy White heterosexual man. In her case, the systematic disadvantages of sexism and classism intersect with her White privilege, but the privilege is still there. This point was brought home to me in a study conducted by one of my Mount Holyoke graduate students, Phyllis Wentworth. Wentworth (1994) interviewed a group of female college students who were both older than their peers and the first members of their families to attend college about the pathways that led them to college. All of the women interviewed were White, from working-class backgrounds, and from families where women were expected to graduate from high school and get married or get a job. Several had experienced abusive relationships and other personal difficulties prior to coming to college. Yet their experiences were punctuated by “good luck” stories of apartments obtained without a deposit, good jobs offered without experience or extensive reference checks, and encouragement provided by willing mentors. While the women acknowledged their good fortune, none of them discussed their Whiteness. They had not considered the possibility that being White had worked in their favor and helped give them the benefit of the doubt at critical junctures. This study clearly showed that even under difficult circumstances, White privilege was still operating.

It is also true that not all people of color are equally targeted by racism. We all have multiple identities that shape our experience. I can describe myself as a light-skinned, well-educated, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian African American woman raised in a two-parent middle-class family in a small, predominantly White, middle-class town. As an African American woman, I am systematically disadvantaged by race and by gender, but I systematically receive benefits in the other categories, which then mediate my experience of racism and sexism. When one is targeted by multiple isms—

racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism—in whatever combination, the effect is intensified. The particular combination of racism and classism in many communities of color is life-threatening. Nonetheless, when I, the middle-class Black mother of two sons, read another story about a Black man's unlucky encounter with a White police officer's deadly force, I know that racism by itself can kill.

I was reminded of this fact once again by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), author of *Between the World and Me*, when he captures the heart-wrenching pain of Dr. Jones, whose 23-year-old son, Prince Jones, was killed by police during a traffic stop. Her socioeconomic success as a prominent physician and the cultural and educational advantages she was able to provide for her son throughout his life could not protect him. She said, “I spent years developing a career, acquiring assets, engaging responsibilities. And one racist act. It's all it takes” (p. 144).

THE COST OF RACISM

Early in my teaching career, a White male student in my Psychology of Racism course wrote in his journal at the end of the semester that he had learned a lot about racism and now understood in a way he never had before just how advantaged he was. He also commented that he didn't think he would do anything to try to change the situation. After all, the system was working in his favor. Fortunately, his response was not typical. Most of my students left my course with the desire (and an action plan) to interrupt the cycle of racism. However, this young man's response did raise an important question. Why should Whites who are advantaged by racism *want* to end that system of advantage? What are the *costs* of that system to them?

In the late 1980s, a *Money* magazine article called “Race and Money” chronicled the many ways the American economy was hindered by institutional racism (Updegrave, 1989). Thirty years later,

the analysis still rings true. Whether one looks at productivity lowered by racial tensions in the workplace, or real estate equity lost through housing discrimination, or the tax revenue lost in underemployed communities of color, or the high cost of warehousing human talent in prison, the economic costs of racism are real and measurable (Turner, 2013).

As a psychologist, I often hear about the less easily measured costs. When I ask White men and women how racism hurts them, they frequently talk about their fears of people of color, the social incompetence they feel in racially mixed situations, the alienation they have experienced between parents and children when a child marries into a family of color, and the interracial friendships they had as children that were lost in adolescence or young adulthood without their ever understanding why. White people are paying a significant price for the system of advantage. The cost is not as high for Whites as it is for people of color, but a price is being paid (Barndt, 2007; Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Kivel, 2011; Wallis, 2016). Wendell Berry, a White writer raised in Kentucky, captures this psychic pain in the opening pages of his book *The Hidden Wound*:

If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society. (Berry, 1989, pp. 3–4)

The dismantling of racism is in the best interests of everyone.

A WORD ABOUT LANGUAGE

Throughout this essay I have used the term *White* to refer to Americans of European descent. In another era, I might have used the term *Caucasian*. I have used the term *people of color* to refer to those groups in America that are and have been historically targeted by racism. This includes people of African descent, people of Asian descent, people of Latin American descent, and Indigenous peoples (sometimes referred to as Native Americans or American Indians). It is important to note here that these groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, people of Latin American descent may have European, African, and Native American ancestors. The politics of racial categorization has served to create artificial boundaries between groups with shared ancestry. Many people refer to these groups collectively as *non-Whites*. This term is particularly offensive because it defines groups of people in terms of what they are not. (Do we call women “non-men”?) I also avoid using the term *minorities* because it represents another kind of distortion of information that we need to correct. So-called minorities represent the majority of the world’s population. Though the term *people of color* is inclusive, it is not perfect. As a workshop participant once said, White people have color, too. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say “people of more color,” though I am not ready to make that change. Perhaps fellow psychologist Linda James Myers is on the right track. She refers to two groups of people, those of acknowledged African descent and those of unacknowledged African descent, reminding us that we can all trace the roots of our common humanity to Africa.

I refer to people of acknowledged African descent as *Black*. I know that *African American* is also a commonly used term, and I often refer to myself and other Black people born and raised in America in that way. Perhaps because I am a child of the 1960s “Black and beautiful” era, I still prefer *Black*. The term is more inclusive than *African American* because there are Black people in the United States who are not African American—Afro-Caribbeans, for example

—yet are targeted by racism and are identified as Black. I capitalize both *Black* and *White* because I use them synonymously with other terms that are always capitalized, *African American* and *European American*.

When referring to other groups of color, I try to use the terms that the people themselves want to be called. In some cases, there is no clear consensus. For example, some people of Latin American ancestry prefer *Latino*, while others prefer *Hispanic* or, if of Mexican descent, *Chicano* (Padilla, 1995). It is difficult to know which is the preferred term because different subgroups have different preferences that may change over time. In the past I have preferred to use *Latino* or *Latina* rather than *Hispanic*. In this edition I am choosing to use the more recent term, *Latinx*, because it is a gender-inclusive term that encompasses everyone—men, women, and those who identify as transgender or gender-fluid. I realize that the word *Latinx* may be unfamiliar to some readers, but I have learned that many young Latinx students favor this term, and I want to be as inclusive in my language as possible. Though used less often in this text, you will find that I have also replaced the terms *Chicano* or *Chicana* with the gender-inclusive term *Chicanx*, for the same reasons. There are regional variations in the use of the terms *Native American*, *American Indian*, and *Indian*. *American Indian* and *Native people* are now more widely used than *Native American*, and the language I use in this edition reflects that shift. People of Asian descent include Pacific Islanders, and that is reflected in the terms *Asian/Pacific Islanders* and *Asian Pacific Americans*. However, when quoting others, I use whichever terms, spellings, and capitalizations they use.

My dilemma about the language to use reflects the fact that race is a social construction (Omi & Winant, 2015). Despite myths to the contrary, biologists tell us that the only meaningful racial categorization is that of human. Van den Berghe (1967) defines race as “a group that is socially defined but on the basis of *physical* criteria,” including skin color and facial features.

Racial identity development usually refers to the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group. The terms *racial identity* and *ethnic identity* are often used synonymously, though a distinction can be made between the two. An ethnic group is a socially defined group based on *cultural* criteria, such as language, customs, and shared history. An individual might identify as a member of an ethnic group (Irish or Italian, for example) but might not think of himself in racial terms (as White). On the other hand, one may recognize the personal significance of racial group membership (identifying as Black, for instance) but may not consider ethnic identity (such as West Indian) as particularly meaningful.

Both racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed, and social definitions of these categories have changed over time. For example, in his book *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*, Richard Alba (1990) points out that the high rates of intermarriage and the dissolution of other social boundaries among European ethnic groups in the United States have reduced the significance of ethnic identity for these groups. In their place, he argues, a new ethnic identity is emerging, that of European American.

It is important to acknowledge that ethnic identity and racial identity sometimes intersect. For example, dark-skinned Puerto Ricans may identify culturally as Puerto Rican and yet be categorized racially by others as Black on the basis of physical appearance. Culture is also an important part of one's sense of group membership, suggesting that what is referred to as racial identity is really more fully described as racial-ethnic-cultural (REC) identity. Whether speaking of racial or ethnic identity specifically, these identities remain most salient to individuals of racial or ethnic groups that have been historically disadvantaged or marginalized.

The language we use to categorize one another racially is imperfect. These categories are still evolving, as changing census classifications indicate (Wright, 1994). The original creation of racial

categories was in the service of oppression. Some may argue that to continue to use them is to continue that oppression. I respect that argument. Yet it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic. We have to be able to talk about it in order to change it.

Beverly Daniel Tatum was the president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, from 2002 to 2015. For more than 20 years, Dr. Tatum has taught a course on the psychology of racism. She has also toured extensively, leading workshops on racial identity development and its impact in the classroom. Her bestselling book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* was released in a 20th anniversary edition (2017) and is excerpted here.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Lewis, A. (2003). *Race in the schoolyard: Negotiating the color line in classrooms and communities*. Rutgers University Press.

Oluo, I. (2018). *So you want to talk about race*. Seal Press.

Tatum, B. D. (1997/2017). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. Basic Books.

Tatum, B. D. (2007). *Can we talk about race? And other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. Beacon Press.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What was the level of racial segregation in your own home community growing up? Does it fit the pattern identified by

- Tatum? Why or why not? What impact do you think this had on you?
2. What is *internalized oppression* as defined by this author? Why is this an important concept in the study of race and racism?
 3. What is the difference between *fault* and *responsibility*? Why does the author argue that this difference is significant?
 4. What are some of the costs of racism for White people? Do you think these are compelling? Why or why not?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Given the author's discussion of the impact of early education on ideas about race and racial groups, identify three or four kids in your social network (middle school or younger) and ask them what they know about Native Americans. What do their responses tell you about the content of their education?
2. In her piece, Tatum urges all of us to look at our own behavior and assess whether we are perpetuating and reinforcing negative messages about race or challenging them. Answer this question honestly, sharing your answers in a small, diverse discussion group. Is there anything uncomfortable about asking yourself this question or sharing your response? If so, why? What does this exercise tell you about the nature of race and racial dynamics in American society?

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ESSAY 3 “BLACKS ARE NATURALLY GOOD ATHLETES” : THE MYTH OF A BIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR RACE

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Journalist Jon Entine (2001) opened his book, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It*, with the following scenario:

Imagine an alien visitor chancing upon a basketball arena on a wintry night. It sees a curious sight: most of the faces of the extended tree trunks scampering around the court are black; the crowd, on the other hand, is almost all white. This alien would see much the same racial division at football games, boxing matches, and at track meets and running races around the world. Even in sports in which blacks are not a majority—baseball, soccer, rugby, cricket, even bob-sledding in some countries—blacks are represented in a greater number than their share in the population. (p. 3)

Entine goes on to argue that genes are the primary explanation for athletes of African descent being overrepresented in elite levels of sport. He is hardly alone in making this claim. On the eve of the 2012 Summer Olympics, former gold medalist sprinter Michael Johnson contended that slavery caused people of African descent to have a “superior athletic gene” (Beck, 2012) that manifested in success in the 100-meter sprint. In doing so, he joined the likes of Al Campanis and Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder, who have made similar comments. For Entine (and others coming from this perspective), skin color demarcates an unambiguous boundary between distinct populations and thus explains a pattern of human social behavior. That an alien visitor would do the same would be as surprising as it would be unlikely. Yet, to a human being, especially one socialized within U.S. culture, the idea that “Blacks are naturally good athletes” seems to make sense. That this myth exists to such a degree within our popular culture tells

us a great deal about how the biophysical diversity of our species has been (mis)understood. For this reason, it serves as a useful starting point for debunking the biological basis for race.

In contemporary biology, the term *race* refers to a unit of taxonomy—like kingdom or phylum—and is used synonymously with *subspecies* to indicate two or more biologically distinct populations within a species. For example, zoologists divide tigers into nine subspecies, including the Bengal, Siberian, and Sumatran types. They do so on the basis of genotypic and phenotypic traits, although the amount of variation necessary to constitute subspecies separation is not agreed on and, therefore, is the subject of debate (Keita & Boyce, 2001). *Genotype* refers to the genetic makeup of an organism, including all genetic material inherited from one's parents or a portion of this material, such as chromosomes that code for eye color. *Phenotype* refers to the observable characteristics of an organism, such as body size, fingerprint pattern, or color of skin, hair, or feathers. While phenotype expresses an organism's genetic inheritance, it is also modified by environmental conditions, such as when exposure to sunlight darkens the color of human skin. Applying the biological meaning of race to humans suggests that our modern species, *Homo sapiens*, can be divided into a number of discrete, mutually exclusive subspecies based on phenotypic and genotypic differences, and that each subspecies will contain nearly uniform individuals who are more similar to each other than to members of other races.

If race strictly referred to a unit of taxonomy, it would be of no more than minor interest to sociologists. However, race has an even longer history of use outside biology. Although its origin is uncertain, the best evidence suggests the term entered the English language during the 16th century as a folk concept that referred to a breed of domesticated animals reproduced for specific behavioral or physical qualities (Smedley & Smedley, 2011). Over time, this meaning was applied to human beings such that race was used as a marker of social distinction, indicating membership in particular social groups. While physical appearance and ancestry played a crucial role in distinguishing between groups, so did behavior and social status. Indeed, as well-worn sayings such as “Blacks are naturally good athletes,” “Asians are good at math,” and “Whites can't dance” attest, in its more common, everyday usage, race was thought to influence a whole range of behaviors, from the athletic to the intellectual to the artistic. Even more,

these different behavioral capacities were thought to naturally account for the unequal positions racial groups came to occupy in society.

A useful starting point, then, is to recognize at least two distinct uses and meanings of race. In the strictest biological sense, it refers to intraspecies variation measured by some unspecified amount of phenotypic and genotypic divergence, a meaning I will refer to as *biological race*. In contrast, the term *social race* will refer to its everyday use as a form of group identification, including how people identify themselves (self-identity) and how they are identified by others (social identity). This essay will focus on biological race and, in particular, whether or not the concept is useful for describing diversity within the human species.

EVIDENCE FOR THE BELIEF IN A BIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR RACE

There is ample evidence that a significant portion of the general public believes there are biologically discrete human races. For example, a survey of Georgia residents found that 61.3% of respondents agreed with the statement that “genetics plays a primary role in determining an individual’s race” (Condit et al., 2004, p. 260). Further evidence can be deduced from questionnaires that ask about racial differences in more limited ways. For example, a survey conducted in 2001 found that 74% of White men and 65% of White women believed that genetics contributed to differences in athleticism across racial groups (Sheldon et al., 2007). While support for genetic explanations of racial differences tends to be higher for Whites than other racial groups regarding athleticism, intelligence, the drive to succeed, and tendency toward violence, non-Whites (such as sprinter Michael Johnson) also express these views (Jayaratne et al., 2009). Open-ended questions show that beliefs about racial differences involve a complex mixture of biological, cultural, environmental, and personal explanations (Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Condit et al., 2004; Morning, 2011), with biology playing a particularly important role. Longitudinal evidence, however, suggests that these beliefs may be fading. In the 2010 version of the General Social Survey, only 10.3% of all respondents agreed that Black people had lower socioeconomic status due to an “inborn disability,” compared with 26% in 1977, the first year this question was asked. However, it is unclear whether this decline is due to an actual change in

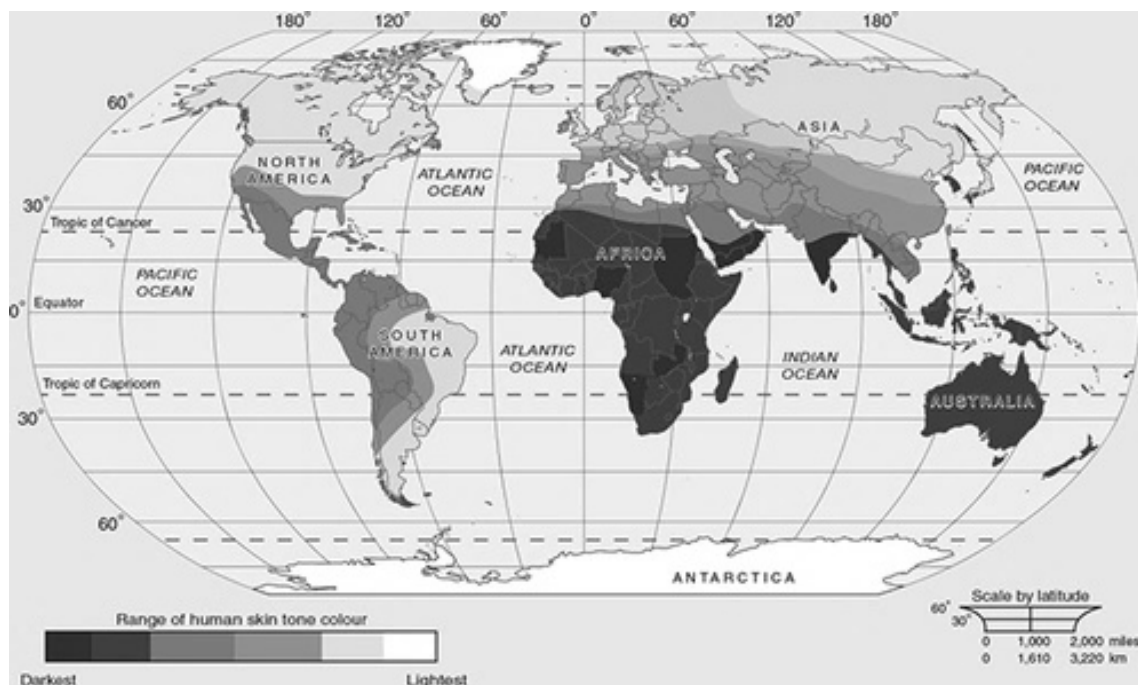
attitudes or increasing social stigma attached to such responses (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Indeed, responses to surveys and interviews should be interpreted as a conservative estimate of the belief in a biological basis for race, given the well-documented tendency for respondents to supply socially desirable answers.

It is clear, then, that a significant portion of the general public—including some racial/ethnic minority-group members—believe, to some degree, in the idea of biologically distinct human races. Yet a number of scientists who specifically study human biodiversity (biologists, geneticists, and physical anthropologists) have questioned biological race's ability to accurately capture the type of variation found in the human species. To understand this doubt, we must return to the definition. Recall that race implies several things of note: that the human species can be divided into a number of distinct groupings on the basis of genotypic and phenotypic differences; that these groupings are mutually exclusive (a person can fall into one, and only one, of these groupings); and that these subpopulations contain individuals who are only minimally different from one another. It is important, therefore, to examine the degree of genotypic and phenotypic diversity within the human species.

REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE: VARIATION WITHIN THE HUMAN SPECIES

Considering genotype, humans are remarkably similar. On average, human beings are 99.9% identical in terms of nucleotide pairs (one of the building blocks of DNA), far more than many other species (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010). The vast majority of the remaining 0.1% variation (ranging from 80% to 95%, depending on the specific markers examined and samples used) is found within any local population—meaning two nonrelated individuals from the same population will, on average, be only slightly more genetically similar to each other than two unrelated individuals from different continents. Furthermore, only a small portion of all alleles in the human genome are “private”—that is, found in only one region—and none of these are found with great frequency in the region where they occur (Rosenberg et al., 2002). This tremendous genetic similarity augments archeological evidence regarding the recentness of our species, suggesting there has not been much time for subspecies separation.

How is this minimal amount of diversity distributed across human populations? Most of this genetic variation is *clinal* (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010; Cavilla-Sforza & Cavilla-Sforza, 1995; Rosenberg et al., 2005); that is, it varies gradually over geographic space in correspondence to transitions in environmental conditions. Not surprisingly, phenotypic traits that are significantly impacted by climate also display this type of continuous variation (Relethford, 2009). The classic example is skin color, a trait that has been central to a number of racial classification systems, especially in the United States. Of course, there are human populations with relatively dark skin and those with relatively light skin. However, when we arrange all human beings from dark to light, we find gradual variation—that is, innumerable shades between the light and dark extremes. These differences correspond strongly to environmental conditions, such that darker skin is found most frequently in the tropics, where sunlight is particularly intense, and lighter-colored skin is found nearer the poles (see [Figure 3.1](#)). Clinal variation leads to a general axiom: Populations differ by distance, such that the farther apart any two populations are in geographic space, the more genetically different they will be. Importantly, gradual variation poses a serious problem to attempts to divide humanity into separate units. Although individuals and groups will have distinctive traits in such a system, there are no obvious and clearly demarcated boundaries, meaning divisions will *always* be arbitrary and subjective and the result of decisions made by human beings.



Description

Figure 3.1 Worldwide Distribution of Skin Color Variation

Source: Worldwide distribution of skin color variation [Map]. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human>

That small portion of biodiversity that is not clinal is mostly the result of barriers—geographic boundaries such as mountain ranges, deserts, large bodies of water, and narrow isthmuses—that made reproduction between adjacent populations very difficult (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010; Cavilla-Sforza, 2000; Cavilla-Sforza & Cavilla-Sforza, 1995). As such, because the Mediterranean Sea is less difficult to cross than the Sahara desert, North Africans are more genetically similar to southern Europeans than they are to sub-Saharan Africans, despite these regions being of similar distance from each other. Social barriers—such as social preferences for mating with members of one’s own social group—are also significant. Therefore, many of these differences in biodiversity appear at the borders between sociolinguistic groups (Cavilla-Sforza, 2000) or between groups that have strong social rules against intimate relationships, such as the castes in India (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010).

Using multiple genetic markers simultaneously, researchers can examine these discontinuities and even classify an individual's geographic origins accurately (Bamshad et al., 2004; Rosenberg et al., 2002), at least for those populations whose grandparents came from a single point of origin. Similarly, phenotypes that are minimally impacted by environmental conditions, such as skull size and shape, display a form of geographic clustering that allows researchers to accurately classify individuals using multiple measurements (Ousely et al., 2009; Relethford, 2009). However, the genetic similarities produced using this method are inconsistent and vary based on the markers examined, the sample distribution, and method of analysis (Barbujani & Colonna, 2010). Furthermore, the groupings suggested by this method of clustering stray quite far from the general understanding of biological races as large, continent-wide distinctions (Long et al., 2009).

For example, using multiple measurements of the skull, physical anthropologists can distinguish between the crania of White people and Black people in the United States with a very high degree of accuracy. However, this same technique can also distinguish with a similar level of accuracy between populations commonly thought to belong to the same racial group, such as Central and South Africans, northern and southern Native Americans, and northern and southern Japanese (Ousely et al., 2009; also see Relethford, 2009). Perhaps most surprising, the skulls of White males born in the mid-1800s and White males born in the mid-1900s display a similar amount of difference. Therefore, if the ability to group individuals on the basis of crania were taken as evidence of the existence of racial groups, there would be thousands of them and they would correspond very imperfectly with the social race categories we use in our everyday lives.

What About Forensics and Medical Research on Biological Race?

At this point, some might argue that forensic anthropologists can determine the racial identity of unidentified skeletal remains at a better than random rate and that medical researchers use race to predict susceptibility to certain diseases. Forensic scientists in the United States are able to do so, in part, because the major population groups they deal with come from vastly different areas of the globe. Since differences in physical traits (i.e.,

phenotype) increase with geographical distance, accurate classification is possible using multiple measurements (Ousely et al., 2009). Still, identification only becomes accurate when compared against the known demographic composition of the location in which the remains are found (Konigsberg et al., 2009). This means that a set of bones found in rural Iowa and identified as White would be classified as Easter Island Polynesian if found in the much more diverse location of Hawaii. If found in Gary, Indiana—the city with the highest proportion of Black people in the United States—the same skeleton would be reported as Black.

Medical researchers are interested in race as a proxy for ancestry, and they are interested in ancestry as a way of predicting the likelihood of an individual's possessing a genetic abnormality that can lead to illness. For example, individuals with ancestors from regions where malaria was frequent (including West Africa, India, the Middle East, and southern Europe) are more likely to be carriers of the sickle-cell trait and therefore develop medical complications. Most studies of the relationship between race and disease rely on self-reported ancestry, which is problematic because the kinship systems used to trace ancestry are culturally (that is to say, socially) constructed. For example, the United States tends to practice a system of hypodescent (more commonly known as the one-drop rule), in which children of European–African sexual relations are socially designated as Black despite their mixed ancestry (Davis, 1991). This means that asking a descendant of one of these relationships his or her self-reported racial identity may provide only a partial understanding of the actual genetic ancestry. Still, medical researchers persist in using self-identity because it provides a rough (if imprecise) approximation of ancestry that is cheaper and less time-consuming than the more accurate methods of detailed genealogical research or analysis of a person's entire genetic makeup (Bamshad et al., 2004; Collins, 2004). Clearly, then, neither forensicists nor medical researchers have discovered something about race that was missed by other researchers.

The Sociological Perspective on Race

Given this, many people are curious as to why sociologists continue to use the word *race* and specific racial group designations such as White, Black, and Native American as if these correspond to distinct entities. To argue that race is not biological is not the same thing as saying it does not exist.

As already indicated, there is a “social” meaning of race distinct from its use in biology, and it is this meaning to which sociologists most frequently refer. Race in this sense refers to a type of social identification in which certain physical features have been assigned social significance. Importantly, this definition incorporates, rather than discounts, biological variation. As we have seen, human beings do differ in terms of physical traits, and these visible differences became the primary criteria for placing individuals into racial categories. However, this classification process only took place once humans came to believe that physical features were salient markers of differences. Although different theoretical perspectives within sociology disagree about the exact mechanisms, all concur that the assignment of social importance to physical features occurred through social relations—such as migration and conquest, competition for scarce resources, and political challenges against the state—that brought different populations into sustained contact with each other. It was only once social importance had been assigned to physical differences that people began to act on them, treating members of their perceived racial in-group different from members of their perceived racial out-group. The result has been the formation of more-or-less coherent social groups that differ in ways that matter a great deal to sociologists in terms of identity, cultural practices, access to important societal resources, and treatment by the larger society. It is for this reason that sociologists continue to study and use the term *race*.

EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE

Understanding the actual distribution of human biodiversity casts doubt on perspectives that rely on biological race as the primary explanation for behavioral differences, such as elite athletic performance. Conversely, recognizing that racial groups form through social interactions opens up the examination of a whole range of social forces. Considering athletic participation, it should be noted that Black people are overrepresented in only a handful of sports¹; therefore, a key question becomes, why only these sports? Sociological explanations call attention to two social features shared by members of the Black category: the occupational structure of society and the opportunity structure within sport itself. The former emphasizes that as a subordinate group, Black people face limited employment prospects in many occupational fields. Conversely, the

institution of sports was among the first to integrate and has subsequently offered a number of high-profile opportunities. These twin forces (ample opportunities in sports coupled with limited opportunities in other occupational fields) funnel a significant number of Black people into elite sports participation (Coakley, 2009; Edwards, 1973). The opportunity structure within sports channels these participants into particular sports. A relative lack of material resources means that Black participation rates are highest in sports for which facilities, training, and competition are available in widely accessible social institutions such as schools (Coakley, 2009; Phillips, 1993). Conversely, sports in which most training occurs in private clubs or through lessons (such as golf, tennis, and swimming) are the sports in which Black participation rates are low.

This is not to say that biology has no impact on an individual's ability to perform a particular activity. Both rules and tactical strategies mean that sports often favor particular phenotypes, such as height in volleyball and basketball. All other things being equal, a relatively tall individual will be at a distinct advantage in these endeavors. Because certain populations are taller on average than others, some groups would appear to have an advantage. However, because of the tremendous amount of diversity within any population, many members of relatively tall groups will not be tall at all. In addition, because of the high degree of shared genes across populations, many members of other groups—including those that are relatively short—will be quite tall. Finally, it must be remembered that phenotypes are malleable due to environmental factors (such as nutrition) and are acted on in social situations shaped by cultural preferences. The Dutch, the group with the tallest average height in the world, have contributed very few elite basketball players, because of this sport's lack of popularity in the Netherlands. To the degree that individuals succeed because of the contribution of a particular genotype or phenotype, this would be because of their individual genetic inheritance, not biological features they share in common with members of their racial group.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, reconsider how well biological race captures variation within the human species. As stated in this essay, the clinal distribution of most of the variance within the human population makes the creation of

distinct groupings difficult. Using sophisticated computer modeling focused on that small portion of human variation that is not clinal does allow for a reasonable classification scheme; however, the corresponding categories are inconsistent and reveal thousands of biological divisions. Further, racial categories are not mutually exclusive, so a person cannot fall into one, and only one, classification. Although the use of multiple genetic markers allows for a highly accurate classification of individuals, even these techniques fail to accurately classify everyone in their samples. Some individuals, and even entire groups, could be classified into multiple categories. If this is the case with samples whose recent ancestors all come from the same self-identified group, this suggests classification would be even more difficult for that significant and growing portion of the human populace that lives in multicultural societies where diverse ancestry is common. At best, biological race very crudely corresponds to diversity within the human species, misrepresenting this variation far more often than it enhances our understanding of it.

It is for this reason that sociologists have instead conceived of race as a social construction—that is, a way of assigning meaning to the social world. In the case of race, minor and primarily gradual biophysical differences between individuals and groups have become understood in everyday social interactions as deeply meaningful markers of boundaries between social groups. It is the actions based on this assigned meaning, not the biophysical differences, that account for most of the differential outcomes among racial categories, including differences in sports participation. As such, biological race within the human species is most accurately described as a myth.

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NOTE

1. Black participation rates exceeded their proportion of the overall U.S. population for only 8 of 38 NCAA-level sports during the 2009–2010 season, including men’s and women’s basketball, men’s and women’s indoor and outdoor track, football, and women’s bowling (Irick & National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2011). A similar pattern emerges when examining professional and Olympic-level competition (Phillips, 1993).

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Antrosio, J. (2012). *Part 1, biological anthropology: Human nature, race, evolution* [Web log comment].

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Edgar, H., & Hunley, K. (Eds.). (2009). Race reconciled: How biological anthropologists view human variation [Special issue]. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 139(1).

Herbes-Sommers, C. (Writer & Director). (2003). Episode 1: The difference between us [Television series episode]. In L. Adelman (Prod.), *Race: The power of an illusion*. California Newsreel.

Roberts, D. (2011). *Fatal invention: How science, politics, and big business re-create race in the twenty-first century*. New Press.

Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. D. (2011). *Race in North America: Origin and evolution of a worldview* (4th ed.). Westview Press.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What is clinal variation, and why does it cast doubt on attempts to categorize humans into discrete racial groups?
2. Compare and contrast the biological and sociological explanations for different outcomes between racial groups, such as elite athletic participation.
3. If races are not biologically distinct groups, how do sociologists explain their existence in society? What factors does the author suggest contribute to the formation of racial groups? Can you think of others?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Examine the map in [Figure 3.1](#). Do members of the same racial group share the same skin tone? Do members of different racial groups have distinct skin tones not shared by members of other racial groups? What are the implications of these reflections for the biological basis of race?
2. Take the “race test” designed by Guido Barbujani in collaboration with Todd Disotell. In it, you will be asked to sort 44 people from around the world based on physical resemblance (http://www.guidobarbujani.it/images/Take_the_race_test_files/pr-930-file_it-Racetest1EN.pdf). What do the results tell you about the social construction of racial categories?

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Descriptions of Images and Figures

[Back to Figure](#)

The tones of skin color of people in different parts of the world are as follows.

- Darkest
 - Parts of Africa, namely Mauritania, Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia, and Namibia
 - Southern half of India
 - Southeast Asia
 - Australia and Oceania
 - Oman, Yemen, and parts of Saudi Arabia
- Darker
 - Most parts of Africa
- Dark
 - Central America
 - Northwest and West parts of South America
 - Saudi Arabia
 - Southern parts of Afghanistan, half of Pakistan, Bangladesh
 - Northern half of India

- Light

- Southern part of the United States
- S-shaped from North to South in the middle of South America
- Northmost part of Africa
- Southern Europe and half of Eastern Europe
- Half of Central Asia and half of East Asia

- Lighter

- Northern part of the United States
- Alaska and Canada
- Northeastern, Eastern, and Southern parts of South America
- Half of Central Asia, half of East Asia, Russia
- Half of Eastern Europe
- Northern Europe
- United Kingdom

- Lightest

- Antarctica
- Greenland

ESSAY 4 “NATIVE AMERICAN/INDIAN, ASIAN/ORIENTAL, LATINO/HISPANIC . . . WHO CARES?” : LANGUAGE AND THE POWER OF SELF-DEFINITION

Bradley Koch *Georgia College*

Students are often intimidated when it comes to discussing race in a public setting such as a classroom. Discussions of race appear to them like minefields, wrought with unseen danger, with the potential to maim and disfigure. Because of what seems like the vagaries of usage, many students assume that they should avoid certain words simply out of a sense of political correctness. To be “politically correct” is to avoid offense and the semblance of injury or ill intent. The problem with both the practice of political correctness and the framing of this issue in terms of political correctness is that it ignores the structural nature of racism and the subtleties of unrecognized individual racism.

One place where we see the notion of political correctness muddying the waters is with the avoidance of racial terms that are not racist at all. As a hypercorrection, people often avoid terms such as *Mexican*, *Jew*, *Puerto Rican*, and even *Black*, assuming that the terms are negative. There is a great irony here, however, because when we extend a politically correct prohibition to words that are not in and of themselves socially or psychologically damaging, such as *Mexican*, *Jew*, or *Puerto Rican*, we unintentionally stigmatize the identities of those who should otherwise proudly embrace them. In these ways, language and terminology are important and carry social meanings that merit attention.

RACE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

When most students think of racism, they imagine overt individual racism. They think of a White man in a robe burning a cross, a storeowner who refuses to serve Black customers, or the tiki-torch-wielding, alt-right members shouting invectives during the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The good news is that the civil rights movement

and its legacy has been largely successful in reducing this kind of racism. However, there has been less success in convincing people that racism also exists in the invisible patterns of our social behavior and in the often-unconscious biases that are difficult to recognize.

Sociologists recognize that people create and transmit meaning through language. Because of that, words can have great power. The meaning and intent behind the use of racial pejoratives, such as the N-word, is to denigrate a racial group—and in the case of the N-word, that has been the intent of the word since its coining (Asim, 2007; see also Harkness in this volume). It is not, however, only about pejoratives. Many terms that are not inherently offensive and are not leveled intentionally to demean and dehumanize nonetheless perpetuate differences in the historical and lingering advantages, power, and privilege between different racial and ethnic groups. Sociologically, the greater concern is the inequality. We are worried about how the biases inherent in language reinforce unequal outcomes by race. The way we all write, talk, and ultimately think about who we are—and who “they” are—influences these outcomes.

One way to think about the importance of language is to engage the language of identity as reflected in the question: “What are you?” It is hard to imagine a less couth question, and yet it strikes at the heart of two issues: What is one’s identity, and who gets to decide? There is tremendous power embedded in the process of definition. Historically, colonization has left some telling scars. As world powers began dominating other peoples, they regularly imposed their own labels on them. Take, for example, the original human inhabitants of the Americas. We continue to call many of these peoples *Indians* after Christopher Columbus’s lifelong and mistaken belief that he had made it to India. Despite its inaccuracy, the term has stuck. As time has passed and overt imperial domination has largely waned (replaced by a system of global capitalism), many racial and ethnic groups have attempted to shed historically subjugating *exonyms*, or terms for a group created by an outside dominant group, for *endonyms*, or terms for a group created by the group members themselves.

Latino, for example, is an endonym, the name that those to whom the term refers use for themselves. *Hispanic* (literally “Spanish-speaking”), on the other hand, is an exonym, a name outsiders impose on those to whom the term refers. After all, one’s language is not a designation that would help

those who already know they speak the same language. Interestingly, Pew Research from 2012 indicates that most Hispanics/Latinos (51%) surveyed prefer their family's country of origin as a descriptor of their ethnicity, meaning they preferred not to use panethnic terms such as *Hispanic* or *Latino* and instead identified as Mexican, Cuban, or Dominican, for example. Only about one quarter (24%) said they used *Hispanic* or *Latino* most often to describe their identity (Taylor et al., 2012). Regarding the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino*, most (51%) had no preference for either term, but when a preference was indicated, *Hispanic* was preferred over *Latino* (33% vs. 14%, respectively). This shows some preference for exonyms, perhaps because they tend to have been present in the culture longer than some endonyms and tend to be terms (historically) used on government documents.

Oriental—literally meaning “of the east”—is an exonym, too. It begs the question, east of what? *Oriental* only makes sense from the perspective of those in the West. The perspective and ascription of the terms matter. In fact, one way to make sense of racial or ethnic categories is as ascribed statuses. Ascribed statuses are social positions that others impose on individuals irrespective of the individual's wishes (Linton, 1936). All exonyms are ascribed statuses. Inasmuch as there is widespread cultural acceptance of the term, exonyms carry with them a reminder of the social and political power that the subjugating group wields over the oppressed group. In these terms, it is not difficult to see why groups would be anxious to shed their exonyms and replace them with endonyms. First, such substitutions challenge the historically oppressive social relationships between groups, and second, the individual-level sense of agency that comes from self-definition can increase self-esteem and reduce anxiety (Cahill, 1986).

CHANGES IN RACIAL LANGUAGE

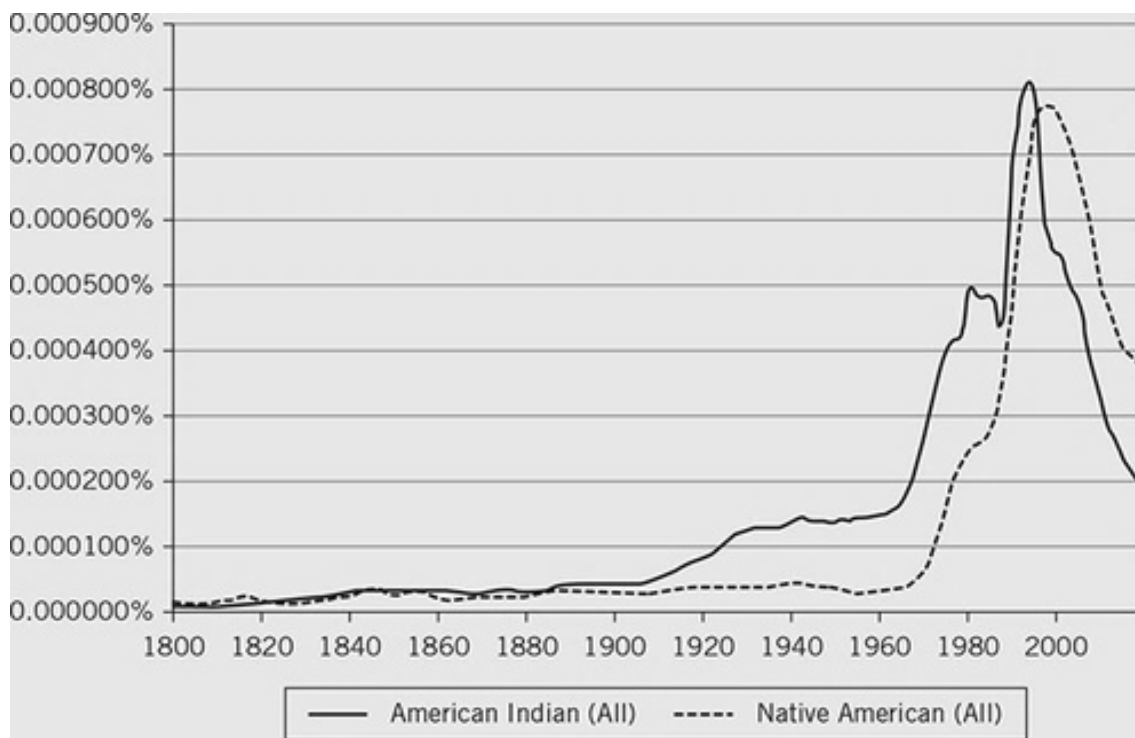
As a way to orient yourself to this social process, it is useful to think about how racial terminology has shifted over time as the concepts of race and ethnicity have shifted. One great new tool with which to see this is Google Ngrams. The Ngram tool draws from Google's growing collection of digitized books (Michel et al., 2011). By searching a word or series of words, Ngram will chart the frequency of those words as they show up in

books over time. It is not a perfect tool in that it restricts analysis to content that elites have created for themselves, it cannot differentiate between critical and noncritical usages, and it cannot control for any other independent factors, making Ngrams of limited use for rigorous scholarship. They can, nonetheless, point to larger historical trends in usage in ways that can be informative.

I begin by comparing the terms *American Indian* and *Native American* ([Figure 4.1](#)).¹ I use *American Indian* instead of just *Indian* to avoid any confusion with Asian Indians. (Years below in curly brackets {} represent the first recorded use of the term and come from Harper [2001] unless otherwise noted.)

Although both terms are relatively scarce until the early 1900s, *Native American* {1956}, which had been the less frequent term, overtakes *American Indian* {1553?} around 1992, signaling a significant victory for Native Americans in their ability to self-define. While the term is still of European origin, it at least is not a coinage of an unapologetic conqueror.

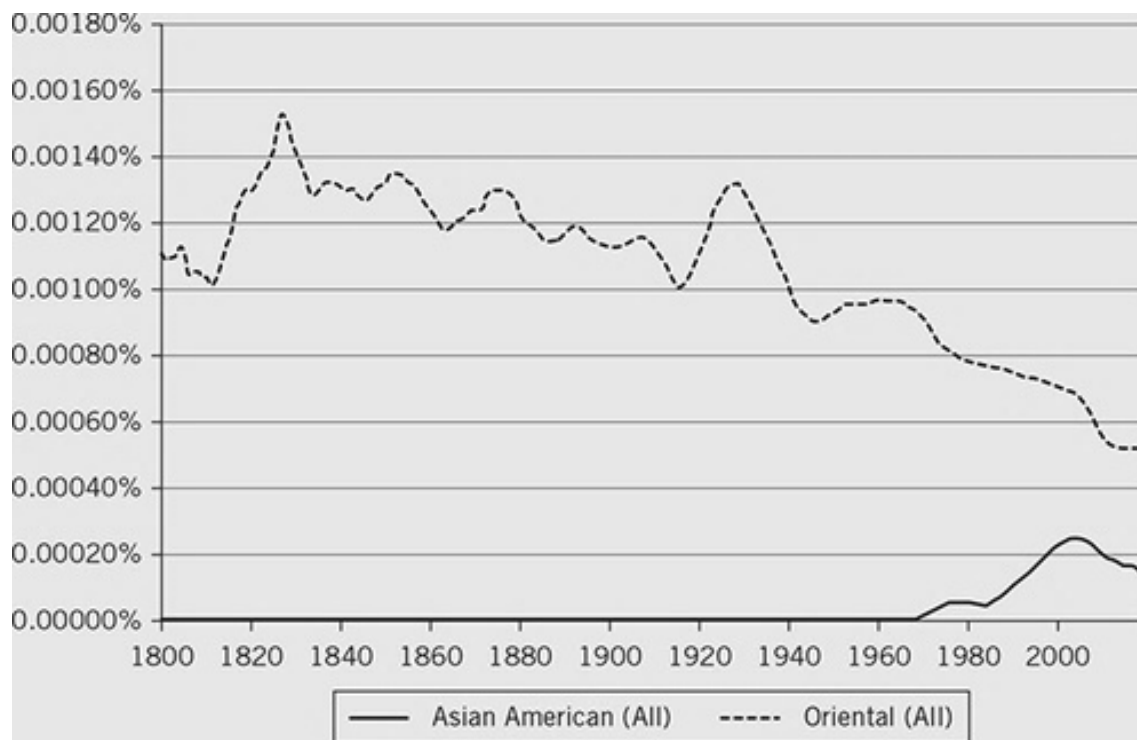
Indigenous is a term that is more inclusive of peoples that are native to their respective, ancestral homelands irrespective of a particular place or culture. In this way, the term highlights the violence and oppression of European expansion. Aboriginal Australians and Native Americans, for example, are both Indigenous populations, and although they have no shared culture, their Indigenous status reflects a shared, parallel history of maltreatment by European colonizers.



Description

Figure 4.1 *American Indian Versus Native American Ngram*

The tough thing, of course, with *Asian* {late 1300s} and *Oriental* {1701} is that they can just as easily refer to inanimate objects (e.g., rugs) as they can human beings. Still, *Asian American* is slowly replacing *Oriental* (see [Figure 4.2](#)). Interestingly, though, more than three quarters (76%) of Asian Americans do not often describe themselves with the terms *Asian* or *Asian American*; instead, most (62%) prefer to use their country of origin to define themselves (e.g., Chinese; Pew Research Center, 2012). In fact, the ability of the dominant group (e.g., Whites) to impose a term such as *Asian* on a set of heterogeneous ethnic groups obscures diversity and thus further reifies the power of the dominant group.



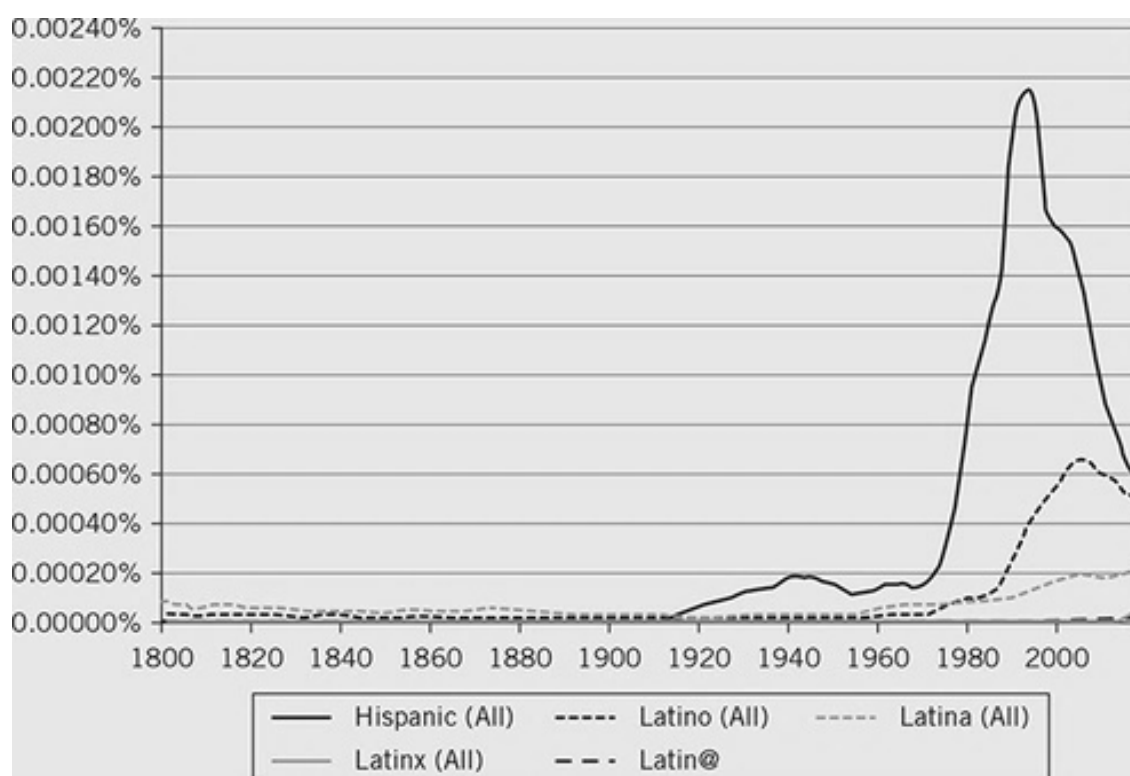
Description

Figure 4.2 Asian American Versus Oriental Ngram

Use of both *Latino* {1946} and the corresponding *Hispanic* {c. 1972} spike in the 1970s and 1980s (see [Figure 4.3](#)). What most of us assume is a neologism is often the older of the two terms. *Latino*, for example, is older than *Hispanic*, and increasingly, many academics and progressives view *Latina* and *Latino* as more appropriate. As with Asian Americans, people of these ethnicities are questioning the use of many of these terms, though, and even the very existence of an all-encompassing ethnicity. As stated earlier, most prefer national labels (e.g., Mexican) to either *Hispanic* or *Latino*, and more than two thirds (69%) believe that the latter two terms represent multiple cultures (Taylor et al., 2012).

Adding a further level of complexity, many use the term *Latin@* or *Latinx* (see Delgado, 2010). Queer communities have long used “x” to transgressively combat heteronormativity in language. Similarly, “Latinx” calls attention to the diversity among those who have historically been called Hispanic, Latino, and Latin@, particularly in terms of gender and

sexuality (de Onís, 2017). In this way, it is part of a larger effort at decolonization and inclusivity. Spanish grammar, unlike English, is itself gendered, which poses either a problem or a possibility with the term, depending on one's perspective; it can either spur dialogue about the issue or complicate language in a way that may be counterproductive. As with all changes in raced language, this term is contested.



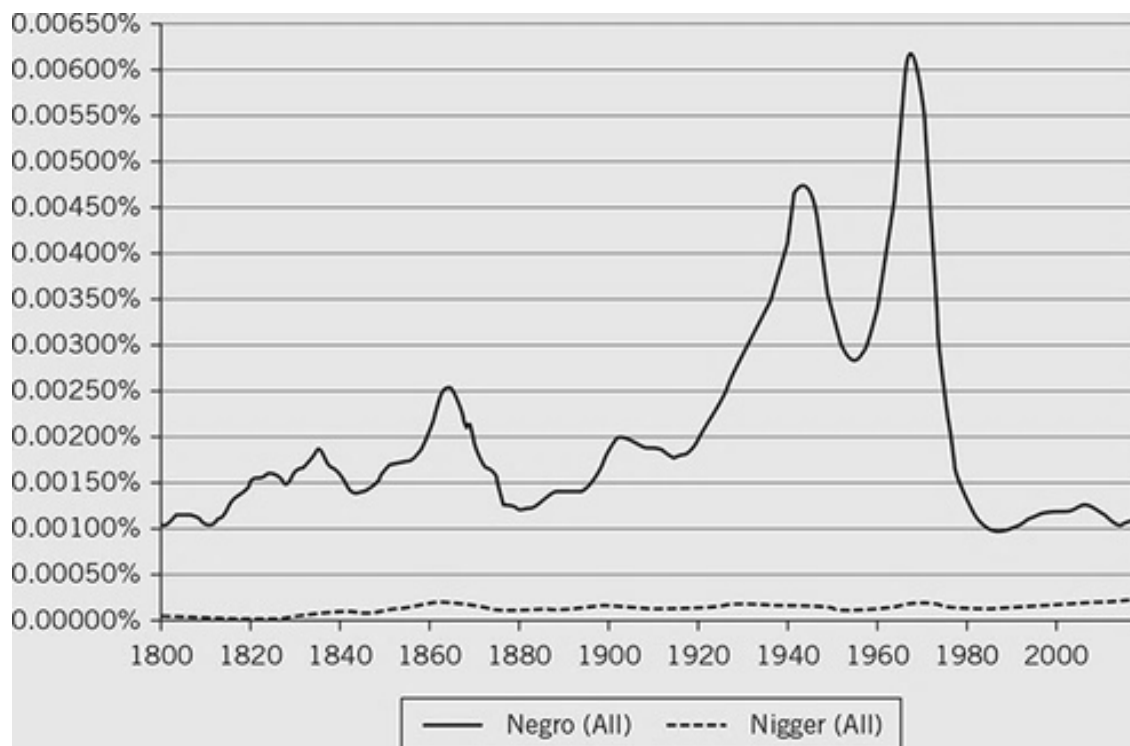
Description

Figure 4.3 *Latino/a* Versus *Hispanic* Ngram

I do not show all the Ngrams for the terms related to the *Black* racial category here, but they still deserve our attention, as they are important in and of themselves and illustrative of the other terms we have addressed. (Notably, it is nearly impossible to compare *Black* {1620s} to these other terms, because it has several definitions pertaining to the color that are unrelated to race.)

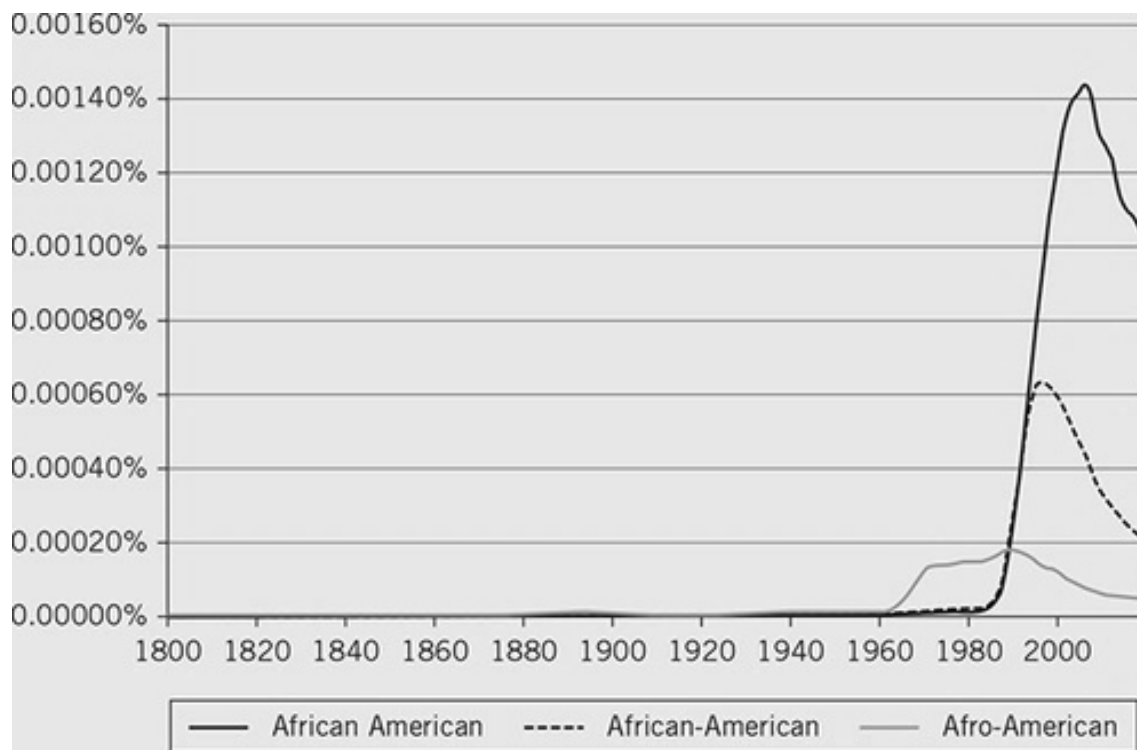
When we look at Ngrams comparing terms used for Black Americans, three things are apparent. First, use of both the N-word {1786} and *Negro*

{1550s} peak during the Civil War and at the tail end of the civil rights movement; however, *Negro* has until recently dwarfed all other terms, even though it is out of date and considered offensive by some ([Figure 4.4](#)). Certainly, the deliberate use of outdated terms is one way to signal intentional insult. Imagine a White speaker emphatically using *Negro* when we could assume he is aware of the alternative and generally accepted terms such as *Black*. Though older speakers may have been socialized to use now-bygone terms, even the most aged of speakers are likely today to be aware of such changes in convention, and breaks with convention carry symbolic power. Second, use of the N-word has remained surprisingly high from the mid-1800s on. Finally, *African American* {1969}, a term championed by Jesse Jackson, developed only quite recently, while *Afro American* {1853} has always been rare ([Figure 4.5](#)).



[Description](#)

Figure 4.4 N-Word Ngram



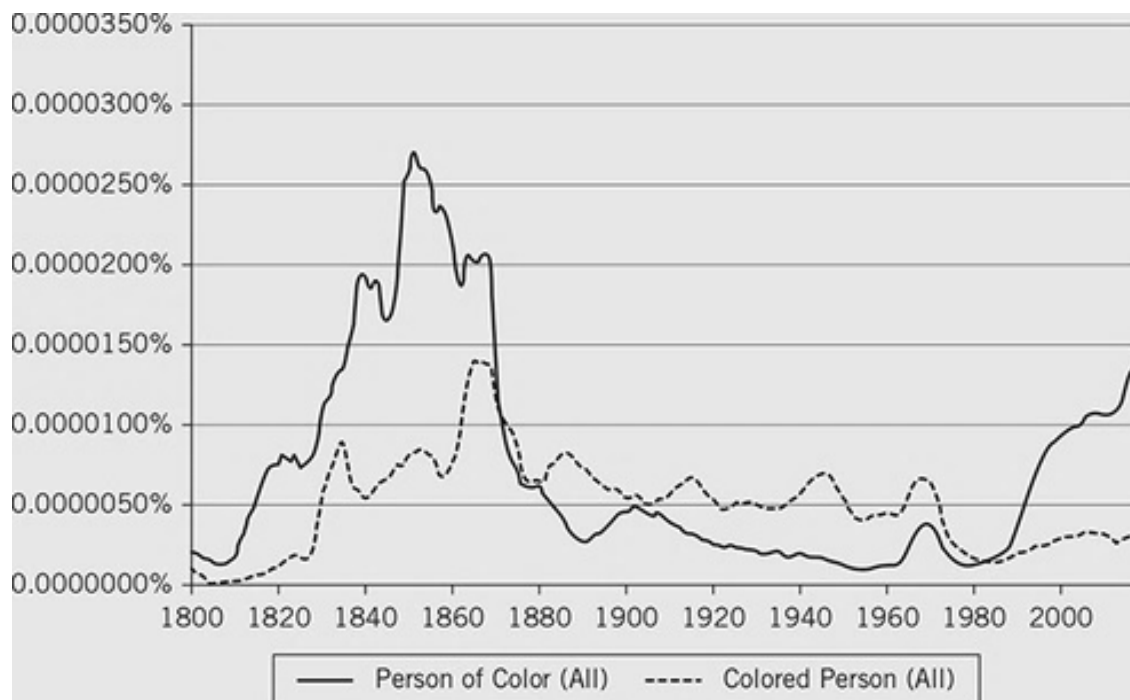
Description

Figure 4.5 *African American Versus African-American Versus Afro-American Ngram*

Motivated by the death of George Floyd and the protests that followed, the *New York Times* has recently changed their style guide to require the capitalization of *Black*. The executive editor and associate managing editor for standards told staff, “We believe this style best conveys elements of shared history and identity, and reflects our goal to be respectful of all the people and communities we cover” (Coleman, 2020). The *Times* decided against a parallel capitalization of *white* and *brown*, arguing that those terms do not reflect shared cultures or histories as is the case with *Black*, though some have argued that choosing not to capitalize *white* perpetuates the privilege of whites to see themselves as unraced and to deny the hegemony of whiteness (see Eligon, 2020). As is a common refrain, there is considerable disagreement about this practice.

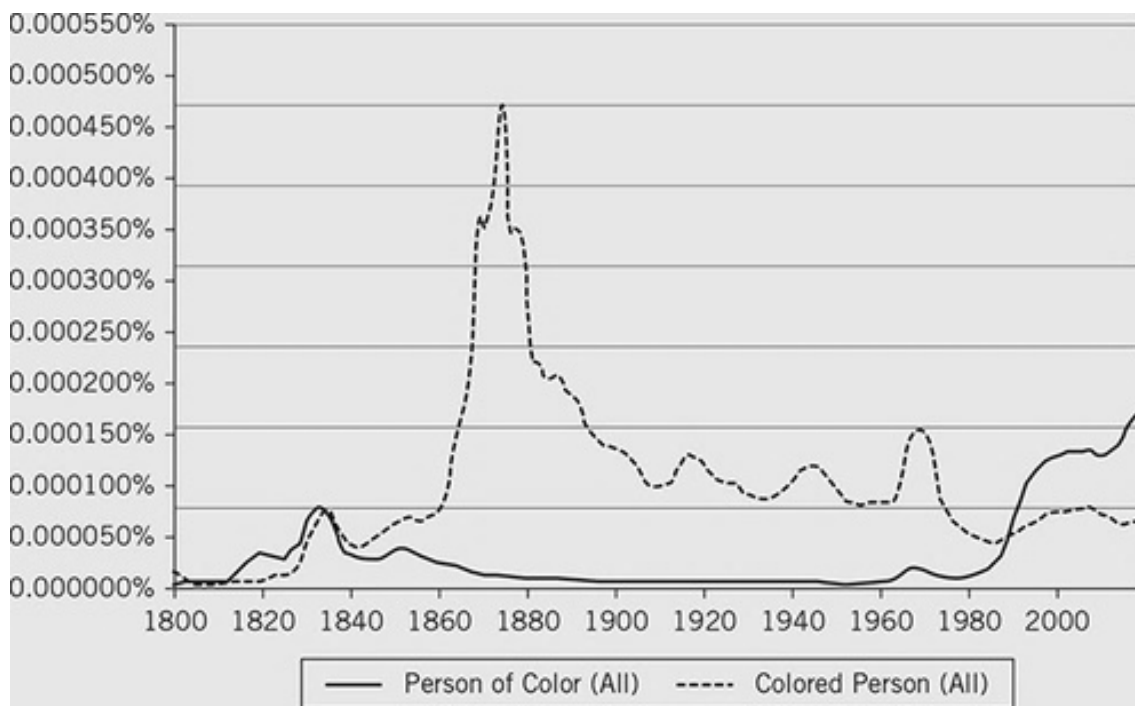
Students often are not aware that most generally consider *Colored people* {1610s} an offensive term and prefer *people of color* {1796} (Garcia, 2020).

Admittedly, it is an odd distinction. Unlike other terms that are preferred over alternatives because they are endonyms (e.g., *Native American* vs. *Indian*), there does not seem to be an obvious reason to favor *of color* over *Colored* aside from convention. It may be that *Colored* serves as a reminder for much of the language and hatred of the segregated South, but its semblance to *of color* makes the distinction confusing for some. (See [Figures 4.6](#) and [4.7](#) for the related Ngrams.)



Description

Figure 4.6 *Person of Color* Versus *Colored Person* Ngram



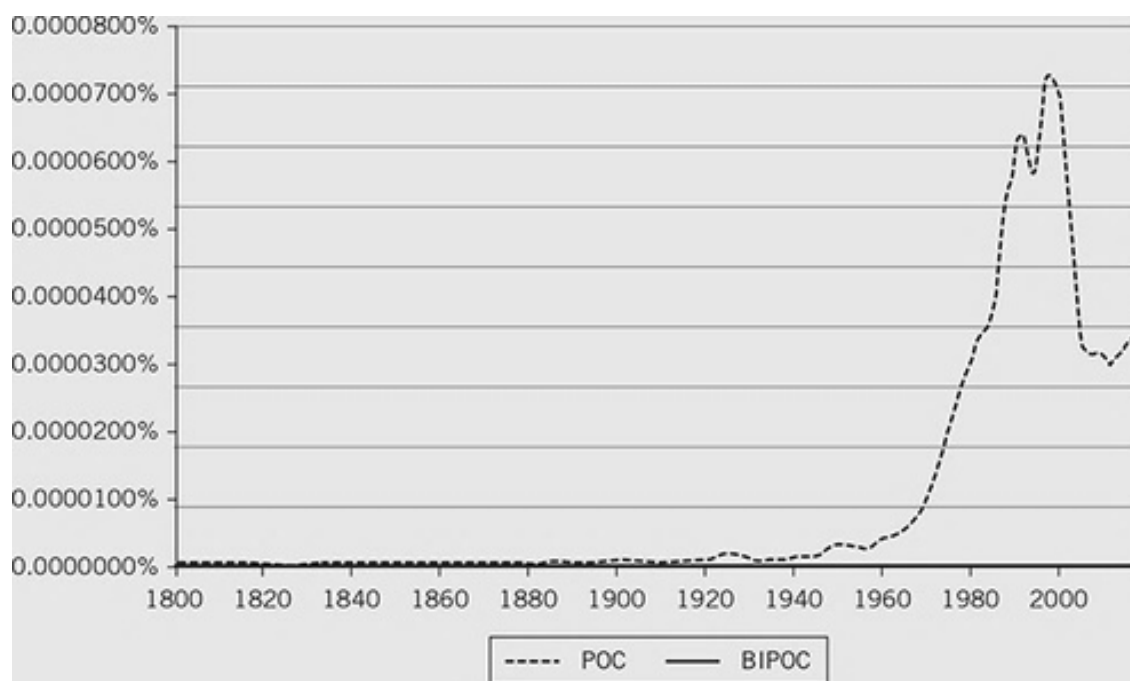
Description

Figure 4.7 *People of Color Versus Colored People* Ngram

Colored starts to fall out of favor around 1970, and *of color* replaces it beginning around 1988 to 1989. Initially, though, *of color* declined with *Colored*. It was only later that it gained acceptance and became a replacement. While *of color* solves some problems when trying to reference those who are not White (as if Whiteness were the absence of color), it is relatively imprecise. I encourage students to say and write *Black* when they mean Black. If they mean “those who are not White,” *non-White* is sometimes permissible. (This distinction is related to the common practice in quantitative sociological analysis of dichotomizing race to Black/non-Black or White/non-White because of limitations of many datasets or for ease of interpretation.) Even this, however, is problematic, as it normalizes Whiteness while othering all other identities. Whenever possible, specificity is preferred.

While the acronym POC, for people of color, is first documented in the late 18th century, BIPOC has recently emerged as a potential replacement (Garcia, 2020). The B and I, for Black and Indigenous, seem to have been

preended to the older acronym in order to (1) draw attention to the marginalization of Black and Native American people, (2) acknowledge the diversity among people of color, and (3) correct the lack of representation that has resulted from that conflation. BIPOC is still, however, a somewhat contested term and has yet to be broadly accepted or applied.



Description

Figure 4.8 *POC* Versus *BIPOC* Ngram

The confusion over these terms is not isolated to people of color. Students are equally confused about how to refer to Whites. Many use the term *Caucasian* {1807}. It has a ring of intellectualism, so students will use it to appear more erudite. The term, however, comes from a misunderstanding about race that began in 1795 when the German anthropologist Johann Blumenbach (1865) theorized that the ancestral homeland of White Europeans was in the Caucasus Mountain region of what is today the border between Russia and Georgia. While scientists discredited the theory long ago, use of the term has persisted. *White* {c. 1600} is a better term.

LANGUAGE AS A FORM OF “OTHERING”

Many of us who are instructors worry about what some of our less-than-tactful students might say in classroom discussions about contentious issues such as those that sociology is wont to address, but we often worry about the wrong kind of tactlessness. Fears about egregious and inappropriate use of the N-word are largely hollow. What should be of far greater concern is language that is much more subtle and, thus, much more dangerous. It is usually something along the lines of, “Professor, why are *they* [meaning Black people] so much more likely to be poor?” Because students are not accustomed to openly discussing topics such as race that are largely taboo in U.S. culture, they do not think critically about the vocabulary they employ. Too often, it becomes “we” versus “they.” Students rarely do this in an intentionally malicious manner, however. As in the previous example, it is often an honest attempt at understanding or benevolence (albeit condescending); however, the employment of this kind of language can be alienating to the “theys” in the class and is an insidious route by which racism is reified. Along with the we/they dichotomy, students are often prone to phrases such as “you people” or “*the* Blacks.” The inclusion of pronouns or articles has the unintended effect of distancing the speaker from the subject, further exacerbating racism.

TALKING ABOUT TALKING ABOUT RACE

It is one thing to read and think about these racial terms and quite another to take the understanding and apply it in one’s life. Most people loathe confrontation, especially with people whom they love and respect. It often happens that a friend or family member will unwittingly say something quite hateful or ignorant, and regularly, classmates—and at times even faculty—will speak in ways that may give one pause. While sociologists are trained to spot these instances, they are often much less obvious to others. As I half-jokingly tell my students, any sentence that begins, “I’m not a racist, but . . .” (or less frequently, “Not to sound like a racist, but . . .”) almost invariably is followed by a blatantly racist statement. If we were quick enough, we might try to catch these folks after the *but* and ask if what they are about to say in any way is in conflict with what they just said. In effect, it would be wonderful to be able to kindly make salient people’s cognitive dissonance. Alas, even the most motivated among us rarely do this. More often than not, we avoid the confrontation altogether, typically hoping that the conversation will change topic as quickly as possible. In many ways,

this is an abdication of our civic duty to confront such ignorance. It is all too easy to rationalize such interactions, arguing that we do better in the long run to model appropriate speaking and thinking instead of risking the wholesale dismissal of our ideas and expertise. It takes both confidence and a soft touch to deal with this topic.

I, along with my fellow authors and the editors of this volume, hope that if you began with any reticence toward learning about race and the problems that come along with it, you are a bit more confident about the topic now. Even if this is the case, though, you likely still have some reservations about how to discuss such topics with others, particularly family, friends, and other loved ones who use outmoded language and hold damaging beliefs. Here are two important tips. First, it is important to be prepared for others to be dismissive. Do not take it personally. Dismissiveness is a reaction prompted by misunderstanding and unrecognized privilege. Open, respectful dialogue is the only way to overcome that misunderstanding. Second, even when one follows this advice, not every battle needs to be fought. As much as you might lament it, you cannot change the world in a day, and you are not even likely to rearrange a person's thinking and speaking in an afternoon. Be selective in your critiques and keep your goals long and broad.

CONCLUSION

Racial and ethnic dynamics change over time, which means the language used to refer to the dynamics changes over time. The meanings inherent to the terminology around race and ethnicity are about power and dominance. By fighting to replace ascribed exonyms with endonyms, groups have correspondingly challenged the structural oppression the terms themselves have reflected. By contextualizing public discussions about the proper use of language when identifying racial and ethnic groups, we help recognize and, ultimately, critically engage the historical legacy of colonialism and racism and discard the misguided belief that it is all a matter of being politically correct.

New understanding often leads to more questions than answers. If you have reached the end of this essay and are unsatisfied by the absence of simple, straightforward answers, I hope you recognize, first, that you are not alone and, second, that the confusing language around race and

ethnicity is a symptom of both the messy and lamentable history of the topic and the complexity of social interaction. It is only by engaging in this topic that we can move together toward a more equitable future.

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NOTE

1. I use the 1800 to 2019 corpus of English terms with a smoothing of 3 years for all Ngrams. All are case insensitive, except Figure 4.5 to increase graph readability and Figure 4.7 to match acronyms.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Google. (2013). *Google Books Ngram viewer*.
<http://books.google.com/ngrams>

Pew Research Center. (2012). *The rise of Asian Americans*. Pew Research Center: Social & Demographic Trends.
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans>

Taylor, P., Lopez, M. H., Martínez, J. H., & Velasco, G. (2012). *When labels don't fit: Hispanics and their views of identity*. Pew Research Center: Hispanic Trends. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/04/when-labels-dont-fit-hispanics-and-their-views-of-identity>

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What fears do you have about using or hearing inappropriate language regarding race? What prior experiences do you have with these

issues? How does this illustrate the complex and “messy” nature of race and identity that the author discusses in this essay?

2. Can you identify currently acceptable racial or ethnic terms not mentioned in the essay that you believe still reflect historical and ongoing oppression?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Make your own Ngrams. Choose a race or ethnicity with different labels (e.g., *African American* and *Negro* [or *negro*]), and go to the Ngram website to investigate the changes in the use of these terms over time.
2. In small groups, role-play a situation in which someone uses inappropriate or outdated racial terminology. Stage a mock intervention in which group members attempt to correct the lone member’s thinking and speech.
3. Interview older members of your own family about their ethnic and racial identities. What terms do they use? What terms do they prefer? How have the terms that others have used for them changed over their lifetime?
4. Ask people in the course of everyday interactions what terms they prefer. Devise other ways to determine what terms your peers use and prefer.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/black-african-american-style-debate.html>

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Taylor, P., Lopez, M. H., Martínez, J. H., & Velasco, G. (2012). When labels don't fit: Hispanics and their views of identity. Pew Research Center: Hispanic Trends. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/04/when-labels-dont-fit-hispanics-and-their-views-of-identity>

Descriptions of Images and Figures

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.000000 to 0.000900, in increments of 0.000100. All data are approximate. The curve for American Indian is plotted through (1800, 0.000010), (1820, 0.000020), (1840, 0.000050), (1860, 0.000050), (1880, 0.000050), (1900, 0.000060), (1920, 0.000090), (1940, 0.000150), (1960, 0.000160), (1980, 0.000500), (1990, 0.000810), and (2000, 0.000500). The curve for Native American is plotted through (1800, 0.000010), (1820, 0.000020), (1840, 0.000040), (1860, 0.000030), (1880, 0.000040), (1900, 0.000040), (1920, 0.000010), (1940, 0.000040), (1960, 0.000030), (1980, 0.000250), and (2000, 0.000780).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.00000 to 0.00180, in increments of 0.00020. All data are approximate. The curve for Asian American is plotted through (1800, 0.00000), (1820, 0.00000), (1840, 0.00000), (1860, 0.00000), (1880, 0.00000), (1900, 0.00000), (1920, 0.00000), (1940, 0.00000), (1960, 0.00000), (1980, 0.00005), and (2000, 0.00025). The curve for Native American is plotted through (1800, 0.00110), (1810, 0.00101), (1820, 0.00130), (1825, 0.00152), (1840, 0.00132), (1860, 0.00130), (1880, 0.00132), (1900, 0.00118), (1920, 0.00100), (1930, 0.00138), (1940, 0.00070), (1960, 0.00090), (1980, 0.00079), and (2000, 0.00072).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.00000 to 0.00240, in increments of 0.00020. All data are approximate. The curve for Hispanic is plotted through (1915, 0.00001), (1920, 0.00002), (1940, 0.00020), (1960, 0.00015), (1975, 0.00080), (1980, 0.00120), (1990, 0.00210), and (2000, 0.00120). The curve for Latino individuals is plotted through (1800, 0.00002), (1820, 0.00002), (1840, 0.00002), (1860, 0.00001), (1880, 0.00001), (1900, 0.00001), (1920, 0.00001), (1940, 0.00001), (1960, 0.00002), (1980, 0.00010), (1990, 0.00040), and (2000, 0.00065). The curve for Latina individuals is plotted through (1800, 0.00007), (1820, 0.00005), (1840, 0.00003), (1860, 0.00003), (1880, 0.00004), (1900, 0.00002), (1920, 0.00002), (1940, 0.00002), (1960,

0.00007), (1980, 0.00010), (1990, 0.00015), and (2000, 0.00020). The curve for Latinx individuals is plotted through y equals 0.00001 for all years from 1800 to 2000, and y equals 0.00003 in 2020. The curve for Latin@ individuals is plotted through y equals 0.00001 in 2000 and y equals 0.00002 after 2000.

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.00000 to 0.00650, in increments of 0.00050. All data are approximate. The curve for Negro is plotted through (1800, 0.00100), (1820, 0.00160), (1830, 0.00180), (1840, 0.00150), (1860, 0.00180), (1865, 0.00250), (1880, 0.00125), (1900, 0.00175), (1920, 0.00200), (1940, 0.00475), (1960, 0.00280), (1965, 0.00620), (1980, 0.00100), and (2000, 0.00125). The curve for Nigger is plotted through (1800, 0.00002), (1820, 0.00002), (1840, 0.00010), (1860, 0.00035), (1880, 0.00015), (1900, 0.00025), (1920, 0.00020), (1940, 0.00040), (1960, 0.00030), (1980, 0.00025), and (2000, 0.00025).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.00000 to 0.00160, in increments of 0.00020. All data are approximate. The curve for African American is plotted through (1885, 0.00001), (1900, 0.00001), (1940, 0.00001), (1960, 0.00001), (1980, 0.00010), (1990, 0.00060), and (2000, 0.00138), and descends gradually after 2000. The curve for African-American is plotted through (1965, 0.00002), (1970, 0.00003), (1980, 0.00005), (1985, 0.00020), (1990, 0.00060), and (2000, 0.00065), and descends gradually after 2000. The curve for Afro-American is plotted through (1800, 0.00001), (1820, 0.00001), (1840, 0.00001), (1860, 0.00001), (1880, 0.00001), (1885, 0.00003), (1900, 0.00001), (1920, 0.00001), (1940, 0.00004), (1960, 0.00004), (1965, 0.00016), (1970, 0.00017), (1980, 0.00018), (1990, 0.00019), and (2000, 0.00018).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from

0.0000000 to 0.0000350, in increments of 0.0000050. All data are approximate. The curve for person of color is plotted through (1800, 0.0000020), (1810, 0.0000040), (1820, 0.0000075), (1830, 0.0000125), (1840, 0.0000180), (1850, 0.0000270), (1860, 0.0000180), (1870, 0.0000140), (1880, 0.0000060), (1885, 0.0000025), (1900, 0.0000050), (1920, 0.0000025), (1940, 0.0000020), (1960, 0.0000015), (1965, 0.0000035), (1980, 0.0000015), (1990, 0.0000050), and (2000, 0.0000090). The curve for colored person is plotted through (1800, 0.0000008), (1820, 0.0000010), (1830, 0.0000050), (1835, 0.0000080), (1840, 0.0000055), (1845, 0.0000070), (1860, 0.0000020), (1870, 0.0000140), (1880, 0.0000065), (1885, 0.0000080), (1900, 0.0000050), (1917, 0.0000060), (1920, 0.0000050), (1940, 0.0000055), (1945, 0.0000060), (1950, 0.0000045), (1960, 0.0000045), (1965, 0.0000060), (1980, 0.0000015), and (2000, 0.0000030).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.000000 to 0.000550, in increments of 0.000050. All data are approximate. The curve for people of color is plotted through (1800, 0.000010), (1820, 0.000035), (1830, 0.000075), (1840, 0.000035), (1850, 0.000045), (1860, 0.000025), (1880, 0.000010), (1900, 0.000010), (1920, 0.000010), (1940, 0.000010), (1960, 0.000015), (1965, 0.000020), (1980, 0.000015), (1990, 0.000075), and (2000, 0.000125). The curve for colored people is plotted through (1800, 0.000020), (1820, 0.000010), (1830, 0.000075), (1840, 0.000045), (1850, 0.000070), (1860, 0.000075), (1870, 0.000470), (1880, 0.000200), (1900, 0.000130), (1920, 0.000125), (1940, 0.000120), (1960, 0.000075), (1965, 0.000150), (1980, 0.000050), and (2000, 0.000075).

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1800 to 2000, in increments of 20. The vertical axis is labeled percentage and ranges from 0.0000000 to 0.0000800, in increments of 0.0000100. All data are approximate. The curve for POC is plotted through (1800, 0.0000001), (1820, 0.0000001), (1840, 0.0000001), (1860, 0.0000001), (1880, 0.0000001), (1900, 0.0000005), (1900, 0.0000010), (1910, 0.0000025), (1920, 0.0000015), (1925, 0.0000035), (1940, 0.0000015), (1950, 0.0000045), (1960, 0.0000055), (1970, 0.0000150), (1980, 0.0000325),

(1990, 0.0000620), and (2000, 0.0000720). The curve for BIPOC is plotted through y equals 0.0000001 for all the years from 1800 to 2000.

ESSAY 5 “BUT ISLAM IS A RELIGION, NOT A RACE!” : THE RACIALIZATION OF MUSLIMS

Moustafa Bayoumi *Brooklyn College, City University of New York*

The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*

But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?

—Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*

Late in 1942, as World War II raged overseas, a Yemeni Muslim immigrant named Ahmed Hassan quietly appeared one day in front of a U.S. district court judge. The Michigan resident had come to court for a hearing regarding his petition for naturalization, and while we don't know what he wore that day, it was probably something carefully chosen to downplay his “extremely dark complexion,” as described in the judge's decision (In re *Hassan*, 1942). Hassan, after all, was making his official appearance in front of the court to prove that he was a White person and, therefore, eligible for citizenship.

Although Hassan was one of the first Arab Muslims to petition for American naturalization, his case was far from unique. Beginning in 1790 and until 1952, the Naturalization Act had limited citizenship to “free white persons” but without exactly defining what makes a person White (Alien Act, 1798). Thus, many people, primarily of

Asian descent, had appeared in front of the courts before Hassan to argue that they were “white by law,” to borrow a phrase from López’s (1996) book of the same name. The immigration laws had changed over the years. In 1870, for example, the Naturalization Act was amended to include “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent” (Act of July 14, 1870), and in 1940 language was added to include “races indigenous to the Western Hemisphere” (Nationality Act, 1940). Nonetheless, certain Asians, beginning with the Chinese, had been excluded from U.S. citizenship since 1878 (López, 1996, pp. 42–45). In 1882, Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, and in 1917, most immigration from Asia was further curtailed with the establishment of what Congress called the “Asiatic Barred Zone” (Chin, 1998, p. 15). The reasoning here was that the country should not admit people who had no chance of naturalization. Despite all these changes, it was still far from clear just what race Hassan was, especially with Yemen sitting squarely on the Arabian Peninsula in Asia.

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Hassan certainly knew he had a fight ahead of him and was aware that the battle would be about his group membership and not his individual qualifications. He understood that the court would want to know if Arabs were white or yellow, European or Asian, Western or Eastern. He probably knew that the court would wonder if Arabs, as a people, could assimilate into the White Christian culture of the United States or if they were, by nature, unsuited to adapt to the republic where they now lived. After all, in previous “racial-prerequisite cases,” as they are called, such political and cultural questions were commonly asked, although they traditionally narrowed in simply on the color of one’s skin. Even then, as López (1996) tells us, the courts adopted shifting standards of Whiteness, first using scientific knowledge (now largely discredited) or

congressional intent and then adopting the test of “common understanding” (pp. 67–77).

We know that Hassan was aware of the impending questions and the legal history of immigration by the fact that he came to court that day armed with affidavits stating that his coloring “is typical of the majority of the Arabians from the region from which he comes, which [in] fact is attributed to the intense heat and the blazing sun of that area” (In re *Hassan*, 1942, p. 844). Under his arm were other affidavits, claims by unnamed ethnologists declaring that “the Arabs are remote descendants of and therefore members of the Caucasian or white race, and that [Hassan] is therefore eligible for citizenship” (In re *Hassan*, 1942, p. 846). He had done his homework. He had hope.

Whatever optimism he may have had, however, was soon dashed. Hassan’s petition was denied. In his three-page decision dated December 14, 1942, Judge Arthur J. Tuttle straightforwardly stated that “Arabs are not white persons within the meaning of the [Nationality] Act” (In re *Hassan*, 1942, p. 847). Interestingly, Tuttle based his determination of Hassan’s Whiteness not principally on the color of his skin but primarily on the fact that he was an Arab and Islam is the dominant religion among the Arabs. “Apart from the dark skin of the Arabs,” explained the judge, “it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominately Christian peoples of Europe. It cannot be expected that as a class they would readily intermarry with our population and be assimilated into our civilization” (In re *Hassan*, 1942, p. 845). One should note that according to this judge, Arabs have a culture whereas Americans have a “civilization.”

Religion determines race. At least in 1942 it did, and so Arabs were not considered White people by statute because they were (unassimilable) Muslims. But by 1944, a mere 17 months later, things changed radically. At that time, another Arab Muslim would petition the government for citizenship. His name was Mohamed Mohriez,

and he was “an Arab born in Sanhy, Badan, Arabia,” who came to the United States on January 15, 1921. Unlike *Hassan*, however, Mohriez would succeed in his petition. District Judge Charles E. Wyzanski, who ruled in Mohriez’s favor, made a point of explaining in his brief decision (delivered on April 13, 1944) that the global political leadership of the United States requires its adherence to the principles of equality that it espouses. After citing *Hassan* and stating his position (“the Arab passes muster as a white person”), the judge ended his decision by admitting that the “vital interest [of the United States] as a world power” required granting Mohriez’s petition (Ex parte *Mohriez*, 1944, p. 942). Why? Wyzanski explained that his decision was necessary “to promote friendlier relations between the United States and other nations and so as to fulfill the promise that we shall treat all men as created equal” (Ex parte *Mohriez*, 1944, p. 943). If in *Hassan*, religion produces race, then in *Mohriez*, politics directly sways legal racial determination.

The last of the Asian exclusion laws was repealed in 1952 in favor of a restricting quota system of immigration. In 1965, the law changed again, abandoning the quota system entirely and making the racial prerequisite cases, with their now antiquated racial language, look like history. But half a century after the *Hassan* decision, and following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Arabs and Muslims have again been repeatedly forced to undergo state scrutiny and official state definition simply because of their group membership and not because of their individual qualifications. Reminiscent of the earlier racial prerequisite cases, today’s post–September 11 state policies also teeter uncomfortably on race, religion, and contemporary politics, and the result has been mass exclusions and deportations of Arab and Muslim men from the United States in a strategy that, I argue, can properly be described as deliberate and racist.

Specifically, I am talking about the policy known as “special registration,” a program of the George W. Bush administration’s war on terror that drew on the history of the racial prerequisite cases for

its authority and its practice. When it was first announced, special registration provoked some critical commentary from journalists and legal scholars, but it has hardly been investigated in depth. It bears looking into, however, for an inquiry into its mechanism should reveal at least two things: (1) the insufficiency of past critiques of legal racial formation (like López's) to address how political expediency affects state definitions of race and (2) the fact that through special registration, the government, in effect, turned a religion, namely Islam, into a race. The rest of this essay elaborates these points, but since the details of special registration are not well known, it is worth reviewing the program in detail before continuing.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL REGISTRATION?

On September 11, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Bush administration established the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) as part of its strategy in the War on Terror. The program was formally ended by the Obama administration on April 28, 2011 (Jordan, 2011). NSEERS, commonly known as “special registration,” was a controversial and poorly executed program, and it was particularly reviled in the American Muslim community, where the brunt of its enforcement was felt.

What exactly was special registration? It was a government-mandated system of recording and surveillance that required all nonimmigrant males in the United States over the age of 16 who were citizens and nationals from select countries to be interviewed under oath, fingerprinted, and photographed by a Department of Justice official (Dinh, 2001). These procedures applied to nonimmigrant visitors as they crossed the border and entered the United States. Until December 2, 2003, this also applied to those already in the country (what the Department of Justice termed “call-in” registration). All those who were required to register had to

provide proof of their legal status to remain in the United States, proof of study or employment (in the form of school enrollment forms or employment pay stubs), and proof of residential address (such as a lease or utility bill). Also, "The office may ask many other, unrelated questions, including questions related to national security and law enforcement" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2002). Some also had to supply any and all of their credit card numbers and the names and addresses of two U.S. citizens who could authenticate their identity and had to answer questions regarding their political and religious beliefs. Two friends of mine, unknown to each other and having different countries of origin, went through the procedure, including the requirement of U.S. citizen guarantors and personal questions about their political beliefs. Before the program was modified, registrants also had to reregister within 40 days with a Department of Justice official if they remained in the country for more than 30 days and then again annually. In addition, special registrants could enter and exit from the country only from specific ports of entry. Each and every time he entered and left the country, the nonimmigrant male had to go through the byzantine and arduous registration process again.

It goes almost without saying that special registration was heavily burdensome on the registrant, and those who underwent it complained that they were treated as if they were guilty of a crime and had to prove their innocence, thus flipping an avowed tradition of American jurisprudence (innocent until proven guilty) on its head. The execution of the program also came under fire. When the deadline for the first call-in registration passed in December 2002, mayhem ensued, particularly in Southern California, where, according to the *Washington Post*, hundreds of men (almost 1,200 nationwide) were incarcerated in mass arrests on alleged immigration violations (U.S. Detains Nearly 1,200 During Registry, 2003). Ramona Ripston, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), compared special registration to World War II measures against Japanese Americans. "I think it is shocking what is happening. It is reminiscent of what happened in the past with the

internment of Japanese Americans,” she told Reuters (Serjeant, 2002). Many of the men arrested had been in the country for over a decade and had families in the United States (with U.S. citizen children), and many more complained that their status was, in fact, legal but that their paperwork was incomplete due to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) backlogs (Lee, 2002). Tens of thousands of lives were disrupted by the special registration program, many more if we consider the collateral effect on families. After implementation began in October 2002, NSEERS had registered at least 83,519 men and boys domestically (and over 93,740 at points of entry; Department of Homeland Security, 2003). Out of this number, 13,799 were served with “Notice to Appear” subpoenas, meaning that deportation proceedings had begun in their cases. The Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* termed this the “largest deportation in [American] history” (Thirty-Five Percent of Deportees From US Are From Pakistan, 2003). Not a single charge of terrorism was levied as a result of special registration (Simpson et al., 2003).

Just what was going on here? If special registration was meant to be a program to net terrorists, as the government claims, then it was nearly a colossal and expensive failure. The Department of Justice stated that “in light of the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, and subsequent events, and based on information available to the Attorney General, the Attorney General has determined that certain nonimmigrant aliens require closer monitoring when national security or law enforcement interests are raised” (Department of Justice, 2002). But the criterion for “closer monitoring” of certain people was based almost exclusively on a single fact: national origin. Kris Kobach, an architect of the program, is unapologetic about such broad-based selection. “We had to just use the very blunt instrument of nationality [for special registration],” he explains (Simpson et al., 2003). But the dull thud of this blunt program was its own failure since it was unlikely to result in the capture of a terrorist, who, if he or she were in the country already, would logically not bother to register before carrying out any nefarious activity. Since the mechanism (i.e., the profile) of the

program was known, it was also highly unlikely to catch an incoming terrorist, who would again logically search for ways to circumvent special registration's categories.

Initially focused on citizens and nationals from five states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria), the list of targeted nations requiring registration ballooned to 25 countries, some in North and East Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Eritrea), others in West Asia (Yemen, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Lebanon, Jordan), South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan), Southeast Asia (Indonesia), and East Asia (North Korea). Six of these countries are listed by the State Department among the seven state sponsors of terrorism (the initial five, plus North Korea; Cuba is the seventh, and its absence is telling). Two of these countries (Iraq and Afghanistan) had recently been invaded by the United States, and the vast majority of the rest are allies of the United States. This fact alone—that the overwhelming number of men who were subject to special registration came from friendly countries—is significant, for it proves that something other than enemy nationality was operative here.

That special registration was a discriminatory program is incontrovertible. Ostensibly, it discriminated by gender, age, national origin, and citizenship status. The discrimination was, in all likelihood, entirely legal under the plenary power doctrine, a century-old Supreme Court decision that holds that Congress and the executive branch have sovereign authority to regulate immigration without judicial review (Chin, 1998; Olafson, 1999). That decision dates from 1898, upheld Chinese exclusion from the United States, and is still considered good law. Furthermore, according to legal scholar Gabriel Chin, the plenary power doctrine approves discrimination based not only on national origin but also on race:

In immigration law alone, racial classifications are still routinely permitted. In recent decades, courts in the District of

Columbia and the First, Second, Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Circuits have said not only that aliens may be excluded or deported on the basis of race without strict scrutiny, but also that such racial classifications are lawful per se. Apparently no court has even hinted to the contrary. These circuits merely honor an unbroken line of Supreme Court decisions holding that “Congress may exclude aliens of a particular race from the United States” and, more broadly, that an alien seeking admission “has no constitutional rights regarding his application” (Chin, 1998, pp. 3–4).

It ought to be noted that in the publication of its rule in the Federal Register (2002b), the Department of Justice cited key plenary power decisions to give special registration its legal legs on which to stand. Since the Chinese exclusion cases provided the foundation for the plenary power doctrine, special registration thus has its own direct connection to Chinese exclusion.

One should also note that little unites the disparate group of special registration countries but that they are all Muslim-majority nations. To argue, as the Department of Justice did, that what unifies the list is not Islam but the “heightened risk of involvement in terrorist” activity (presumably al-Qaeda membership) just does not hold (Federal Register, 2002b). By the government’s own admission, al-Qaeda activity had already been discovered in France, the Philippines, Spain, Germany, and Britain, but no visitors from these countries were required to undergo special registration. Indeed, the case of Richard Reid, the so-called shoe bomber, who converted to Islam (and thus is not a “citizen or national” of a Muslim country), underscores the limitations—or falsity—of such an argument.

Special registration accomplished several things, nonetheless. It reinscribed, through a legal mechanism, the cultural assumption that a terrorist is foreign-born, an alien in the United States, and a

Muslim, and that all Muslim men who fit this profile are potentially terrorists. But special registration also did more than this. Special registration made legal and executive sense to the government because it participated in a long bureaucratic tradition found in American law of racial formation. Through its legal procedures, special registration was a political and bureaucratic policy that created a race out of a religion.

RACING RELIGION

How does special registration “race” Islam? To begin answering this question, we need to investigate the relationship between religious and racial difference in U.S. politics and to understand how both racial and religious difference can be exploited in ways that are racist by definition. Racism is, of course, a complex social phenomenon that is difficult to sum up in just a few words. George Fredrickson, however, offers a useful definition in his book-length essay on the topic. According to Fredrickson, racism “exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes to be hereditary and unalterable” (Frederickson, 2002, p. 170). While racism may at times appear similar to religious clashes, Fredrickson sees them as, in fact, quite distinct for the important reason that in religiously based systems or conflicts, the opportunities for conversion have always been present as a way to defeat one’s own marginal status. In a religious conflict, it is not who you are but what you believe that is important. Under a racist regime, there is no escape from who you are (or are perceived to be by those in power). Thus, Fredrickson correctly finds racial and not religious division as driving the Spanish Inquisition’s purity of blood laws. “Anti-Judaism became anti-Semitism,” he explains, “whenever it turned into a consuming hatred that made getting rid of Jews seem preferable to trying to convert them, and anti-Semitism became racism when the belief took hold that Jews were intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions”

(Frederickson, 2002, p. 19). Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain were both collectively marked as dangerous and excludable because of a belief in their innate and hereditary natures. Exclusion was preferable to conversion.

How one's religion or culture is apprehended, for example, can also assume a racist character. During the Spanish Inquisition, certain cultural (not necessarily religious) practices labeled one as a Jew or a Muslim. Changing one's sheets on Friday could make one Jewish in the eyes of the Christian community (Kamen, 1998, p. 62), just as sitting on the ground (as opposed to in a chair) proved one was Muslim (Kamen, 1998, p. 223). As the explanatory power of scientific theories of race has declined in our contemporary world, culture has again assumed a prominent role in determining and describing racial difference. As Balibar (1991) puts it, "Culture can also function like nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin" (p. 22).

Racism, however, should not be seen as something that is necessarily irrational or is a "consuming hatred," as Frederickson describes it. Although these certainly are historic realities, racism must also be understood as a careful ideology that is, unfortunately, politically useful, particularly in circumstances where one is called upon to define oneself against another. It determines the other, and it does so through various institutions, the law being a primary one among them. It also has historically led to three different categories of material consequences: exploitation, extermination, and exclusion (Frederickson, 2002, p. 9). All three, unfortunately, have their precedents in U.S. history, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out in *Racial Formation in the United States*:

From the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and indeed

one's sense of "identity." The hallmark of this history has been racism, not the abstract ethos of equality, and while racial minority groups have been treated differently, all can bear witness to the tragic consequences of racial oppression. The examples are familiar: Native Americans faced genocide, blacks were subjected to racial slavery, Mexicans were invaded and colonized, and Asians faced exclusion. (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 1)

Here is a short history of racism in the United States, from extermination (of Native Americans) to exploitation (slavery and colonization) to exclusion (of Asians). It is in the last of these, exclusion, where special registration operates.

With its broad-brush focus on national origin, special registration juridically excluded thousands of Muslims by category and created a barrier that repelled even more. Special registration created a vast, new legal geography of suspicion for the U.S. government, a geography that in some way mirrored the "Asiatic barred zone" of the 1917 Immigration Act. It may not have prevented visitors from entering, but it made it onerous to penetrate the border. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that special registration, rather than barring entry, drew a burdensome zone around Muslim-majority countries.

But special registration, again, did more. In requiring that citizens and nationals of those countries suffer through its burdens, special registration collapsed citizenship, ethnicity, and religion into race. Under the special registration guidelines, immigration officers were charged with the authority to register whomever they had reason to believe should be specially registered. This procedure extended to nonimmigrant aliens whom the inspecting officer had "reason to believe are nationals or citizens of a country designation by the Attorney General" (Federal Register, 2002b, August 12, p. 52592). In a memo to regional directors and patrol agents, the INS clarified that

this included cases such as “a nonimmigrant alien who is a dual national and is applying for admission as a national of a country that is not subject to special registration, but the alien’s other nationality *would* subject him or her to special registration” (Memorandum for Regional Directors, 2002). Numerous reports since special registration began have indicated that birthplace was used as the trigger to determine the “reason to believe” one should be registered.

In fact, soon after special registration began, registering dual nationals became commonplace and sparked a minor international incident. Canada issued a rare travel advisory for its citizens visiting the United States because the United States was discriminating between types of Canadian citizenship. The United States offered Canada assurances that dual citizenship would not automatically trigger special registration, and Canada withdrew its advisory. Canadian citizens who are nationals from the listed countries, however, continued to complain that birthplace triggered registration automatically (One Religion, 12 Voices, 2003).

The implications of every national being required to register are that if you happen to hold dual citizenship with, say, Sweden and Morocco, or if you were born in Morocco but are not its citizen, or if you were born out of Morocco but to parents who are Moroccan, then you qualify. Swedish citizenship, even if it is your only citizenship, is no protection from special registration if you were born or your parents were born in one of the listed countries. The reason why this in particular is troubling is that, considering the broad geography of special registration, it makes descent or inheritability of Islam (and gender) the defining criterion. And that inheritability has nothing to do with enemy nationality because most of the listed nations are considered allies of the United States. Nor has it anything to do with belief or political affiliation because it says nothing about each individual’s worldview. Rather, it is only about one’s blood relationship to Islam. Through that blood relationship, legal barriers have been established to exclude as many Muslims as

possible, and that fact consequently turns Islam into a racial category.

THE ARABIAN GULF OF RACIAL DIFFERENCE

Troubling as all this is, the relationship of Islam to racial definition in the United States is not new with special registration, and it is important to review this past to understand the history that special registration has to U.S. political and racial logic. In fact, the combination of Islam and immigration has its own legal history in the United States, and we can discover that by surveying some of the key racial prerequisite cases from 1909 to 1944, particularly cases like *Hassan* and *Mohriez* in which the petitioners are Muslim or come from countries with Muslim majorities. Whereas we may be accustomed to thinking of racial definition as being determined by the color of one's skin, what we observe here is that religion in general, and Islam in particular, plays a role in adjudicating the race of immigrants seeking naturalization in the United States. The various immigration acts that constitute the body of racial exclusion laws did not explicitly place religion inside a logic of race, but the courts did repeatedly note the religion of an applicant, and that in itself was often a deciding (if not the deciding) factor in determining the race of the petitioner. Although the physical attributes of the applicants were often discussed, the main question surrounding many of these cases, as in the *Hassan* decision cited earlier, was actually about the ability to assimilate to the dominant, Christian culture.

The cases are worth a look. An initial review reveals, as one might expect, that many did rely simply on ocular proof to determine race. Race, it would appear, was the color of one's skin, no more and no less. This seems to be the case with the Syrian Costa George Najour, who in 1909 went before the district judge to petition for citizenship. The judge was impressed that Najour "is not particularly dark, and has none of the characteristics or appearances of the

Mongolian race, but, so far as I can see and judge, has the appearance and characteristics of the Caucasian race” (In re *Najour*, 1909, p. 735). Najour’s petition was granted.

Similarly, skin tone is called into question when, in 1909, four Armenians petitioned for naturalization. “I find that all were white persons in appearance, not darker in complexion than some persons of north European descent traceable for generations,” writes the district judge in that case (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 835). Likewise, in *United States v. Dolla* (1910), the Circuit Court of Appeals makes the determination that in this case it lacks jurisdiction, but not without first noting the facts of the case, with a novelist’s detail. The court states that Dolla, an Afghan who lived in Calcutta before coming to the United States, has a “complexion that is dark, eyes dark, features regular and rather delicate, hair very black, wavy and very fine and soft.” It continues,

On being called on to pull up the sleeves of his coat and shirt, the skin of his arm where it had been protected from the sun and weather by his clothing was found to be several shades lighter than that of his face and hands, and was sufficiently transparent for the blue color of the veins to show very clearly. He was about medium or a little below medium in physical size, and his bones and limbs appeared to be rather small and delicate. Before determining that the applicant was entitled to naturalization the presiding judge closely scrutinized his appearance. (*United States v. Dolla*, 1910, p. 102)

His race was written on his body, just above his tan line.

In the case of In re *Ellis* (1910), the judge notes that “ethnologically, [Ellis] is of Semitic stock, a markedly white type of race,” although the judge does concede that “the words ‘white person’. . . taken in a

strictly literal sense, constitute a very indefinite description of a class of persons, where none can be said to be literally white, and those called white may be found of every shade from the lightest blonde to the most swarthy brunette" (p. 1003). Ellis, too, was admitted.

In *Ex parte Shahid* (1913), the petitioner was, once again, a Syrian, yet this time "in color, he is about that of walnut, or somewhat darker than is the usual mulatto or one-half mixed blood between the white and the Negro races" (*Ex parte Shahid*, 1913, p. 813). *Shahid* is most interesting because the judge acknowledges the limitations of phenotypical race: "One Syrian may be of pure or almost pure Jewish, Turkish, or Greek blood, and another the pure-blooded descendant of an Egyptian, an Abyssinian, or a Sudanese. How is the court to decide? It would be most unfortunate if the matter were to be left to the conclusions of a judge based on ocular inspection" (*Ex parte Shahid*, 1913, p. 814). Taking up the argument that "free white persons" meant "Europeans," the judge goes on to acknowledge that that definition, too, is problematic since that "would exclude persons coming from the very cradle of the Jewish and Christian religions" (*Ex parte Shahid*, 1913, p. 816). Although he seems bothered by such a line of thought ("such arguments are of the emotional ad captandum order that have no place in the judicial interpretation of a statute"), the judge relies on the strict application of the separation of powers to devolve himself of any greater comment on the matter. *Shahid* will be excluded, he explains, not because of his race but simply on his "own personal disqualifications [sic]" (*Ex parte Shahid*, 1913, p. 817).

The first time a Syrian is denied naturalization because of his race occurs with *Ex parte Dow* (1914). Again, the court finds it necessary to write the skin of the applicant. "In color he is darker than the usual person of white European descent, and of that tinged or sallow appearance which usually accompanies persons of descent other than purely European" (*Ex parte Dow*, 1914, p. 487). *Dow* is first denied naturalization because, "following the reasoning set out in *Ex parte Shahid*," the court here construed "free white person" to mean

“inhabitants of Europe and their descendants” (Ex parte *Dow*, 1914, p. 489). The district judge laments this, for Dow, he argues, is a capable man, but making law is beyond the power of the court. To prove his point, the judge mixes nation, religion, and race in an exasperated (and racist) appeal: “No race in modern times has shown a higher mentality than the Japanese. To refuse naturalization to an educated Japanese Christian clergyman and accord it to a veneered savage of African descent from the banks of the Congo would appear as illogical as possible, yet the courts of United States have held the former inadmissible and the statute accords admission to the latter” (Ex parte *Dow*, 1914, p. 489).

Dow is appealed, and at first affirmed, as geography takes precedence over skin color. (“There is no known ocular, microscopic, philological, ethnological, physiological, or historical test that can settle the question of the race of the modern Syrian; but the applicant and his associates are certainly Asiatics in the sense that they are of Asian nativity and descent and are not Europeans” (In re *Dow*, 1914, p. 362). On further appeal to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals (*Dow v. United States*, 1915), the decision is reversed, and Dow is finally admitted citizenship. In fact, the Syrian community mobilized every resource it had for the Dow case, as described by Naff (1985, p. 256).

All these cases take place before *United States v. Thind* (1923), the Supreme Court case that López (1996) cites as shifting the reasoning of the courts. Prior to *Thind*, the courts depended largely on so-called scientific knowledge to determine Whiteness. After *Thind*, the notion of common understanding of what Whiteness is held sway. It would seem, then, that in the bulk of the cases I have thus far discussed, race is understood primarily as the color of one’s skin and secondarily as geographically determined. Skin color influences the decisions in *Najour*, *Halladjian*, *Dolla*, *Ellis*, *Shahid*, *Dow*, and others. In discussions of race, this is to be expected. Geography, too, plays a role in these cases, but what about religion?

All of the Syrians to come before the court during the racial exclusion era were Christian, and the court often found it important to underline this fact in every instance it could. In *Ellis*, the court reiterated the fact twice in the first paragraph of its decision: "The applicant is a Syrian, a native of the province of Palestine, and a Maronite . . . It may be said, further, that he was reared a Catholic, and is still of that faith" (In re *Ellis*, 1910, p. 1002). In *Halladjian*, the court not only draws attention to the confessional traditions of the Armenians but uses their Christianity as proof of their eligibility for naturalization: "Race. . . is not an easy working test of 'white' color," averred the court, which then moved to discuss eligibility in terms of "ideals, standards, and aspirations" (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 840). The court also says: "In the warfare which has raged since the beginning of history about the eastern Mediterranean between Europeans and Asiatics, the Armenians have generally, though not always, been found on the European side. They resisted both Persians and Romans, the latter somewhat less strenuously. By reason of their Christianity, they generally ranged themselves against the Persian fire-worshippers, and against the Mohammedans, both Saracens and Turks" (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 841). The decision goes so far as to explain why Armenians are part of the Eastern Church and to excuse them for it: "Present war and their remoteness are said to have prevented the Armenian bishops from attending the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. Thus, they say that they were misled as to the pronouncement of that Council, and so a schism arose without heresy on their part" (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 841). Whereas Catholicism was a liability for a long time for Italians and Irish in the United States, it was considered favorably with regard to the Armenians, illustrating the shifting boundary of acceptability: "During the Crusades and afterwards many Armenians came into the obedience of the Roman Catholic Church, while retaining distinctive rites and customs" (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 841). Religion becomes the ultimate arbiter of admissibility, though, the court argues, without prejudice. "These facts are stated, without reproach to the followers of Mohammed or Zoroaster, because history has shown Christianity in the near East has generally manifested a sympathy with Europe

rather than with Asia as a whole,” said the court (In re *Halladjian*, 1909, p. 841). Christianity turns Armenians White.

In *Shahid*, too, the religion of the petitioner is proclaimed in the beginning: “According to his statement he is now 59 years of age, was born at Zahle, in Asia Minor, in Syria, and came to this country about 11 years ago, and is a Christian” (Ex parte *Shahid*, 1913, p. 812). Dow, we are told, “is a Maronite—a Christian” (In re *Dow*, 1914, p. 362).

After *Thind*, who is referred to not as an Indian but as a “high caste Hindu,” the decisions adopt more explicit language regarding religion (as science is discarded and replaced with culture). Another case involving the right of Armenians to naturalize comes before the court in 1925. The case of *United States v. Cartozian* (1925) references both *Ozawa v. United States* (another Supreme Court decision from 1922 disallowing Japanese to naturalize) and *Thind* in its decision. It argues that “it is now judicially determined that mere color of the skin of the applicant does not afford a practical test as to whether he [the petitioner] is eligible to American citizenship” (*United States v. Cartozian*, 1925, p. 919). Thus, the court feels emancipated from judging hue and tone and relies largely on religion (and assimilation) in its determination. According to the court: “Although the Armenian province is within the confines of the Turkish empire, being in Asia Minor, the people thereof have always held themselves aloof from the Turks, the Kurds, and allied peoples, principally, it might be said, on account of their religion, though color may have had something to do with it” (*United States v. Cartozian*, 1925, p. 921). In *Wadia v. United States* (1939), the court substitutes “ethnicity” for “race,” calling Wadia “of the Parsee race,” and feels compelled to disclose facts that must be important to its deliberations, including that “he was a follower of Zoroaster” (*Wadia v. United States*, 1939, p. 7).

By the 1940s, we have the two notable petitions of *Hassan* and *Mohriez*. Unlike the petitioners mentioned in the previous paragraph, Hassan and Mohriez are both Muslim (at least by name). What

makes their cases noteworthy is not just their faith community but the short span of time between when an Arab Muslim is considered non-White (*Hassan*) and when an Arab Muslim is officially considered White (*Mohriez*). In fact, one could logically argue that Christian Arabs were admitted as White people not because they are intrinsically White but because of their religious difference from Muslim Arabs. Thus, the race of Muslims was, in fact, first negatively determined with Najour's petition in 1909 and first positively determined with Hassan's in 1942. Nevertheless, it is this abrupt shift, mirrored in the sudden creation of a Muslim race by special registration, that should concern us, for it illustrates not just the capricious nature of racial formation but also the depth to which contemporary American politics creates race, rather than race always creating politics.

But the legal scholars generally don't view *Hassan* and *Mohriez* through this perspective. Consider law professor John Tehranian's (2000) article, "Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America." Here, Tehranian (2000) correctly states that the "racial-determination games [of the courts] often produce judicial opinions riddled with internal contradictions and dadaistic logic that find Arabs to qualify as white in some situations and nonwhite in others" (p. 839). He argues that "the potential for immigrants to assimilate within mainstream Anglo-American culture was put on trial" by these cases (and he explicitly discusses *Hassan* and *Mohriez*, among others, in the article; Tehranian, 2000, p. 820). Tehranian labels the assimilation potential of petitioners as "the performance of whiteness." "Successful litigants," in Tehranian's view, "demonstrated evidence of whiteness in their character, religious practices and beliefs, class orientation, language, ability to intermarry, and a host of other traits that had nothing to do with intrinsic racial grouping" (p. 821).

While Tehranian's discussion is valuable for the way it accounts for religion as a racial determining category, its organizing principle of "performance" confuses the fact that the judge performs "whiteness"

through his adjudication, not the litigant through testimony. Tehranian, to paraphrase W. B. Yeats, confuses the dancer for the dance. Hassan surely came to court ready to act the part of a White person, but the judge would not admit the act, since his own performance of Whiteness requires denying Hassan's petition. More important, however, the judge could not admit Hassan because the political culture of the time would not allow for it. The inertia of the United States' racial tradition kept the categories consistent. By the time we get to *Mohriez*, the political situation has changed, with the United States shedding its isolationist past for global dominance as the war nears its conclusion. With that transformation (manifest in the judge's explicitly political reasoning in his decision), the racial logic of the United States has been sent into flux.

Regrettably, López (1996) in his otherwise fine book also fails to account adequately for the role of politics in racial formation. He reaches the conclusion that "the incremental retreat from a 'Whites only' conception of citizenship made the arbitrariness of U.S. naturalization law obvious" (p. 46). But there is nothing arbitrary about the racial shift from *Hassan* to *Mohriez*, or the creation of Islam as a post-September 11 racial category. These are clearly political decisions that have calculated consequences. Although he does provide some historical context throughout his book for the reasons for racial flux, López (1996) seems unwilling to discuss politics in depth. In fact, the idea sometimes just drops out of the discussion. Consider this sentence from *White by Law*, where the idea simply disappears: "One might argue that [a judge's] views turned on cultural or political, rather than racial, prejudice. However, these forms of prejudice blur together, each fading into the other. Indeed the concept of race incorporates, and arguably partially arose out of, cultural prejudice" (p. 56). Instead of a sustained investigation into the politics of Whiteness and the Whiteness of politics, what we get from López is an appeal for Whites to "relinquish the privilege of whiteness," thus making it clear that, for him, race making in the law is less a system of rational domination by the state than a problem of

individual White identity (which he explicitly labels “white race consciousness”; p. 202).

But politics matters a great deal, and it always has, as Yale historian Rogers Smith understands. Smith (1999) has exhaustively examined thousands of citizenship cases in the United States and has come to the conclusion that inclusion in the United States has not been determined by an overarching theory of liberalism or by republican notions of citizenship. Rather, “American citizenship laws have always emerged as none too coherent compromises among the distinct mixes of civic conceptions advanced by the more powerful actors in different eras” (p. 6). The point is to recognize how labor or civil unrest or, especially for our purposes, war aids in producing citizenship and inclusion, which in the history of the United States functions through political power and along the definitional axis of race.

One of the most painful examples of race in flux during American history must be Japanese internment during World War II. The signing of Executive Order 9066 resulted not only in the internment of over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry but also in the removal of the protections of citizenship, at the stroke of a pen, for over 70,000 of them. The others were ineligible for citizenship, of course, owing to the naturalization laws that excluded Japanese from citizenship. Race trumped nationality. If you were born in the United States to Japanese parents prior to February 18, 1942, for example, you were an American citizen. But on February 19, you were born an enemy alien. On March 9, 1942, criminal sanctions were added to relocation, making this date perhaps more significant than Roosevelt’s executive order. General Dewitt’s orders read, “All persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above areas by 12 o’clock noon, P.W.T., Saturday, May 9, 1942” (see Irons, 1983, pp. 48–74). To understand the political nature of racialization even better, one need only compare the fate of people of Japanese descent in Hawaii to those on the West Coast. While West Coast Japanese were rounded up as

enemy aliens, Hawaiian Japanese—the dominant ethnic group (with larger numbers than Whites, Filipinos, or Native Hawaiians)—were not interned en masse, despite the fact, of course that Pearl Harbor is on Oahu. In California, the Japanese were politically vulnerable and thus imminently “racializable” (to coin an ugly word) by the state, whereas in Hawaii, mass evacuation of the Japanese descent population would have crippled the islands.

There are other cases as well, situations that resolved into inclusion rather than exclusion. In 1943, for example, following U.S. entry into the war, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Acts (but set a paltry quota of 100 Chinese immigrants a year, following the Immigration Act of 1924, which established a minimum quota of 100 immigrants per year per country). President Roosevelt described the measure “as important in the cause of winning the war and of establishing a secure peace” (*INS Monthly Review*, 1943, p. 16) and told Congress that Chinese exclusion had been a “historic mistake” (*INS Monthly Review*, 1943, p. 17). Whereas Asians had been since 1917 an undifferentiated mass of people living in a barred zone of immigration, Chinese were now politically and ontologically distinct (especially from Japanese) and had achieved a type of honorary White status as evidenced by their (limited) ability to immigrate and naturalize. In his decision on Mohriez’s petition, Judge Wyzanski shows he is aware of this fact. The end of the Mohriez decision reads, “And finally it may not be out of place to say that, as is shown by our recent changes in the laws respecting persons of Chinese nationality and of the yellow race, we as a country have learned that policies of rigid exclusion are not only false to our professions of democratic liberalism *but repugnant to our vital interests as a world power*” (*Ex parte Mohriez*, 1944, p. 942). Sometimes politics, and not just personal or cultural prejudice, produces race.

THE ARMENIAN STATE OF EXCEPTION

The point that I have been making in this essay is not only the one that López (1996) discusses in his book, namely that the law produces race, but also that we need to examine racial formation through law and policy as a rational system of administration and domination rather than as an example of individual prejudice or capriciousness to understand its full impact. Only then can we possibly imagine new political formations that will not be dependent on race as a principle of political domination. Moreover, what special registration proves is that any group can be racialized through America's traditions and then be sent into administrative hell through the bureaucracy of the state (what Arendt [1969] calls "rule by Nobody," p. 81). Racialization operates through a legal past and enables a legal machinery to provide differential rights, particularly to immigrants, who are the most vulnerable owing, in part, to the plenary power doctrine. An ominous remembrance of things past is the revelation that the Census Bureau provided specially indexed and extremely detailed population statistics on Arab Americans to the DHS. Japanese internment was facilitated by similar Census Department work (Census Now Limiting, 2004; Clemetson, 2004).

In the case of special registration, we can also witness the bizarre memory of a bureaucracy. U.S. history has long operated through a kind of racial logic that has its own inertia (call it tradition) as well as its own adaptability (call it political expediency), and at times both sides of U.S. race policy will careen right into each other. Under special registration, this is precisely what happened. As the cases of *Halladjian* and *Cartozian* illustrated, Armenians—as a Christian people who live in the Middle East—were a particular conundrum for the courts. In fact, in *Hassan*, the judge cites the *Cartozian* case in his decision. Judge Tuttle writes, "The court there [in *Cartozian*] found, however, that the Armenians are a Christian people living in an area close to the European border, who have intermingled and intermarried with Europeans over a period of centuries. Evidence was also presented in that case of a considerable amount of intermarriage of Armenian immigrants to the United States with other racial strains in our population. These facts serve to distinguish the

case of the Armenians from that of the Arabians” (In re *Hassan*, 1942, p. 846). And yet, in a twist that can reveal only the strange pull of history on a bureaucracy, the Justice Department published the list of the third “call-in” group for registration on December 16, 2002. Designating Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as countries whose male citizens would be subject to special registration, the department also included Armenia on its list. Without comment, Armenia was dropped the next day (Cooperman, 2002).

RACE, TERROR, AND BUREAUCRACY

Special registration is not necessarily a nefarious plot to racialize Islam, but it is a bureaucratic and cultural response to political turmoil. This is not to say that religious bigotry no longer exists. If we consider the words of deputy undersecretary for defense, Lieutenant General William Boykin, who claims that “my God [is] a real God,” and a Muslim’s God is “an idol,” and that the United States must attack radical Islamists “in the name of Jesus,” we find that his statements participate not in racializing Islam but in older traditions of religious prejudice that, sadly, are still with us (Holding the Pentagon Accountable, 2004; Three Star Bigotry, 2004). Moreover, we should not exonerate special registration from the charge of being a legal method of racial formation, even if it does not subject all Muslims to its procedures and despite the fact that not every Muslim-majority country is included on its list. In fact, what special registration accomplishes is the production of a typology of Muslim for the War on Terror, and by defining one type, it colors the whole population. What it produces is a kind of racial anxiety among Muslims, non-Muslims from Muslim countries, and those who are perceived to be Muslim. Every immigrant male in these groups must disidentify from the Muslim-as-terrorist figure, sometimes officially (as with special registration) or unofficially, as political policy and cultural attitudes bleed into each other. Suspicion is coded into law through race.

In fact, like Operation TIPS (Terrorist Information and Prevention System, which asked us to spy on our neighbors), special registration is best understood as a form of political theater. It allows a new bureaucracy (Homeland Security) to parade itself as being hard at work. The public is both the cast and the audience in this play. While it is acted out, we are propelled into living in an increasingly militarized and surveyed society. And when government actions impact Muslim populations so visibly, the public understands what is politically acceptable (even if criminally prosecutable) behavior. Meanwhile, the government bureaucracy can mobilize statistics and bodies to prove that it is cleansing the country of a terrorist threat, all at the expense of Muslims in the United States. This same logic reached its apogee when, on June 26, 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld President Donald Trump's travel ban (disproportionately affecting Muslims) illustrating again how the law, by sanctifying the suspicion of a broad class of people, continues to create race.

The academic silence around special registration not only facilitated the elaboration of special registration and the racialization of Muslims but also smoothed the way for future discriminatory programs, such as the Muslim ban. Without outspoken critique, special registration continued to race Muslims and to bind Whiteness in the United States with political exigency and with notions of culture and Christianity. However, as Arendt (1969) says, "Neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon. . . . they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man's faculty of action, the ability to begin something new" (p. 82). From the beginning of its inception, special registration, in its continuation of this country's past of racial formation and rule through racial ways of thinking, was in fact begging us to begin something new.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What examples of the impact of religion on questions of citizenship in the courts were most surprising to you? How does Bayoumi connect this to the racialization process?
2. Consider Fredrickson's definition of racism from the essay. How does this definition differ from that offered by Tatum in this volume? What do you think?
3. What does it mean to be an "American" to you? Who is able to easily claim an American identity, and who is not? How does being a Muslim impact one's American identity?
4. Consider the cases mentioned in Bayoumi's essay. How do you think these cases and the ideology behind them prompted the Muslim travel ban enacted by former President Donald Trump?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Go to the Internet and do a search of the term *Muslim* in Google's news section. Read carefully through five different articles and write down descriptions of the language used to describe Muslims in each article. After reading these articles, answer these questions: What did you learn about Muslims? Are Muslims represented as average Americans? Did you feel there was bias in the articles? Did the articles focus on one particular issue surrounding Muslims? How did the news sources differ from one another?
2. Some policies have impacted Muslims living in the United States and in Europe. In France, the government passed a ban on Muslim women covering their faces in public, known as the "burqa ban." In the United States, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) was instituted from 2002 to 2011, requiring Muslim noncitizen men over the age of 16 to register with the government, where they were fingerprinted, interrogated, and photographed. Do some research on these

two policies and write up a brief paragraph about how they can result in the state targeting Muslims unfairly.

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ESSAY 6 “DOESN’T ANTI-BLACKNESS ONLY HAPPEN IN THE U.S.?” : CONFRONTING THE REALITY OF GLOBAL ANTI-BLACKNESS

Nikki Khanna

“I can’t breathe!”

These were the final words of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old unarmed Black man who died at the hands of New York police in 2014. He repeated these desperate words at least 11 times as he was forcibly held face-down on a Staten Island city sidewalk. Bystanders filmed the interaction as it unfolded and the recording attracted considerable media and public attention; it also renewed a national conversation regarding police violence in the United States—particularly toward Black men. To be sure, Garner’s death was shocking, but it was no anomaly. Data show that Black men in the United States are killed by law enforcement at disproportionately high rates. For instance, data on the use of deadly force by police from 2013 to 2019 show that officers killed Black men at approximately 2.5 to 3 times the rate of White men (Khanna & Matsumoto, 2021). Studies further reveal that unarmed Black men are more likely to be shot and killed by officers than unarmed White men, which challenges beliefs that their deaths are somehow necessitated by the unique threats they pose to officers (Khanna & Matsumoto, 2021). Collectively, these data also show that Garner’s death, though brutal and appalling, is just one example of a larger pattern of police violence in the United States. As such, his final words have become a rallying cry for protestors; from coast to coast, they chant the words, “I can’t breathe!” and wear t-shirts emblazoned

with the phrase as both a reminder of Garner's death and as a vociferous renunciation of systemic violence by law enforcement against unarmed Black men. These words have also become a symbol of the broader frustrations felt by many Black Americans regarding systemic discrimination in the United States.

Garner's brutal death, and that of other Black men and women (including George Floyd's asphyxiation and subsequent death at the hands of Officer Derek Chauvin in 2020, which was also recorded) has been a driving force behind the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which originally started as a hashtag and then blossomed in 2013, when three Black women aimed to draw the nation's attention to the devaluation of Black lives in the United States (and abroad). According to Alicia Garza, the civil rights activist credited as one of the first to use the phrase, "Black Lives Matter is not just concerned with what happens in policing. The disregard, the disrespect, and the lack of dignity for Black life transcends through the fabric of our society" (Greenwald, 2016). Her words echo those of Kihana Miraya Ross (2020), a professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University, who asserts that police brutality is rooted in "the inability to recognize Black humanity" and reflective of "anti-Blackness" that pervades American society. Undoubtedly, anti-Blackness has long been a fixture of U.S. life. People of African descent have a long history of brutalization and mistreatment by police in the United States, but also centuries of dehumanization, exploitation, and violent abuse during slavery; marginalization and disenfranchisement during Jim Crow segregation; mass terrorism as a result of lynching and anti-Black mob violence throughout the 20th century; humiliation in Blackface minstrel shows that regularly mocked Black people for the entertainment of White audiences; and systemic discrimination that persists even into the 21st century in housing, education, employment, health care, criminal justice, and more.

Anti-Blackness is widespread and deeply embedded in U.S. society. According to Fordham University professor Nana Osei-Opare (2020),

“the U.S. has long been a symbol of anti-Black racism” to the rest of the world. The history of slavery in the United States, Jim Crow segregation, and other blatant discriminatory practices have, in the eyes of many nations, set the country apart from much of the world, and even in the United States, many see anti-Blackness as a distinctly U.S. phenomenon. They may be aware of anti-Black racism in the United States (either through personal experience, education, or the media), though they are sometimes surprised to learn of anti-Blackness beyond U.S. borders. Black students in particular often find travel abroad during their college years to be eye-opening and even jarring, and many return home from study abroad experiences to recount experiences of racial stereotyping and discrimination. For instance, in a 2018 essay for the *New York Times*, Nicole Philip (2018), a Black undergraduate student, described studying abroad in Italy as a scarring experience. On the street, Italians called her Michelle Obama, Rihanna, and Beyonce (as if Black women all looked the same and were interchangeable); she was repeatedly ignored when asking for directions (Italian men often rudely brushed past her blatantly disregarding her questions); and she endured endless stares, insults, and name calling. In addition, when simply walking down the street, a screaming Italian woman shielded herself behind a parked car (presumably out of fear due to the negative stereotypes she associated with Black people).

Michelle Chikaonda, a Malawian writer based in the United States, recounts her own story of travel as a Black woman. As she perused store shelves in an airport souvenir shop, she noticed not one, but four less-than-friendly store associates trailing closely behind her as she moved from shelf to shelf. Perhaps, she thought, because she is Black, they stereotyped her as a “criminal” and presumed she would steal merchandise. To be sure, many Black Americans have experienced similar treatment in the United States, though she reveals that this experience happened not in the United States but in predominantly Black South Africa and by Black store associates, pointing out, “Anti-Blackness is everywhere.” According to Chikaonda (2020), anti-Blackness “is a global phenomenon, and when I walked

into that store I merely walked into one of its many iterations.” Anti-Blackness is well-documented in the United States, but it can also be observed throughout Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and more. And as Chikaonda’s story reveals, anti-Blackness also exists in parts of Africa.

Phillip’s and Chikaonda’s experiences and the experiences of many other Black travelers perhaps explain the growing popularity of the social media hashtag, *#travelingwhileblack*. According to a 2018 study, Black travelers use the hashtag for many reasons, including to document and share incidents of racism. After analyzing *#travelingwhileblack* tweets over a one-year period (2015–2016), researchers found that nearly 30% of the tweets documented racism. They also discovered that many Black travelers used the hashtag to voice their fears, frustrations, anxieties, and feelings of vulnerability when traveling (Dillette et al., 2019). Undoubtedly, Black travelers experience anti-Blackness as they traverse the United States, but they often discover that they must contend with it in their travels outside the country as well.

An important note: “Blackness” is a social construct—one that is defined differently in different parts of the world. In the United States, the term *Black* signifies African ancestry and, historically speaking, people were defined as Black if they possessed *any* degree of African ancestry. In the United Kingdom, Blackness encompasses a broader spectrum of ethnic and racial groups and has traditionally included those of African descent, but also Indians, Pakistanis, and other people of color. In Australia, Blackness denotes people of African descent, but the term also includes Indigenous people of Australia (i.e., Aborigines), though Aboriginal Australians have no recent ties to Africa. Because of their dark skin, they are frequently described as Black, though notably, many Aboriginal Australians also have blond hair—a trait often associated with Europeans. For the purposes of describing global anti-Blackness in this chapter, however, the term *Black* is defined here as (1) people with African

ancestry, but also includes (2) Aboriginal Australians. Both share dark skin and are frequently raced as Black.

GLOBAL ANTI-BLACKNESS

Anti-Blackness exists in many parts of the world. We can observe it clearly in (1) the stigmatization and everyday discrimination faced by Black people, and (2) institutional discrimination against Black people, including systemic police violence.

Stigmatization of Blackness and Everyday Discrimination

In many parts of the world, Black people, Black cultures, and Black skin are stigmatized and negatively stereotyped. In India, for example, Africans are commonly perceived as “prostitutes,” “cannibals,” and “people snatchers” (Prabhu, 2017). These negative stereotypes arguably drive the discrimination they frequently face in public spaces, including racial slurs, verbal threats, and violence. In 2017, African university students studying in India shared some of their personal experiences. Nigerian student Zaharaddeen Muhammad, for instance, recounted the daily verbal abuse he regularly suffered on city streets—such as locals yelling, “Hey Bandar [Hey Monkey].” Other students described endless stares and aggressive posturing by Indian locals, as well as their general perceptions of feeling unsafe in public spaces (Prabhu, 2017). Their fears are not unwarranted. Anti-Black attacks in India have made national headlines in recent years, including that of three African university students who were beaten in an unprovoked attack by a mob of Indian men in 2013, a Tanzanian woman who was beaten and stripped naked in 2016, and in the same year, a Congolese man who was beaten to death by a mob of Indian men over a dispute regarding the hiring of a rickshaw (Khanna, 2020). Namisha Jaiswal

(2016), a journalist based in India, observes that “Being Black in India can be deadly.”

In China, officials in 2018 banned all things hip-hop—a music and dance genre rooted in African American culture—from television and popular streaming sites, as part of a crackdown on what the government deemed “low taste content” (Pasha-Robinson, 2018). Rappers (even Chinese rappers), are censored, and fans of one popular television show watched as one of the show’s contestants had his hip-hop style necklace blurred out (Quackenbush & Chen, 2018). A few years prior, anti-Black racism in China was also evident in a laundry detergent advertisement that was deemed by some as perhaps the “most racist ad ever” (Folley, 2016). In the ad, a Chinese woman seductively beckons a Black man, splattered with paint, toward her. As he moves in for a kiss, she pops a detergent pod in his mouth and shoves him into a washing machine. He soon reemerges from the machine and voila! He’s squeaky clean and magically transformed into an Asian man!

In many parts of the world, Blackness is often linked with dirtiness (as exemplified in the aforementioned detergent commercial), but Black people are also stereotyped as backward, violent, and unintelligent (see Feagin, 2020). Perhaps this explains why Black teachers in parts of Asia often struggle to find teaching positions. In Taiwan in 2008, one prestigious private school advertised on social media for English teachers for young Taiwanese children, noting that they would not accept applications from those who were “Black or dark-skinned” (General, 2018). In South Korea, Black teachers similarly struggle to find teaching jobs, but they also report difficulty in hailing taxis, daily harassment in public spaces, and Koreans who refuse to share elevators or subway cars with them (Hazzan, 2014). Sam Okyere, a Ghanaian television personality and arguably the most famous Black man in Korea, spoke of his early experiences in South Korea before achieving celebrity status; people stared at him everywhere he went, taxi and bus drivers would not pick him up, and fellow travelers on the subway refused to sit next to him (Luo, 2017).

Perhaps in Asia, lack of contact with people of African descent explains the negative treatment. However, it bears noting that Whites living or traveling throughout Asia often encounter very different treatment as compared to Black people; they more frequently find themselves fawned over, met with excitement and interest, and generally privileged as they move through society. They rarely face the same discrimination as their Black counterparts. For example, in South Korea, when bars and clubs exclaim “No foreigners allowed,” this generally means “no Black foreigners.” White people enter “just fine” (Hazzan, 2014).

In Russia, African migrants have likened living there to “living in hell on Earth” (Simmons, 2014). Some describe casual discrimination that they experience daily, including racist jokes, stares, and slurs, as well as people moving away from them on the metro, refusing to pick them up in their cabs, or denying them entry into public places such as cafés. They also describe race-based harassment on the streets and rental ads that read “Slavs only” (Zatari, 2020). At the extreme, they also report violence. John Steven Abumen, a Nigerian, has been attacked three times over the 15 years he has lived in Russia, suffering stab wounds, broken bones, a dislocated knee, and an eye injury. His fear compels him to carry pepper spray everywhere for protection. His story is no anomaly. Between 2010 and 2014, 177 acts of anti-Black violence were reported in Russia, though human rights advocates estimate the numbers to be much higher. Osman Kamara, a Liberian living in Russia, asserts, “They don’t like our color. Going out is a problem. Maybe if you go out, you might not return” (Simmons, 2014).

In Cuba, a post-slave society, about 9% of the population identifies as Black, though many Cubans have some degree of African ancestry, including the nearly 27% who identify as mixed race (based on the 2012 Census). Nonetheless, anti-Black racism persists. Before the Cuban Revolution in 1959, overt racism was pervasive and was evident in building signs that read, “No dogs or Blacks,” and in the blatant discrimination that barred Black people from some

clubs and schools. Though the communist government enacted policies to counter racism, it persists in contemporary Cuban society. One scholar, Rebecca Bodenheimer (2020), who conducted more than 15 years of research on the island, noted that “overt racism has persisted in Cuba” and Black Cubans typically experience “second class treatment” and “assumptions of criminality.” Even Black culture is devalued. Bodenheimer writes that she’s had “more than one Cuban question [her] desire to conduct academic research on rumba, a music and dance genre that is both historically and currently associated with Blackness” because it is considered by many Cubans to be “a ‘low-class’ or ‘vulgar’ tradition.” She also points out that anti-Black racism is perpetuated by Whites but is also internalized by Black and mixed-race Cubans. There is a widespread notion of *adelantar*, which means “to improve the race.” According to this cultural norm, people are encouraged to marry someone who is White or light-skinned so as to increase their odds of producing light-skinned children. In local jargon, a White woman with a Black boyfriend is described as “holding back the race,” though her partner is perceived as “advancing” his (Diaz, 2020). Interracial relationships with Black people are generally looked down upon, as they are in many other parts of the world, including in Central and South America and parts of the Caribbean.

In the Dominican Republic (DR), a neighbor of Haiti, anti-Black discrimination is widespread and interracial relationships with Black people are similarly stigmatized. The two nations share an island in the Caribbean, though they are divided by history, culture, and, most notable here, race. Haitians are typically dark-skinned, while the DR is composed of a lighter-skinned populace that sees itself as Hispanic (though, notably, 90% of Dominicans also have African ancestry). In the DR, just as in Cuba described earlier, Dominicans are told they must “refine” their race (i.e., marry someone with light or lighter skin than themselves) and light-skinned Dominicans face intense social pressure not to intermarry with Black people (Planas, 2017). Moreover, anti-Blackness in the DR does not end there. Maribel Nuñez, a Black journalist and director of the activist group

Afro-Dominican Action, sees racism at every level of Dominican society “from the atypically light skin of its presidents to the beauty salons that spend much of their time ironing out hair so it won’t look kinky. . . . Bouncers at clubs sometimes tell Black people that there’s no room inside while letting lighter-skinned people though” (Planas, 2017). Like Nuñez, others report similar problems. Morgan Miller (2015), an African American woman who once lived in the DR, notes that Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans confront racism on a daily basis. While initially excited to move to a country where most of the people resembled members of her family, she regularly encountered taunts on the streets by those who told her to “Fix that hair!” or derisively mocked her afro. Racial slurs and extreme violence are also part of the daily lives of people with dark skin living in the DR.

Even in Africa, Black people sometimes face stigmatization and discrimination—especially in (but not limited to) post-colonial nations where light-skinned colonizers once held power and privilege over the Black masses. South Africa, for example, was colonized for centuries by the Dutch and British and then ruled by a White minority for more than 40 years of *apartheid*, the racially repressive system that segregated and subjugated people of color—especially Africans. Though formal apartheid ended in 1994, vestiges of the anti-Black system remain. In Orania, South Africa, Black people find that though apartheid has officially ended, they are not permitted to live within the town’s borders; this is because Orania has been allowed by the nation’s constitution to remain a “Whites-only” town within the majority Black nation (Webster, 2019). In Cape Town, South Africa, the only major city where Black people are not the majority, Black people describe feeling “unwelcome” and treated as “second-class citizens.” For example, some Black people report being told that there are no tables available at seemingly empty restaurants or no cars at rental car offices. Others recount stories of being mistaken for prostitutes while enjoying drinks at predominantly White bars (Polgreen, 2012). As noted here and in the chapter opener

discussing Chikaonda's story in South Africa, anti-Blackness, even in parts of Africa, runs deep.

Anti-Blackness is pervasive in other parts of Africa as well. With their arrival to Africa, European and Arab colonizers brought with them racist theories that elevated light skin over dark, and these theories have had long-lasting effects on the continent. In Sudan, for example, Egyptian colonizers established a social hierarchy that privileged their comparatively lighter skin over darker-skinned locals. This division persists even into the modern era and is evident with regard to (1) power and social class (Sudanese Africans hold less power and wealth as compared to Sudanese Arabs), and (2) skin bleaching (which is popular among Sudanese women as light skin is associated with wealth, class, and beauty). Regarding the latter, skin bleaching is not limited to Sudan. In fact, the practice of skin bleaching is widespread across Africa and, according to 2011 data by the World Health Organization, 40% of African women bleach their skin. In particular, 77% bleached their skin in Nigeria, as did 59% in Togo, 35% in South Africa, 27% in Senegal, and 25% in Mali (Rao, 2019). Whitening products—including creams, tablets, and injectables—flood the market and promise consumers lighter skin, even going so far as to appeal to pregnant women who might want to lighten their babies in utero. This “Whitening craze” has been attributed to the legacy of colonialism, as well as to the mass dissemination of Western beauty ideals through the media (Rao, 2019). As such, Black skin, even in Africa, is sometimes disparaged, and Africans (especially African women) are repeatedly told by the media and advertisers that light skin is beautiful and that possessing light skin will advantage them in employment and marriage markets.

These are just several of the many examples of everyday anti-Blackness around the world. Black people, Black cultures, and Black skin are stigmatized in nations with few Black people, as well as in nations with significant (and even majority) Black populations. They often face devaluation, stereotyping, unwarranted negative attention, exclusion, racist jokes and slurs, threats, violence, and in the most

extreme cases, even death. Data also reveal that Black people face institutional discrimination on a global scale.

Institutional Discrimination Against Black People

Black people have faced and continue to face institutional discrimination in much of the world—that is, discriminatory treatment that is systematically embedded in the social institutions of society (e.g., in governmental laws and policies, housing, education, employment, healthcare, criminal justice, and more). Many governments, for example, have implemented laws and policies throughout their histories that were deliberately and blatantly anti-Black. Some examples are listed here.

- Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, South Africa, and Australia are nations that at one time or another implemented immigration policies that were designed to simultaneously “Whiten” their societies and “dilute” their Black populations—by giving preference to European immigrants. These government strategies were sometimes termed “Blanqueamiento” (in Spanish-speaking countries) or “Branqueamento” (in Portuguese-speaking Brazil), which translates to “whitening.” These programs were specifically intended to whiten the dark-skinned populace by inverting their Black-to-White population ratios.
- Brazil and Australia also actively promoted interracial mixing between Whites and Blacks to further “dilute” their respective Black populations. These typically included descendants of Africans brought over during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, such as in Brazil, but also Aboriginal people in Australia who arrived long before European settlers (Moore, 2014). In Australia, for instance, government officials promoted interracial mixing between White Australian men and Aboriginal women to, as they argued, “breed the Blackness out” of Australia (Moore, 2014).

- For much of its short history, Canada actively recruited White immigrants and used “whatever means necessary” to keep Blacks out of the country (Bashi, 2004). Though they never formally banned Blacks (though not for lack of trying), they attempted to dissuade them from immigrating into the country by hiring African Americans to spread anti-Canada propaganda in the United States (even telling them that Canada “wasn’t better, only colder”) and refusing to send them written instructions regarding how to immigrate (Sylvester, 2017). Workers on Canada’s Great Northern Railway were also instructed not to sell any tickets to “Negroes” (presumably arriving from the United States) to deter them from entering Canada; conversely, White migrants often found their train fees reduced or waived. By the 1960s, when immigration restrictions began to loosen, Black migrants still found themselves at a disadvantage: they had to prove they had enough money to support themselves upon entry into the country, though White migrants faced no such burden (Boyko, 1995, as cited in Bashi, 2004).
- During the Cold War era, the United States entered into an agreement with Iceland that allowed for the long-term installation of a U.S. military base in Keflavik. To appease the Icelandic government, the U.S. government agreed that it would not send African American soldiers as the “presence of blacks was seen as posing a direct threat to Icelandic women and, by extension, to the Icelandic nation” (Ingimundarson, 2004, p. 69). These restrictions were not fully lifted until the 1970s. Icelandic historian Valur Ingimundarson (2004) points out that the Scandinavian island was not the only country to ban African American soldiers, but it was certainly the “most zealous” (p. 78).

Even today, institutional discrimination against Black people is pervasive and can be observed in many parts of the world. Some 21st-century examples are listed here.

- Britain: Government data shows that Black people are seven times more likely than White people to be stopped and searched by law enforcement for drugs and weapons (Macfarlane, 2020).
- China: In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Africans living in China (where presumably the virus originated) were uniquely subject to forced coronavirus testing and quarantining, as well as evictions by landlords and discrimination by hotels. This led to scores of Africans sleeping on the streets, particularly in the city of Guangzhou, a hub for Africans in China that holds Asia's largest African population. Though the official position by the Chinese government is that "all foreigners are treated equally," the reality for Black residents contradicts their seemingly color-blind mantra. During the outbreak, many Africans felt singled out, often pointing out that White foreigners did not face the same scrutiny and discrimination (Marsh, 2020; Vincent, 2020).
- Cuba: Blacks in Cuba are poorer than White Cubans, and this is most likely explained by persistent and systematic discrimination on the island. For instance, half of all White Cubans said they had a bank account as compared to 11% of Black Cubans, nearly a third of Whites had traveled abroad as compared to just 3% of Blacks, and Whites control 98% of all private business (Diaz, 2020).
- Dominican Republic: In 2013, the government announced that it would strip citizens of Haitian descent (their darkest-skinned populace) of their citizenship. Later the government somewhat relaxed its decision by allowing those born in the DR to validate their citizenship by providing proof of their DR birth. However, this was difficult for most people of Haitian descent because for decades, the Dominican government had refused to grant them birth certificates (Taub, 2015). This move by the government is representative of the long-standing anti-Black sentiment in the DR.

- France: Though the French government has branded itself as color-blind and typically rejects the existence of systemic racism in France, data reveal otherwise. For instance, Blacks (as well as Arabs) are stopped by police at 20 times the rate of Whites (Piser, 2020).
- Ireland: A 2015 report titled, “Afrophobia in Ireland,” detailed some of the examples of institutional racism regularly faced by Black people in Ireland. Lucy Michael (2015), of Ulster University, points out that people of African descent are the most targeted racial group in Ireland as evidenced in “political hate speech, racist crimes, racist violence, intimidation, racist bullying, illegal practices and discriminatory treatment in housing, education and service provision, poor policing practices and poor responses by [police] to racist crimes, lack of access to healthcare and employment and persistent and repeated racial harassment” (p. 5). Regarding employment, for example, she points out that people of African descent, despite having higher qualifications than other migrants, are offered comparatively fewer employment opportunities commensurate with their educational qualifications.

At its extreme, discrimination can also take the form of systemic brutality and murder—particularly by law enforcement. Though comprehensive data on deaths by police do not exist in most countries (especially regarding data on the race of victims), some known examples include the following:

- Britain: Though the nation has tight gun laws and the police tend to be unarmed, statistics show that Black Britons are disproportionately killed by police. When looking at instances in which police used force or restraint, Black and minority individuals were twice as likely to die in police custody as compared to their White counterparts (Macfarlane, 2020).

- Brazil: The society is a multiracial one, though it is Blacks (i.e., Brazilians with the darkest skin shades) who are most targeted by police. For example, nearly 9,000 people were killed by police in Rio in the past decade alone, and more than three quarters of those deaths were of Black men (Munoz, 2020).
- Canada: A study by the Ontario Human Rights Commission found that, in Toronto, Black people are 20 times more likely to be shot by police than are White people (Simpson, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Anti-Blackness is a problem that reaches well beyond the United States. Some nations, such as Brazil and Cuba, have histories that parallel the United States with regard to African enslavement; consequently, anti-Blackness is arguably also embedded in the foundation of their societies. Others, such as those in parts of Asia, Africa, and South America, are post-colonial societies that continue to grapple with the racist messaging brought by their lighter-skinned colonizers that, for decades and even centuries, denigrated and vilified dark skin. Still other nations, particularly those that are racially homogeneous (such as China, Japan, and Korea), are seeped with age-old ethnocentric prejudices, which lead to heightened suspicion and distrust of “outsiders”—especially of those who look noticeably different from themselves. And, most nations worldwide are undoubtedly influenced by Western mass media, which often valorize White people, American and European cultures, and light skin, while at the same time stigmatizing all things Black. Because of these reasons, Black people, Black cultures, and Black skin are devalued and maligned in many parts of the world.

As people in the United States increasingly come to terms with racial injustice toward Black people (as evidenced by the growth of the Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement), a similar racial reckoning appears to be happening abroad. People outside the United States

have been watching American protests and many have joined in direct solidarity with the BLM movement, even carrying signs emblazoned with such words as “I can’t breathe” as they march down city streets “from Sydney to Cape Town, Paris to Seoul” (Haynes, 2020). Others march, not simply out of a show of commitment to the U.S. movement but because they see common ground; they recognize that Black lives are devalued in their own countries or they draw connections between Black lives in the United States and other stigmatized groups within their own borders (such as those defined by ethnicity/race, gender, social class, religion, or caste). As such, the BLM movement has gone global. In 2020 alone, BLM solidarity protests and BLM-inspired social justice protests took place around the world in places such as Belgium, Brazil, Columbia, England, India, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, and Poland (this list is not exhaustive) (Coke & Naylor, 2020; Erdekian, 2020; Wattenbarger, 2020).

Though there are many permutations of the BLM movement outside of the United States, the key message remains the same: Injustice against Black people and other stigmatized social groups must end. However, it is important to note that many nations continue to see the devaluation of Black lives as a distinctly U.S. phenomenon and they downplay or discount their own anti-Black racism. For example, South Korea, like many other countries around the world, witnessed a BLM protest in 2020, though only about 100 people marched, and the demonstration was barely covered by the media. Perhaps, as some critics have argued, South Korea is blind to its own problems of racism (Park, 2020). In Mexico, there has been a show of solidarity for BLM protestors in the United States, though a common refrain among Mexicans is that race is less of an issue than social class, and there is a widespread belief among Mexicans that Mexico has no Black people. In fact, Mexico has a sizeable Black population. A 2017 report estimated that 1.3 million Afro-Mexicans reside in Mexico, primarily in the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Moreover, anti-Black violence is systemic there as well (Wattenbarger, 2020). According to Minority Rights Group

International (n.d.), Afro-Mexicans tend to live in the most isolated, rural, and poorest parts of Mexico; lack adequate services, including education; and face ongoing discrimination. In Cuba, too, critics point out that while the Cuban government and media have condemned anti-Black police violence in the United States, they tend to be “tight-lipped” when it comes to police violence involving Black Cubans (Bodenheimer, 2020). South Korea, Mexico, and Cuba are certainly not alone.

Much work remains to counter global racism and, more specifically, to recognize, understand, and surmount the problem of anti-Blackness that permeates much of the world. It is important to recognize, however, that levels of anti-Blackness vary globally, with some parts of the world more or less amenable to Black people and Black cultures. Some Black Americans, for example, have abandoned the United States to live in places they deem to be comparatively more accepting and agreeable. In 2020, for example, *USA Today* profiled several Black Americans who have left the United States for places such as Germany, Ghana, and Trinidad and Tobago. Though they emigrated out of fear and frustration with American racism, they recognize that their new homes are not racism-free; however, for some, a life free of racism seems “somewhat more within reach” (Hjelmgaard, 2020). Nonetheless, the reality remains that anti-Blackness is a formidable problem throughout the Americas, the Caribbean, Australia, Europe, Asia, and even in parts of Africa. For Black people living or traveling around the world, they often face unique challenges as they contend with negative stereotypes, day-to-day bigotry, systemic discrimination, and even violence.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bashi, V. (2004). Globalized anti-Blackness: Transnationalizing western immigration law, policy, and practice. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(4), 584–606.

Khanna, N. (2020). *Whiter: Asian American women on skin color and colorism*. New York University Press.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Prior to reading this essay, did you believe that anti-Blackness was primarily a problem in the United States? Why or why not?
2. What are the major factors identified by the author as explaining the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness? Which do you believe are most significant?
3. What are the consequences of this phenomenon for individuals racialized as Black? Consider the implications for those living or traveling outside of the United States.
4. What concrete steps could we take to reduce global anti-Blackness?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Examine anti-Black stereotypes by researching one or more of the following: (1) the life of Saartjie Baartman, (2) coverage of Africa and Africans by *National Geographic*, (3) human zoos. How were Africans and people of African descent depicted? Who had the power to shape these stereotypes?

2. Whitening creams are a global multi-billion-dollar industry and they are particularly popular in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Conduct an online image search of “advertisements for whitening creams.” What messages do the advertisements send to consumers? How are “Whiteness” and “Blackness” presented? Looking at these advertisements, can you find visual examples of anti-Blackness?
3. Choose a country (other than the United States) and research the experiences of Black people living or traveling there. Are there available data on access to education, educational attainment, access to health care, police brutality, segregation, or various forms of discrimination directed at Black people? Can you find first-person narratives written by Black people regarding their experiences there?

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PART II DEBUNKING INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES

ESSAY 7 “IF ONLY WE COULD RETURN TO THE PRE-TRUMP ERA” : NOSTALGIA AND COLOR-BLIND RACISM

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Over the past several decades, most White Americans have strongly held that race no longer matters and that in the United States anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Gallagher, 2012; see also Ioanide in this volume). This is one of the hallmarks of the color-blind perspective. In sociological terms, *color blindness* actually has two meanings—one prescriptive, the other descriptive. The former suggests that it is both possible and preferable to think and act toward others without acknowledging skin color. The latter, sometimes called post-racialism, refers to the belief that race no longer determines individuals' life chances in contemporary U.S. society (Gallagher, 2012). Most Whites have internalized both of these meanings, allowing them to rest secure in the racial status quo, comforted by their post-racial delusion. Gallagher (2012) explains it the following way,

The rosy picture that colorblindness presumes about race relations and the satisfying sense that one is part of a period in American history that is morally superior to the racist days of the past is, quite simply, a less stressful and more pleasurable social place for whites to inhabit. (p. 93)

The notion of a color-blind society may seem absurd to some readers given the racist demagoguery and policies of the 45th president, and his acolytes' enthusiastic embrace of most, if not all, of both. Yet, despite a notable but temporary increase in Whites' support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the weeks following

the brutal torture and execution of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, and a related increase in their acknowledgment of systemic racism, color-blind ideology remains the dominant White American understanding of racial matters. Indeed, for most Whites, it remains those who would notice race and invoke it publicly (e.g., in policy discussions, classrooms, courtrooms, or the media) who are the real obstacles to a racially harmonious, color-blind society. This sentiment is frequently expressed in statements such as, “If people stopped talking about race, it wouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

EXPLAINING COLOR-BLIND IDEOLOGY

During the civil rights movement, activists often invoked the idea of a color-blind society—a sentiment embodied most strongly by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1963) “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he envisioned a day where individuals “[would] not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” This phrase has since been decontextualized and co-opted by political conservatives to proselytize a rendering of post–civil rights America that is inconsistent with reality. These individuals, and a nontrivial number of liberals, too, are steadfast in their mission to eliminate the very laws, programs, and policies meant to ensure that Americans of color would be fully incorporated into American society, unencumbered by the effects of historical White supremacy and its contemporary manifestations (Brown et al., 2003; Wise, 2010). Civil rights legislation has not eliminated the need for affirmative action policies that help offset the continued effects of state-sanctioned racial injustices of the past and contemporary forms of racism in the present, to say nothing of the country’s glaring failure to provide compensatory repair to former slaves and their descendants, which has ensured a chasmic wealth gap between Whites and Blacks.

While the civil rights movement did not eliminate racial inequality, it did initiate a reshaping of the discourse around race. One positive benefit of this restructuring, at least prior to Donald Trump’s racist

campaign and presidency, is that the use of explicitly racist language had been eliminated from most public forums, except for the Internet where many individuals have, since its inception, used social media and the (perceived) anonymity of online chat rooms and forums, blogs, and e-mail to use racist epithets, promote racial stereotypes, and advocate White supremacy (Daniels, 2009; Eschmann, 2020; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Relatedly, research has even shown that search engines such as Google facilitate racism online through their search algorithms (Noble, 2018). Still, in most public forums, the discursive space around the topic of race is now dominated by the ideology of color blindness, or the desire to ignore race, though this was often expressed more caustically during the Trump era.

Color blindness is buttressed by several key assumptions. First, within the color-blind racial project, racism is conflated with racial prejudice. This fails to recognize that racism is a structural phenomenon that is “variable” and often takes on a different character in different historical periods (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, p. 470). When coupled with the sacrosanct color-blind imperative of “no race talk,” it becomes impossible to address post–civil rights era racism and racial discrimination, which in the present is more often subtle, institutional, and at times even unintentional. The color-blind perspective demands a permanent gag order against opponents of racial injustice and White supremacy (Guinier & Torres, 2002). And in the flawed logic of color blindness, merely suggesting that White racial privilege and White-maintained systemic racism are real barriers to racial equality often results in the label of “racial rabble-rouser” for violating the color-blind imperative (see also Harris and McClure in this volume). This is problematic for several reasons, the most important of which is the fact that there are many institutional and organizational practices that produce negative and disparate outcomes by race, often without any overt racial animus or intent on the part of individual Whites. Under color-blind rhetoric, none of these issues can be addressed.

Consider the seemingly benign practice of many organizations' giving preference in hiring to the family members and friends of current employees. On the surface, this practice can appear entirely nonracial. However, most BIPOC folks (Black people, Indigenous peoples, and other people of color) were barred from employment in nearly all historically White organizations through the better part of the 20th century. When coupled with the high level of racially endogamous marriages and peer groups among Whites, it is more likely than not that the family members and friends of White employees will be White. Advocating for the dismantling of these types of racially unequal arrangements and a willingness to critically examine contemporary social issues (e.g., the police killing of 26-year-old Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, or the COVID-19 pandemic) from a race-conscious perspective.

Another key assumption of color blindness is that the civil rights movement was largely successful in dismantling all significant barriers to upward social mobility for BIPOC groups. Here, the claim is regularly made that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), along with the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s, all but eliminated racial discrimination in education, housing, voting, and the labor market. As such, advocates of color blindness believe that racial discrimination in these areas occurs only on rare or infrequent occasions because the practice is illegal. King (1968) succinctly addressed this White fallacy in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, where he wrote, "The recording of the law in itself is treated as the reality of the reform" (p. 5). A half century since King penned these words, many Whites remain wedded to this position. However, it does not hold water, as there are federal and state laws and local ordinances that prohibit all sorts of other behaviors (e.g., murder, theft, pollution, speeding, tax evasion, breach of contract, driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol). Yet no one would claim that since we have laws and ordinances prohibiting these acts that they are not violated every day in the United States. Similarly, despite legal prohibitions against racial discrimination in areas such as housing, education, and

employment, these laws are also violated every day in the United States. In 2020 alone, there were 22,064 employment-based racial discrimination complaints filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2021). These complaints account for only a fraction of the actual number of violations, as most cases of racial discrimination in employment are likely to go unreported because most individuals are unaware that they have been victimized (Bendick et al., 1994). The claim that the modern civil rights movement eliminated racial discrimination or reduced it to the point of social insignificance is entirely inconsistent with the evidence.

The color-blind racial project is in essence the 21st-century equivalent of the ideology of White supremacy that prevailed in the United States prior to the achievements of the modern civil rights era. Although the logic and presentation of these two belief systems are quite different, the effect remains the same: a racially unequal society where Whites are afforded greater life chances than Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.

It is important to note that the racially unequal status quo that is, in large measure, perpetuated by the ideology of color blindness is not only harmful to people of color; it adversely affects Whites, too. While a considerable body of research and writing has documented the numerous material and psychological benefits of White racial privilege (e.g., Jensen, 2005; Lipsitz, 1998; McIntosh, 2013), there are also costs associated with these unearned advantages. White racial privilege that is today buttressed by color-blind thinking can have the effect of enveloping its beneficiaries in “a bubble of unreality” that prevents an accurate understanding of “the way the world really works” (Wise, 2008, p. 155). Wise further states that it can also produce emotional and psychological costs that result from benefiting unjustly from racial advantages that harm other human beings. This is particularly the case in an American society that pretends it is the quintessence of meritocracy in the world.

There are also more tangible costs associated with White racial advantage. As Brown et al. (2003) claim,

White Americans may win better jobs, better housing in better neighborhoods, a better shot at a high-quality education for their children. But they must also pay, and pay handsomely, for the prisons, police, mopping-up health care services, and other reactive measures predictably required by the maintenance of drastically unequal social conditions. (p. 249)

In his memoir, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race From a Privileged Son*, antiracist author Tim Wise (2008) asserts, “Racism and white privilege are dangerous to us, even as they pay dividends—sort of like a precious gem that turns out to be toxic if held too close” (p. 148). More recently, in his widely praised book, *Dying of Whiteness*, physician and sociologist Jonathan Metzl (2019) highlights how White racial resentment (i.e., the belief and bitterness that the gains of BIPOC groups are unwarranted and come at Whites’ expense) is literally killing White people. Through in-depth interviews and an extensive analysis of mortality and other social and political data, Metzl (2019) shows that through their support for Republican policies such as “loosening gun laws, repealing the Affordable Care Act, [and] enacting massive tax cuts that largely benefited wealthy persons and corporations,” Whites are dying at elevated rates due to their intransigent commitment to Whiteness (p. 6). In essence, there are manifold ways the ideology of color blindness can have indirect negative effects for Whites. Yet the fact remains that BIPOC groups are inarguably those most adversely and directly affected by a society that has permitted the chimera of color blindness to become the popular understanding of race in America—that is, an understanding that race no longer matters. In the next section, I provide evidence that establishes Whites’ strong commitment to color-blind ideology.

SYSTEMIC RACISM, COLOR-BLIND THINKING, AND WHITE PUBLIC OPINION

Most White Americans remain on an ideological island, consistently espousing inaccurate and retrograde views about racial matters that are at odds with the everyday lived experience of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Muslim Americans. For generations, this lived experience has been expressly communicated through the heart-wrenching and righteously indignant testimonies of BIPOC folks who fight to exist, learn, thrive, and love in defiance of the designs of Whiteness, the minds it captures, and the structures it creates, supports, and defends. Furthermore, a great deal of empirical social science research has documented and explained these experiences, and journalists and essayists regularly communicate them to the public. In the age of 24-hour cable news, the Internet, and social media, it can strain credulity to imagine that in a nation as racially and ethnically diverse as the United States, that a significant percentage of White Americans are unaware that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Muslim people in this country encounter significantly greater obstacles to a socially equal and materially secure existence than do Whites. Yet, this is precisely what most Whites—and some confused people of color (more on them later)—would have us believe.

It is important to keep these historical and social facts in mind as we consider Whites' racial views during two adjacent though very different political periods in the United States: the first governed by the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, who served two terms in office by twice winning—in commanding fashion—the electoral college and the popular vote; the second governed by Donald Trump, a reality TV personality and businessman, whose political ascendance, and his narrow electoral college win, was tethered to his promotion of the debunked, racist birtherism conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, thereby making Obama ineligible to serve as president

(Kelley-Romano & Carew, 2019). Below, I review Whites' racial views during Obama's second term followed by their views during the Trump era, revealing their remarkably durable, if modestly attenuated, collective adherence to color blindness.

White Racial Views During Obama's Second Term

National surveys conducted in the years preceding or during Donald J. Trump's demagogic 2015–2016 presidential campaign revealed that the vast majority of Whites believed that the United States was a color-blind or post-racial society. Indeed, a 2015 *New York Times* & CBS News (2015) poll found that 55% of Whites believed that Whites and Blacks have “about an equal chance of getting ahead in today's society” (7% actually believe that Blacks have a competitive advantage). In 2014, a similar Gallup (2014) poll found that 74% of Whites believed that the Blacks living in their community “have as good a chance as Whites” in finding employment for which they are qualified. Whites were even more confident that Blacks received equal treatment in the areas of education (80%) and housing (85%). This helps explain why fully two thirds of Whites (66%) believed that those “who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition” (Pew Research Center, 2014). It also helps explain why nearly three quarters of Whites (73%) *disagreed* that “every possible effort to improve the position of Blacks and other minorities” should be made “even if it means giving them preferential treatment” (Pew Research Center, 2012).

That most Whites oppose race-conscious policies as a means of redressing historical racial oppression is understandable, if not morally defensible, once we also consider that only 43% of Whites agreed that racism is a “big problem” (DiJulio et al., 2015). A significant number of these Whites agree that racism is a “big problem” precisely because they see themselves as a victim of it. Indeed, findings from the 2015 American Values Survey revealed a stunning 50% of Whites believe that “discrimination against Whites

has become as big a problem today as discrimination against Blacks and other minorities” (Public Religion Research Institute, 2015). Yes, you read that correctly. In 2015, roughly every other White American believed that Whites not only experience racism and racial discrimination but that it was occurring on a scale comparable to that experienced by Blacks and other Americans of color. Below, I highlight more recent surveys capturing Whites’ racial views during the Trump era when racism became increasingly public, prolific, arguably state-sanctioned, and widely protested against in order to show the durability of their color-blind thinking.

White Racial Views During the Trump Era

As suggested above, while the Trump administration ushered in a more overt type of racism than we witnessed during the Obama era, it was still one marked by color blindness. We have to look no further than the days following the murder of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers. A CBS News poll revealed that even in that brief moment of bipartisan, cross-racial condemnation of those responsible for the brutal killing of yet another unarmed Black man by law enforcement, 45% of Whites still believed that Whites and Blacks have “about an equal chance of getting ahead in today’s society” (De Pinto et al., 2020). It is important to note that White Republicans account for most of this 45%. And, although this number declined by 10 percentage points between 2015 and 2020, from 55% to 45%, respectively, two crucial pieces of information must be noted. First, as I will elaborate on more fully later in this essay, nearly half of Whites still subscribe to the fallacious belief that Whites and Blacks have a roughly equal opportunity to “get ahead in today’s society.” There is absolutely no credible empirical evidence that this is true. Second, this poll was taken literally days after the nation and the world watched the horrific 8-minute and 46-second video of four police officers torturing and executing George Floyd. Given the durability of Whites’ racial views, whether this 10-point shift will persist is questionable.

Additional Trump-era Gallup polls continue to show Whites' support for color-blind ideology. For instance, 62% of Whites continue to believe Blacks in their community have as good a chance as whites at finding employment (Brenan, 2020). This rose-colored perception of Black–White equality persists across institutions and can again be observed with respect to education (65%) and housing (67%), as was the case in 2014. Whites' belief that Blacks and Whites are treated equally in the labor market, education, and housing has declined by 12, 15, and 18 percentage points over the past six years, respectively, thereby suggesting a greater acknowledgment of systemic racism. However, this interpretation must be tempered. Here's why: The decline among Whites' perceptions paralleled an almost identical decline among Blacks' views, which suggests that Whites are making very little progress in appreciating how Blacks experience racial discrimination across social institutions. And, even this fractional change in Whites' acknowledgment of the barriers Blacks face in the area of jobs, education, and housing only appeared in the polling data with the advent of Donald J. Trump's overtly racist candidacy and presidency. Stated differently, it took a prolifically racist Trump presidency for a notable percentage of Whites to begin to acknowledge that Blacks do not have the same life chances as Whites. This is disappointing, if not surprising.

Additionally, more than half of Whites (54%) still believe “Blacks who can't get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition” (Pew Research Center, 2017). Further, approximately half of Whites (49%) continue to believe “discrimination against Whites has become as big a problem today as discrimination against Blacks and other minorities” (Public Religion Research Institute, 2019). This percentage has essentially remained unchanged since 2014.

In-depth interviews and focus groups with Whites over the past 20 years further reflect this pattern. These studies show that most Whites strongly believe Americans of color have an “equal opportunity” to succeed and as such they should stop dwelling on race, “playing the race card,” and engaging in “self-defeating”

behaviors (see, e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiTomaso et al., 2003; Gallagher, 2012). As with the survey data, qualitative studies also reveal Whites' belief that the pendulum of racial preference has swung so far in the opposite direction that Americans of color are now the beneficiaries of "reverse discrimination" or "reverse racism" against Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; DiTomaso et al., 2003; see also Moore in this volume). This sentiment is captured in the following quote by one White interviewee: "I think we find it sometimes going in the other direction. We bend over backwards for the minorities and the person that suffers is the White person" (DiTomaso et al., 2003, p. 195).

Many White liberals and moderates anxiously awaited Donald Trump's exit from the White House in hopes that the country could return to "normal." However, the end of Trump's presidency cannot magically mark an end to systemic racism, nor will it engender an antiracist awakening among his millions of unwavering acolytes. Rather, the Biden–Harris administration still governs a systemically racist nation, albeit in a more publicly genteel fashion, which makes it all the more insidious as systemic racism will be more effectively buttressed by color-blind ideology without presidential amplification of White supremacy. Moreover, the fact that Vice President Harris is Black and Asian (and also the first woman vice president) only lends further credence to the idea that systemic racism has ended. Therefore, in light of the nation's racial history, one should expect the intoxicating fragrance of color blindness to once again attract most Whites' attention in post-Trump America. One need only consider how quickly White support for the Black Lives Matter movement declined in the weeks and months following the murder of George Floyd—from 60% in June 2020 to 45% in September 2020—to glimpse most Whites' fragile or non-existent commitment to antiracist projects, particularly those led by and centered on Black and Indigenous liberation (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Yes, as noted previously, conversations and awareness of systemic racism (at least an unimpressive, simplistic version) increased in the

wake of the brutal torture and execution of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers. However, these fleeting increases were *almost entirely attributable to shifts among liberals/Democrats*. In part, this may be due to the largely symbolic changes that occurred in the months after the Floyd murder. For instance, the Mississippi State Legislature voted to retire their state flag, which bore the confederate battle emblem; the Washington NFL team finally disposed of its racist mascot; and several municipalities enacted policing reforms. However, irrespective of the new Biden presidency, there is a social fact that must be fully understood: White Americans have a history of quickly growing tired during seminal moments when transformative, antiracist legislative and policy changes are possible.

The Intractability of Color-Blind Racism

Given these facts, it remains important to address color-blind racism, which those committed to racial justice will need to understand in order to be able to refute its harmful, racist illogic. While the ideology of *overt* White supremacy was amplified during the Trump presidency, the more sophisticated, subtle, and still dominant ideology of color blindness continues to operate *in the service of* White supremacy. For example, some locations where color-blind claims are commonly found are the comments sections of online news reports, social media, or blog posts. Even a cursory scanning of comments to articles or posts that address topics such as affirmative action, Indigenous sovereignty, immigration, police killing of unarmed Black men and women, and racial justice protests reveal a color-blind ideology. Although there is not a reliable way to discern the racial identity of these individuals, except for profile pictures and self-reports within the body of the text, the tenor of their comments suggests most are White. Consider the following example during the Obama era.

In January 2012, a coalition of nonprofit organizations in Duluth, Minnesota, launched the Un-Fair Campaign, which was designed to

promote awareness and initiate a conversation about White racial privilege and racism through the medium of roadside billboards. These billboards were intentionally provocative, with phrases such as “It’s hard to see racism when you’re White” written in bold letters on the faces of White women and men. The billboards sparked considerable controversy, locally and nationally. Opponents of the Un-Fair Campaign created a Facebook group in an effort to communicate their frustrations. Consider the following representative comment posted on the “STOP Racist Unfair Campaign” (2012) Facebook group wall:

Racism is Racism no matter how you slice it, and this ad campaign is RACIST! We all see color, how we react to all the colors we see in the world is up to each individual!! I was always taught to treat others as I would like to be treated, last time I looked an individual’s color was not factored into what I was taught!!!!!! I will not apologize for being White and I would not ask anyone of color to apologize either!!!

This post is indicative of the problem with color blindness; it assumes that we already inhabit a society where racial equality prevails. When White privilege and White racism are implicated as real barriers to racial equality, the tendency is for White Americans to summarily dismiss the well-established body of readily available evidence and respond with hollow claims of racism, particularly against Whites. Unfortunately, this practice is all too common. As mentioned earlier, broaching the topics of racial disparities between Whites and BIPOC people in areas such as wealth, education, jobs, health care, and treatment by the criminal justice system is often cited as evidence of racism against Whites.

A more visible example of racist color-blind nonsense was the Trump administration’s formal effort to prevent federal government employees and contractors from learning about the historical and

contemporary racial reality of the United States. Following the summer of 2020's historic and overwhelmingly peaceful racial justice protests demanding greater police accountability and the elimination of racist laws, policies, and practices across the nation's institutions and organizations, the Trump administration issued a directive¹ to all federal agencies and an executive order² to end all diversity trainings that reference or draw on critical race theory or a consideration of White privilege or systemic racism. Consistent with the foregoing discussion of the role of the Internet in promoting color-blind ideology, this decision can be directly traced to a right-wing social media campaign that made its way to popular conservative media outlets, including Fox News.

1 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/M-20-34.pdf>

2 <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-combating-race-sex-stereotyping/>

A similar example of color-blind absurdity is the largely White, conservative furor that ensued following publication of the *New York Times Magazine's The 1619 Project* in August 2019, which was intended to mark “the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery.” The goal of *The 1619 Project* was “to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (Hannah-Jones, 2019). More than a year after publication of *The 1619 Project*, right-wing ire had not abated, especially when schools and districts across the country had begun integrating it into the curriculum. *The 1619 Project* had so inflamed White conservatives that Donald Trump announced his “1776 Commission” in October 2020, which was ultimately nothing more than a rehashing of the tired Eurocentric rendering of American history that most of the nation’s children are still subjected to in schools.

On Donald Trump's last full day in office, January 19, 2021, his staff released the 1776 Commission report on the White House website. Yes, on Martin Luther King Day. The report was widely criticized as sophomoric and propagandistic. On January 20, 2021, the American Historical Association (2021) released a statement—cosigned by 46 additional professional academic associations—condemning the 1776 Commission's report as hastily prepared, devoid of intellectual seriousness, and containing ample "falsehoods, inaccuracies, omissions, and misleading statements." Two days later on January 21, 2021, President Joe Biden dissolved the 1776 Commission on his first full day in office and removed its widely condemned, anti-Black report from the White House website. Demonstrating much anti-Blackness, by February 2021, at least three Republican state legislatures (in Arkansas, Iowa, and Mississippi) had introduced bills that would ban *The 1619 Project*, and by the summer of 2021, states were issuing bans on teaching critical race theory. This backlash, which seems largely driven by a resentment for telling the truth about the history of race and racism in the United States, is a part of color-blind racism's insistence that talking about race is itself racist. Insisting something is not true because you find it unpleasant is a logical fallacy associated with an appeal to emotion in place of facts.

Given this, by now you may be wondering whether BIPOC folks also advocate color blindness. Some do, though not to the same extent as Whites. Sociologist Bonilla-Silva (2018) explains this phenomenon in the following way:

An ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system in the *same* way and to the *same* degree. Instead, an ideology is dominant if *most* members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system must accommodate their views vis-à-vis that ideology. (p. 161; emphasis in original)

In other words, since the ideology of color blindness is hegemonic, some Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Muslim, and Asian Americans will inevitably also be persuaded by its claims. This is evident in groups like “Hispanics for Trump” and prominent Black Republicans like Candace Owens and Ben Carson.

“IF WE COULD ONLY RETURN TO THE PRE-TRUMP ERA”: THE NOSTALGIA FOR COLOR-BLIND RACISM

So what’s wrong with color blindness? It just means that you want to see people as human beings, not colors, right? Not exactly. The color-blind narrative omits crucial facts about how we arrived at the current racial reality in the first place. To begin with, the process of racialization is ignored. Racialization involves “creat[ing] difference where previously no phenotypical or biological difference existed” (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010, p. 9). Europeans used certain physical features, most notably skin color, to classify non-Europeans as distinct “races,” brand them as genetically and culturally inferior, and justify various forms of oppression against them, such as genocide, slavery, theft, and apartheid (Feagin, 2020; Feagin & Ducey, 2018). What are now considered distinct racial groups (e.g., Black, White, Asian, Indigenous) are actually social constructions originating from Europeans’ desire to dominate those perceived as “other.” Race is not a biological reality that, with focused effort, can be ignored and rendered inconsequential, as the color-blind perspective suggests (see also Buffington in this volume). Instead, it is a social construct, contingent on history, politics, geography, and *time*.

In reality, color blindness is a powerful example of what sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have called a “racial project,” which they define as “*simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to*

reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56; emphasis in original). As such, racial conflict of the past did not simply evaporate with the passage of the landmark civil rights legislation of the mid-20th century; it merely adapted to a different period. The overarching goal of the civil rights movement was to abolish the overt, state-sanctioned apartheid system that severely limited the life chances of Blacks, and other Americans of color, throughout the United States, particularly in the southern states. Civil rights activists also demanded that Americans of color be accorded the same rights, privileges, and opportunities as Whites based on their common humanity and citizenship. The first goal was accomplished; the second goal has been only partially fulfilled. In the next section, I provide evidence that shows that the color-blind perspective is, in a word, wrong.

RACE STILL MATTERS: THE CASES OF EDUCATION AND THE LABOR MARKET

A concise review of how and where race continues to shape individuals' life chances would require a book-length treatment. However, a thorough repudiation of the myth of a color-blind society does not require such an exhaustive approach. Highlighting the falsity of this perspective requires only sufficient evidence that racism and racial discrimination remain regular and durable features of U.S. society. Research has shown that racial inequities continue to exist in areas such as education, the labor market, housing, politics, health and health care access, the criminal justice system, exposure to industrial toxins, retail experiences, and media depictions, to name but a few (see, e.g., Feagin, 2018; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). In this section, I show how race affects Americans' experiences in the areas of education and the labor market. I focus on these two social areas because they are institutions with which nearly all Americans must interact fairly regularly throughout their lives and because the law explicitly prohibits racial discrimination in both of them.

Race Matters in Education

Americans view education as the principal means of upward social mobility, a central pillar of the “American dream.” In our “meritocratic” society, high academic achievement is supposed to grease the wheels of mobility and propel one toward occupational and financial success throughout life. This process tends to work marvelously for the average White student. Unfortunately, for many BIPOC students, it operates in a wholly different manner in large part because of the poor quality of the schools they attend.

In the United States, most children and adolescents attend schools based on where they live. However, the ghettoization of Blacks, Latinxs, and Asians in cities and the forced relocation of Indigenous peoples to reservations across the United States have ensured that children of color do not receive equal schooling, both prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* (because separate is *not* equal) and up to the present day (because separate is *still not* equal). Yet, irrespective of discursive shifts in public rhetoric that have recently included greater acknowledgment of systemic racism, color-blind logic still prevails, as many pretend that Americans who find their children’s schools unsatisfactory always have the option of moving to another location with better schools; whether they decide to do so is entirely an individual decision. These types of statements ignore the overwhelming body of evidence showing that racially segregated urban ghettos were intentionally created by Whites through practices such as redlining, blockbusting and panic selling, threats and violence, and restrictive covenants. Today, racial residential segregation is maintained and expanded (either contiguously or non-contiguously) through such illegal practices as racially discriminatory lending and racial steering on the part of real estate agents, as well as freedom of choice [read: White flight] (Lewis et al., 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993; Zubrinsky Charles, 2003). Where one lives matters for a variety of reasons, including the availability of jobs, exposure to pollution (water, air, soil, noise), violent victimization, the availability

of fresh fruits and vegetables, and most especially, the quality of schools that one's children will attend (McKoy & Vincent, 2008).

Due to the legacy of forced racial residential segregation, students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students, are more likely than White students to attend inferior racially segregated schools, for example, with less qualified teachers and limited gifted, honors, and advanced placement classes (Kozol, 1991, 2005). This is partially due to social class differences by race. Yet the social class advantage held by Whites is itself a product of White racism, both past and present (Feagin, 2020). Even when students of color, especially Blacks, attend diverse schools, they are still more likely than White students to be “tracked low,” independent of their abilities and aspirations and their parents' preferences (Diamond, 2006; Tyson, 2011). That is, they are disproportionately placed in developmental courses, dropout prevention, and vocational programs.

Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Muslim, and Asian American students also routinely experience explicit and implicit racism on the part of some White teachers and students, which creates a significant disruption in their learning (see, e.g., Kailin, 1999; Kohli, 2008). Examples of implicit racism include teachers and administrators subscribing to negative racial stereotypes about Black students' having poor moral character and disliking academic pursuits. More overt forms of racism would include racially coded or not-so-veiled comments such as, “Come on, Calvin (who is Black), you should know the answer to this question about slavery” or “Kim (who is Chinese American), how did your grandparents feel about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II?” These types of statements and questions may come from teachers, administrators, coaches, or students. And at the intersection of both explicit and implicit racism lies the well-documented lower expectations of many White teachers for Black and Latinx students relative to White students (Landsman, 2004; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

At this point, some may argue that students of color could overcome these barriers to academic excellence through hard work. Indeed, some of them do. However, pointing to examples of “motivated minorities” who attend poor schools, graduate at the top of their respective classes, and earn scholarships to prestigious colleges and universities as evidence of what is possible is disingenuous. The “homeless to Harvard” and “jail to Yale” stories that appear in the popular media at seemingly regular intervals are extremely rare exceptions and, by definition, are far outside the norm. Further, given the differences in the educational experiences of White students and students of color, it would be unrealistic to expect both groups to have comparable educational outcomes even if they worked equally hard, to say nothing of the social class advantages of White students. This begs the question: Why should a herculean effort be required of students of color to compensate for all the educational inequities they experience? This doesn’t comport with the widespread perception of education as “the great equalizer” or the claim of a color-blind society where race no longer has material consequences.

Race Matters in the Labor Market

Regarding the labor market, in terms of income, the U.S. Department of Labor (2016) reports Black and Latinx people consistently earn less than their White and most of their Asian American counterparts across all major occupational groups (e.g., management, professional, service, and sales). The per capita income among Latinx people (of any race) in 2019 was \$22,002 compared with \$42,106 among non-Latinx Whites. This represents a 91% advantage for non-Latinx Whites that has remained relatively unchanged since at least 2011. Black people fared only marginally better than Latinx people, earning a median income of only \$24,509 in 2019. And this already significant income gap between Blacks and non-Latinx Whites has grown by almost \$4,000 since 2011. Asian Americans earned a per capita income of \$43,884 in 2019, marking

the first time that their average income either met or exceeded that of Whites, since at least 2012. Whereas some may view this finding as evidence of meaningful progress toward racial equality given the magnitude of the Black–White and Latinx–White income gaps, it actually masks considerable income variation that exists among Asian ethnic groups. For example, the per capita incomes of Japanese, Filipino, and Hmong Americans in 2019 were \$51,999, \$38,493, and \$22,530, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Moreover, members of those Asian ethnic groups with both higher and lower per capita incomes still pay a “race tax,” as evidence reveals that they must be better educated and more experienced than their White counterparts to realize similar pay and promotion opportunities (Chou & Feagin, 2014; Woo, 2000). Unfortunately, Asian Americans’ burden of having to be more qualified than their White colleagues to realize equitable treatment in the workplace is widely ignored due to the invidious “model minority” myth (see Zhou and Tran in this volume).

From education to the labor market, research has shown that even among vocational school graduates—that is, those for whom marketable skills are of the utmost importance—the stigma of non-White skin color presents itself as a significant barrier to gainful employment. An important study by Royster (2003) documented this phenomenon by following two groups—one Black and one White, similar in all relevant respects (i.e., motivation, grades, skill level, etc.)—of recent male graduates of a vocational school in Baltimore, Maryland, to assess their labor market experiences. She found that they had greatly disparate rates of success in the blue-collar labor market. The White graduates found more lucrative jobs in the areas in which they were trained and did so relatively quickly. The Black graduates did not have the extensive networks of the White graduates due to historical racial discrimination in the blue-collar labor market and the exclusionary policies of most craft unions. Royster also found that Blacks’ ability to develop these types of materially valuable social networks is stymied, in part, by the fallacious belief among White employers that Whites are routinely

facing “reverse discrimination” and that they are “underdogs” in the labor market. Therefore, White employers find it necessary to look out for fellow Whites struggling to find employment in what they perceive to be a political climate overly concerned with issues of diversity and affirmative action. Royster (2003) concludes that

because older White men actively recruit and assist younger White men—even those who are not family members, to the virtual exclusion of young Black men—patterns that unfairly advantaged White men during the pre-civil rights era continue to do so now. (p. 177)

CONCLUSION

White people as well as Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color have significantly different opportunities in nearly every sphere of life. Color blindness supports this racially unequal status quo, and most Whites, and some BIPOC folks, buy into this ideology to varying degrees. So how do we resolve this situation? Is there a viable alternative to color blindness? Thankfully, there is. Rather than a color-blind society, we need to strive for a society that is both racism-free and racially equitable. This first requires that we become race or color conscious. Wise (2010) has suggested “illuminated individualism” as a way toward racial equity. Here, we must first acknowledge that individual identities matter; we are not simply raceless, generic Americans. Next, we need to realize that we have different lived experiences and be reflexive about how race has shaped those experiences. Last, it is imperative that we remain cognizant of the influence of historical and contemporary racism on the life chances of BIPOC groups in the United States. In essence, we need to adopt both a sociological and a historical perspective. Without doing so, we can never hope to achieve a society where race does not determine individuals’ life chances. We *can* move

forward together as Americans of all hues, but only after sincerely and completely addressing America's racist past, committing to addressing racism in the present, and resolving to confront it in the future when, not if, it rears its unsightly head.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2018). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

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Websites

Racism Review: <http://www.racismreview.com>

“Racism Review is intended to provide a credible and reliable source of information for journalists, students and members of the general public who are seeking solid evidence-based research and analysis of ‘race,’ racism, ethnicity, and immigration issues, especially as they undergird and shape U.S. society within a global setting. We also provide substantive research and analysis on local, national, and global resistance to racial and ethnic oppression, including the many types of antiracist activism.”

Tim Wise: <http://www.timwise.org>

This is the personal website of antiracist activist and author Tim Wise. Many of his essays are posted here, as well as interviews, speeches, and his speaking schedule.

The Privilege Institute: <https://www.theprivilegeinstitute.com/>

“The Privilege Institute (TPI) was created as a nonprofit organization in early 2014 by Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr. TPI develops and sustains collaborations grounded in the essential ideals of the White Privilege Conference (WPC): Understanding, Respecting and Connecting. TPI offers multiple opportunities for advocates of peace, equity, and justice to enhance their work and research by providing challenging workshops, engaging speakers, and a range of educational opportunities and resources on issues of privilege, power, and leadership.”

Audio/Visual

Race: The Power of an Illusion (2003): This is a three-part PBS documentary. The executive producer Larry Adelman writes, “Our hope is that this series can help us all navigate through our myths and misconceptions, and scrutinize some of the assumptions we take for granted. In that sense, the real subject of the film is not so much race but the viewer, or more precisely, the notions about race we all hold.”

The Great White Hoax: Donald Trump & The Politics of Race and Class in America (2018): “The Great White Hoax, featuring acclaimed anti-racist educator and author Tim Wise, explores how American political leaders of both parties have been tapping into white anxiety, stoking white grievance, and scapegoating people of color for decades to divide and conquer working class voters and shore up political support. The film’s primary focus is Donald Trump’s race-baiting 2016 campaign for the presidency. But it also widens its scope to show how Trump’s charged rhetoric about African-Americans, Latinos, and Muslims fits within a longstanding historical pattern, offering a stunning survey of how racism and racial scapegoating have shaped American politics for centuries. *The Great White Hoax* is an ideal resource for courses that look at race relations, white privilege, the intersectionality of race, class, and gender identities, presidential politics, and political propaganda.”

White Like Me: Race, Racism, & White Privilege in America (2013): “*White Like Me*, based on the work of acclaimed anti-racist educator and author Tim Wise, explores race and racism in the U.S. through the lens of whiteness and white privilege. In a stunning reassessment of the American ideal of meritocracy and claims that we’ve entered a post-racial society, Wise offers a fascinating look back at the race-based white entitlement programs that built the American middle class, and argues that our failure as a society to come to terms with this legacy of white privilege continues to

perpetuate racial inequality and race-driven political resentments today.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Having learned about the problems with the color-blind perspective, do you still find that you are sympathetic to its claims? Why or why not?
2. Do you think a truly post-racial America is possible? Why or why not? If so, what do you think some of the preconditions might be for this to become a reality?
3. Why do you think some Americans of color endorse color blindness, whereas other Americans of color strongly resist such claims?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. If you are a White student, consider sharing with your White family members and friends how color-blind thinking actually harms both White Americans and Americans of color. Would this be difficult to do? Why or why not? What steps might you take to become more comfortable talking about race, racism, and racial inequality?
2. If you are a student of color, think about how the color-blind perspective has shaped your understanding about race in both your own life and the larger society. How has the ideology of color blindness played a role in how you interpret social and political issues?
3. If you have family members and friends of different races, make the decision to regularly talk with them about how race and racism continue to be relevant across social institutions and settings.

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ESSAY 8 “BLACK PEOPLE COULD MAKE IT IF THEY JUST WORKED HARD” : THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

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Following the tragic passing of the remarkable basketball player Kobe Bryant and his 15-year-old daughter Gianna Bryant on January 26, 2020, millions of people across the United States and the world held vigils and gatherings to commemorate Bryant’s legacy and contributions. Soon, a theme emerged in the discussions of celebrity sports shows and commemorative speeches: Bryant’s famous “Mamba mentality.” Outlined in his book by the same name, Bryant (2018) defines this mentality as an approach or way of living where you constantly work at self-improvement through dedicated hard work. As Ravens quarterback Robert Griffin III stated in an interview after Bryant’s passing, “Mamba mentality gave people hope—hope that if you stay focused and work hard enough, your goals are attainable, and not to let anyone stop you” (Jones, 2020).

Often, when we hear Black politicians and celebrities promote the American ideals of hard work, merit, and individualism, our tendency is to cast them as authorities on “the Black experience” and racial realities in the United States, and thus we give their comments greater weight. Political figures like Barack Obama, for example, encourage Americans to believe that all dreams are achievable in U.S. society if a person works hard enough, irrespective of one’s race, class, or gender identity. In his November 6, 2012, reelection speech, former President Obama claimed that

we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you’re willing to work hard, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or who you love. It

doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, able, disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you're willing to try.

Celebrities such as talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and rapper Jay-Z echo these popular beliefs in meritocracy, reinforcing the idea that U.S. society now has a structure of equal access and opportunity. Their rags-to-riches stories tend to make people believe that anyone willing to pursue their goals has a fair chance in the United States. While most people concede that poor people, people of color, and women continue to face some obstacles in U.S. society, the dominant belief is that they generally have a fair chance. The perception is that if Kobe Bryant, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez, Oprah Winfrey, and President Obama managed to do so, other people of color and women should also be able to succeed. Implied in this logic is the idea that those who fail to achieve their goals have poor work ethics and therefore have only themselves to blame.

The narrative of hard work, self-improvement, and individual perseverance mirrors stories of immigrants who came to Ellis Island penniless and managed to reach the "American dream." Whether that "American dream" involves owning a home, obtaining a well-paying job that provides for one's family, or the ability to acquire other symbols of wealth and success, many Americans believe that individuals who take the "personal responsibility" to obtain success are likely to reach their goals. What's more, people often assume that a person's success has a direct correlation to how hard that person worked.

Like all good narratives, there is some truth to such notions of meritocracy, hard work, and opportunity. Certainly, people who put little or no effort into pursuing their goals in education, work, business, sports, or creative projects rarely reach their objectives. Personal experiences of overcoming obstacles to achieve particular

aspirations similarly give legitimacy to the idea that hard work produces good results that are well deserved. The accomplishments of individuals such as Kobe Bryant and Barack Obama indicate the changing conditions of U.S. society. Only one or two generations ago, the likelihood that a Black person would become a global sports celebrity or the president of the United States seemed inconceivable. Indeed, due to their agency and perseverance, a growing number of Black people have pursued new opportunities in education and employment that only a few decades ago were primarily reserved for Whites. Such perseverance has led to some measurable gains in Black people's class mobility (Lacy, 2007; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).

When considering U.S. institutional structures and systems, however, the dominant belief that people are rewarded primarily on the basis of merit and that we live in a society of equal opportunity turns out to be much more myth than fact. An extensive body of sociological facts and empirical evidence shows that a person's life chances and opportunities in the United States—by which I mean people's ability to access and obtain homeownership, sustainable employment, good education, effective health care, and quality transportation—continue to be significantly shaped by a person's racial identity.

To be sure, a person's gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality citizenship, religion, and other markers of identity intersect with a person's racial identity to further complicate the ways a person's life chances and opportunities are impacted. But the relationship between race and life chances in the United States deserves particular scrutiny. As Lipsitz (2011) argues, "More than four decades after the civil rights activism of the 1960s, and nearly one hundred and fifty years after the abolition of slavery, race remains the most important single variable determining opportunities and life chances in the United States" (p. 15).

This seems like a radical claim to make given that some people argue that institutional, policy-based forms of racial exclusion and discrimination have largely been eliminated in today's society. To

understand why this claim is unfounded and why life chances and opportunities are still severely skewed along racial lines, we must understand the historical connection between race and wealth in the United States. Specifically, we must consider how the wealth and inheritances of White Americans today originate directly from unfair gains and unearned advantages made possible by past racial discrimination.

RACE AND WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES

Wealth and inheritance play a critical role in an American's life chances. Sociologist Thomas Shapiro (2004) demonstrates that inheritance is more important than college degrees, number of children in the family, marital status, full-time employment, or household composition in giving a person opportunity to succeed economically in U.S. society (Lipsitz, 2011). This is because wealth and inheritance allow people to get a head start in accessing opportunities that subsequently yield the potential to build more wealth. People use wealth and inheritance to pay for private schools and college, to buy homes in well-resourced neighborhoods, and to start small businesses. All these things require work and perseverance, but the initial capital required to start such initiatives makes it so that the hard work of people who already have wealth is much more likely to yield good outcomes than the hard work of people who must use their entire income simply to manage bills and expenses.

Black and White people with similar incomes, work histories, and family structures have radically different relationships to wealth and inheritance. According to the Economic Policy Institute, "White families are twice as likely to receive an inheritance as black families, and that inheritance is nearly three times as much" (Jones, 2017). According to 2015 data, the median wealth for a White family that receives an inheritance is \$287,457. By contrast, the median wealth for a Black family that receives an inheritance is \$38,174. Even for

families that do *not* receive an inheritance, the racial wealth gap persists, with White families having 5.4 times more wealth than Black families (\$183,050 to \$33,969) (Jones, 2017).

Because they tend to inherit significantly less money from their parents and grandparents, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other people of color are more likely to be asset poor. This means that they do not have savings to fall back on in the event a family member loses a job, experiences the onset of an illness or disability, or has to stop working to take care of children. According to Lipsitz (2011), “only 26 percent of white children grow up in asset-poor households, but 52 percent of blacks and 54 percent of Latinos grow up in these economically fragile households” (p. 4).

Why are White Americans today much more likely to inherit wealth than Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other people of color? The answer to this question has much less to do with White Americans’ good work ethic than with policies and practices that purposefully and exclusively gave Whites opportunities to gain wealth in the past. Indeed, for most of U.S. history, racially discriminatory policies and practices did not simply produce disadvantages for Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans; they also produced calculable advantages for Whites. For example, 46 million Americans today can trace the origins of their family wealth to the 1862 Homestead Act, a federal policy that gave farmland (typically of 160 acres) west of the Mississippi River to those who applied. Because the Homestead Act had restrictions that were expressly designed to exclude Black people, this land was overwhelmingly allocated to Whites, essentially producing intergenerational wealth advantages for millions of White Americans (Lipsitz, 2006). Such exclusive opportunities for White wealth accumulation were also facilitated by federal and state policies that dispossessed and forcibly removed Native Americans onto reservations west of the Mississippi, allowing White settlers to overtake and develop land in the northeast (Rogin, 1991).

White Americans today can also trace the origins of their wealth and inheritance to the trillions of dollars accumulated through the appreciation of home values that were secured through federally insured loans granted between 1932 and 1968. As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage loans enabled working-class people who previously would not have been able to afford to buy homes the benefits of wealth accumulation through homeownership. Once again, however, this opportunity was granted almost exclusively to Whites. As Lipsitz (2006) shows, "98 percent of FHA loans made during that era went to whites via the openly racist categories utilized in the agency's official manuals for appraisers" (p. 107). Because of the racially discriminatory practices in mortgage lending and real estate agencies, the American dream of owning a home, and the capital accumulated through the gradual increase in property values, means that White people were much more likely to reap the benefits of their hard work than were people of color. As a cornerstone of racial inequality, residential segregation and the differential effects of homeownership mean that middle-class Whites have between "3 and 5 times as much wealth as equally achieving blacks" (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 3).

Housing policies and practices were not the only mechanism through which Whites were given unearned economic advantages. New Deal policies such as the 1935 Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, and the 1944 GI Bill of Rights were central to White working-class people's ability to climb the economic ladder (Roediger, 2005; see also Brown, 1988; Lipsitz, 2001; Williams, 2003). Although these policies were technically "race-neutral" and did not explicitly exclude people of color, their application in the larger context of racial inequality meant that they disproportionately granted taxpayer-subsidized advantages to White men. For example, the GI Bill offered some benefits to Black veterans and historically Black colleges, but the disqualification of Black men from military service as a consequence of segregated schools and poor health meant that they were underrepresented among GI Bill beneficiaries. As Williams

(2003) notes, “In 1950, the first census year after World War II ended, of 15,386,000 veterans eligible for GI benefits, 920,000 or 6 percent, were African Americans, although they accounted for 10 percent of the adult male population” (p. 113).

It may seem that once overtly discriminatory and exclusionary policies were eliminated as a result of the racial justice struggles of the 1950s through the 1970s, the significance of race, wealth, and opportunity would diminish. But because assets transferred to subsequent generations tend to compound in value, the significance of White wealth advantages obtained as a result of past injustices actually becomes greater in the present. The baby boom generation is estimated to inherit between \$7 trillion and \$9 trillion between 1990 and 2020. Lipsitz (2011) writes that virtually all this money is

rooted in profits made by whites from overtly discriminatory housing markets before 1968. Adult white wage earners routinely inherit money *from* parents, while adult non-white wage earners routinely send out money *to* their parents to compensate for the low wages and lack of assets they [the parents] possess because of racial discrimination. (pp. 3–4)

Indeed, historical data reveal that “no progress has been made in reducing income and wealth inequalities between black and white households over the past 70 years” (Kuhn et al., 2018).

The racial wealth gap is also exacerbated by contemporary policies that are seemingly race-neutral or “color-blind.” Reducing taxation on inheritance and capital gains, as well as granting deductions to local property taxes, adds value to wealth created through past discrimination in lending and housing policies (Lipsitz, 2006). Moreover, subprime mortgage lending practices that are technically color-blind have been applied in race-specific ways and have produced disproportionate losses in wealth for people of color,

particularly for Black and Latino people (Rugh & Massey, 2010). Subprime loans have higher interest rates and less favorable repayment terms to purportedly make up for some homebuyers' higher credit risk. Yet studies have found that even when people of color have income and debt characteristics similar to those of White applicants, they are disproportionately sold subprime loans (Lipsitz, 2011). A United for a Fair Economy report titled "State of the Dream 2008: Foreclosed" found that people of color were more than three times more likely to be sold subprime loans. Based on federal data, the study estimated that high-cost loans account for 55% of loans to Black people but only 17% of loans to Whites. Because of such racially discriminatory lending practices, people of color were disproportionately dispossessed of their wealth as the housing market began to collapse in 2007. The report estimated that people of color could expect to lose between \$164 billion and \$213 billion as a result of the subprime mortgage crisis. This represents the greatest theft of wealth in modern U.S. history. Although Whites also suffered economically as a result of the crisis, had subprime loans been distributed equitably, losses for White people would be 44.5% higher and losses for people of color would be about 24% lower (Rivera et al., 2008, p. vii). Numerous other studies, scholarly books, and policy evaluations also show that the shift to color-blind policies has not resulted in greater racial equality when it comes to wealth distribution (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2006; Feagin, 2000; Massey, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Williams, 2003).

Economic capital is not the only unearned advantage Whites possess; social capital also facilitates White people's access to job opportunities. Social scientists have shown that personal contacts are the single most important advantage in obtaining employment. Moreover, most jobs in the United States are not listed in classified advertisements or conducted through publicly advertised searches (Lipsitz, 2006). Because White people dominate supervisory, hiring, and decision-making roles in most companies and institutions, White people often offer jobs to insiders in their social networks, creating a hidden advantage that is difficult to quantify or contest. In addition,

institutional hiring practices consistently show patterns of racial discrimination against people of color and foreigners. Even when supervisors do not explicitly intend to produce such racially skewed outcomes, their unconscious racial bias against applicants who have non-White names or appearances, or foreign accents produces discriminatory effects (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Rooth, 2010; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005).

The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic has had a radically disproportionate effect on Black and Latinx communities. Past and present-day racial discrimination in employment and education translates into greater job precarity for Black people. Because they are overrepresented in the service sector, Black people lost jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at much higher rates than did Whites. According to April 2020 Labor Department figures, only “48.8 percent of black adults were employed, tying two months in the early 1980s for the worst rate on record. The equivalent rates for white and Hispanic Americans have also dropped precipitously, but remain above 50 percent” (Long & Van Dam, 2020). Such economic devastation is compounded by the fact that people of color, particularly Black, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Latinx people, have experienced higher COVID-19 related death rates and high rates of hospitalization (which come with enormous medical bills) compared to Whites (Artiga et al., 2020).

Although I have focused on the economic advantages White Americans obtain as a result of past and contemporary forms of discrimination, race is also enormously significant in determining other factors critical to obtaining well-being. The opportunities to attain a good education, adequate health care, and physical safety are similarly shaped by the convergences between race and place. People of color systematically experience disproportionate vulnerability to environmental hazards, police violence, longer sentences and punishment in the criminal justice system, and health effects such as asthma and lead poisoning in their neighborhoods, while White Americans are protected from these vulnerabilities due

to privileges afforded by their skin color and suburban locales (Lipsitz, 2006, 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993).

PERSISTENT MYTHS ABOUT RACE AND WEALTH

Despite a growing body of evidence that race continues to be the single most significant factor in determining life chances and opportunities, the myths of meritocracy, hard work, personal responsibility, and equal opportunity continue to trump these facts. Indeed, even when presented with mountains of empirical evidence that White Americans' advantages are overwhelmingly rooted in past and present discriminatory practices, many people continue to believe that Whites tend to be at the top of the socioeconomic ladder as a result of merit and hard work (Ioanide, 2015). Today, common explanations for Black, Latinx, and Native American poverty rarely acknowledge the effects of past and present discrimination on the basis of race, citizenship, and ethnicity; instead, the low socioeconomic status of Black, Latinx, and Native people tends to be attributed to "cultural pathologies" that purportedly encourage low aspirations for educational attainment, poor work ethic, family and sexual nonnormativity (e.g., single-parent households or teenage pregnancy), and "welfare dependence." Such racist myths were gratuitously reinforced during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, when he claimed that

the U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (McRady, 2015)

Throughout the course of his 2017 to 2021 term, President Trump made countless false claims that reinforced the idea that people of color were “undeserving” and lacked the hard work ethos of White Americans. Moreover, he repeatedly constructed people of color and immigrants as national threats intent on “stealing” resources from hard-working, deserving White Americans. Despite extensive sociological evidence that these are baseless stereotypes, more than half of the White electorate voted for Trump in the 2020 election, indicating an overwhelming emotional investment in these false beliefs.

What do we do when copious amounts of facts and evidence fail to make a difference in changing people’s dominant false beliefs and perceptions about people of color? And why do people hold on to largely unfounded myths even when extensive evidence is presented to challenge and unravel these myths? Such denials, disavowals, and displacements suggest that people’s investments in the myths of meritocracy and hard work are not simply based on ignorance or the lack of sound information. That is, people may hold on to false beliefs despite being exposed to evidence-based “correctives” because these mythologies provide a sense of ideological, psychological, and identity-based coherence.

For White people, holding on to these beliefs despite the extensive evidence of ongoing systemic racism often has to do with avoiding the guilt, pain, and moral questions raised by a violent history that continues to grant them unearned advantages and privileges. A White person may be avidly committed to stopping discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity, but he or she still inherits some aspect of privilege and advantage by virtue of being White. Even poor White Americans who face significant economic obstacles are, at the very least, granted the privilege of not being constantly subject to discrimination on the basis of skin color.

When White Americans do accept the overwhelming evidence of White advantages and privileges yielded by a long legacy of racism,

the worldviews, ideologies, and belief systems through which White people are encouraged to understand themselves tend to crumble. If I believe that I got to the top of my class solely on the basis of my individual hard work, I may feel justified in considering myself superior to those who are lower than me in rank. If instead I consider all the unearned and unjust advantages I inherited by virtue of my race, my hard work has to be reconsidered in the context of these unjust advantages and disadvantages. By extension, I likely have to confront ethical questions about my role and responsibility in a system that gives me advantages through the exclusion, exploitation, and dispossession of people of color.

For people of color, investments in the myths of meritocracy and hard work are often rooted in something quite different. For the past 40 years, politicians, pundits, and media representations have blamed and demonized poor Native, Black, and Latinx people for high poverty rates, school dropouts, teenage pregnancies, criminality, and “welfare dependence” (Kim, 2000; Lee, 1999; Reeves, 1994; Springer, 2005). As a result, some people of color invest in notions of hard work, merit, and personal responsibility to dissociate themselves from these negative stereotypes, particularly from the stigmatization of dependence. Indeed, because the “Black urban underclass,” “illegal immigrants,” and “welfare dependents” are so stigmatized, people of color are constantly compelled to prove their exceptionality from these imposed perceptions.

For Asian Americans, who tend to be stereotyped as “the model minority,” investments in the myth of meritocracy and hard work may be rooted in the desire to preserve a status that is relatively valorized in comparison with other groups of color. This often functions to socially divide groups who share experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion, emphasizing differences over similarities that could produce generative political alliances (see also Zhou and Tran in this volume).

At times, people of color who obtain middle- and upper-class status through education, entrepreneurship, or employment also adopt the rhetoric of blaming poor people of color for their class status and begin advocating the myth of meritocracy and hard work. They offer their own experiences of success as “proof” of other people’s unwillingness to pursue opportunities. While there may be some truth to this correlation, such views often minimize the number of systemic obstacles poor people of color would have to overcome to reach economic ascendance *as a group*. In other words, the U.S. racial order has conceded class mobility for a small number of people of color. But if it were to allow the economic ascent of a *majority* of people of color, it would have to radically alter its wealth, opportunity, and social structure. White people would have to relinquish their long-term dominance in the domains of property and business ownership, employment, education, and political office and share these resources and opportunities with people of color.

Middle- and upper-class people of color may also advocate notions of meritocracy and hard work to obtain or preserve higher positions of power. Such positions, particularly if they are situated in predominantly White institutions, often require that people of color adopt the values, rhetoric, and practices of those institutions. For example, it is not likely that people such as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice or Justice Clarence Thomas would have gained entry into such high governmental and judicial positions had they made public critiques of institutional racism in the United States.

When people of color advocate, defend, and invest in notions of hard work, personal responsibility, and equal opportunity without also revealing the ongoing significance of racial discrimination and inequality, the myth of meritocracy is reinforced. Television shows such as *Insecure*, *Ugly Betty*, and *Fresh Off the Boat* present media representations of dignity, resilience, humor, and self-empowerment common in many families of color in the United States. These representations may even touch on interpersonal forms of everyday racism. Yet because the origins and persistence of institutional

racism are often missing, representations of people of color who pull-themselves-up-by-their-own-bootstraps tend to reinforce the myth of meritocracy in the post-civil rights era (Dyson, 2005; Gray, 1995; Hunt, 2005; Jhally & Lewis, 2005; McKnight, 2014; Warner, 2015). In other words, although these shows are groundbreaking in humanizing people of color to predominantly White audiences, they generally do not bring systemic aspects of racial discrimination into full view.

There is nothing inevitable about White people's compliance with a system that continues to stratify advantages on the basis of racially unjust practices and policies. It is also not inevitable that a person of color will elect to fight such a system, though people of color have often spearheaded social justice movements that have collectively benefited the U.S. social fabric. Lipsitz (2006) reminds us that

we do not choose our color, but we do choose our commitments. We do not choose our parents, but we do choose our politics. Yet we do not make these decisions in a vacuum; they occur within a social structure that gives value to Whiteness and offers rewards for racism. (p. viii)

Those who find justice irresistible and White supremacy intolerable always have the option to collectively organize to transform their society toward what Du Bois (1998) called "abolition democracy." Abolition democracy does not mean opening up U.S. structures of opportunity so people of color can simply compete better while leaving a radically hierarchal system intact. Instead, abolition democracy refers to democratization processes that undo the inherent hierarchies in wealth and opportunity this country has built along racial lines. It means changing the very structure of our socioeconomic system so its conditions are increasingly conducive to communal health, safety, healing, and ethical integrity.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What role does the author believe hard work and personal responsibility play in life chances and outcomes? How invested are you in the idea of hard work and personal responsibility? How do these ideas affect the ways you act in school, at work, or in your family?
2. Does the evidence of racial discrimination and the root causes of wealth inequalities change your perception of “hard work” and the ways it is rewarded, or do you find yourself dismissing this evidence, needing further evidence? If so, why?
3. What are the differences between White students' investments in meritocracy and the investments of students of color? Based on this essay, what do you believe accounts for these differences?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Take some time to discuss family expectations and self-imposed expectations regarding achievement, success, educational

- attainment, and hopes for future employment. Are these expectations expressed differently by students of color and by White students? Why do you think these differences exist?
2. In a multiracial group, discuss whether White students and families acknowledge privileges and advantages on the basis of race. Also discuss the extent to which families and students of color expect to be faced with the obstacles and challenges of racial discrimination in college and beyond. What is the root of these different narratives and explanations?

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ESSAY 9 “IF ONLY THEY HADN’T . . . [BEEN BLACK]” : RACE, IMPLICIT BIAS, AND STEREOTYPE MAINTENANCE

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In 2014, Darren Wilson, a 6’4” approximately 210-pound, 28-year-old White police officer, shot Michael Brown (6’4”, 290 pounds), an unarmed 18-year-old Black teenage male, at least six times, resulting in Brown’s death. During the grand jury hearing, Wilson defended the killing by recalling that he “felt like a five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan,” when describing his encounter with Brown. Wilson also described Michael Brown as “enraged” and looking like a “demon”; he further classified Brown as an “it” (Gore Perry Reporting and Video, 2015). Wilson stated, “I mean, it [Michael Brown] was very aggravated, aggressive, hostile” (NBC News, 2014). The grand jury decided not to pursue charges against Wilson. Brown’s death catapulted the Black Lives Matter movement and led to the most protests, at the time, in the pursuit of racial equality and an end to police brutality (Ray et al., 2017).

Research suggests that racial impressions and memories like Darren Wilson’s are products of a racialized social system established during colonialism and slavery, and subsequently reproduced throughout time and space via social institutions and social interactions (Boersema, 2013; Gay, 2004; Griffin & Bollen, 2009; Hind, 1984; Turner, 1973). Devine (1989a, 1989b) found that given an ambiguous or unfamiliar object, people with previous exposure to racial stereotypes tend to evaluate the object in a racially stereotypical fashion. Social psychologists illustrate that situational, social, and visual cues prompt stereotype activation in areas that may be best described as *racial projects* (Bargh et al., 1996;

Kawakami et al., 1998; Lepore & Brown, 1997). According to Omi and Winant (1994):

racial projects are simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning. (pp. 57–58)

Consequently, activated racial stereotypes in the context of racial projects frequently affect one's emotions, attention to, and interpretation of racial information, beliefs, and interactions in everyday life. The workings of racial stereotypes and racial projects enable individuals to make inferences or attributions that are indicative of a *racial ideology* or a racialized social system of beliefs that explains and justifies a society's racial hierarchy and its structural inequalities (Pettigrew, 1979; Sears et al., 2000).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) suggests conceptualizing racism as an ideology that is composed of a system of racial beliefs that reflect a system of racial domination. This theoretical framing is useful to social psychology, or the understanding of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors in a social context, because it allows for the mapping of racialized cognitive structures that illustrate the working of a racialized social system. Beliefs are also stratified based on a society's racial hierarchy (Bobo & Kluegel, 1997). As such, in the United States, beliefs about racial inequality typically involve attempts to justify our opportunity structure by invoking American individualism, meritocracy, and cultural deficiency frameworks. These frameworks are beliefs that minimize the racism inherent in racially unequal outcomes. Thus, officer Darren Wilson's impression and testimony of his encounter with Michael Brown reflect a racial

ideology of White supremacy and racial domination that uses stereotypes, perceptions, prejudiced attitudes, and emotions to persuade a grand jury that Wilson was an innocent “five-year-old,” child-like “peace” officer that was fearful of, and threatened by Michael Brown, an “enraged,” “psychotic,” and “aggressive” “demon.”

The Brown killing is an example of a racial project with activated racial stereotypes grounded in power and scripts used to persuade individuals and groups to interpret, feel, believe, and act toward information in ways that support and confirm a society’s racial ideology. Therefore, racial projects encourage Whites to think of their own success and privileges as situational and meritocratic, whereas the disadvantages associated with racialized others are often perceived and interpreted as self-inflicted (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Henry, 2010; see also Ioanide in this volume). Wilson’s description of unarmed Michael Brown as “hostile” provides evidence suggesting that racial ideology can often “serve and protect” Whites against racial criminalization, whereas for Blacks and other BIPOC groups, it is a source of violence.

Approximately 1 out of 1,000 Black men die by police violence. Latinx men are more likely to be killed by police than are White men. Black people are 3.5 times more likely than Whites to be killed by police when they are not attacking and do not have a weapon (Ray, 2020a). Additionally, Black, Alaska Native, and Indigenous women and men are more likely than their White counterparts to be killed by police brutality and misconduct. What accounts for these racial and gender differences? A social psychological framework on state violence demonstrated by police brutality and police misconduct reveals the structural, institutional, and systemic forces shaping disparities relevant to racial criminalization in law enforcement. We will present more on the basics of this framework in the next section. However, before doing so, it is important to understand police brutality as a process of racial criminalization.

Criminalization is the inability to separate a person from criminality based on the person's group identity and/or culture. *Racial criminalization* is the stigmatization of crime as racially non-White, specifically Black, and the dismissing or minimizing of White criminality. In other words, "It is the practice of linking crime to Blacks as a racial group, but not Whites" (Muhammad, 2010, p. 3; see also Doude and Rodriguez in this volume). This essay introduces major social psychological concepts that are relevant to the study of racial criminalization. These concepts include social (i.e., racial) cognition and schemas, stereotype, cognitive dissonance, ultimate attribution error, racial prejudices, subjective uncertainty, selective perception, and racial ideology. Our analysis highlights that no matter whether Black people are walking (Elijah McClain), drinking iced tea and eating skittles (Trayvon Martin), sleeping (Breonna Taylor), driving to work for the first day on a new job (Sandra Bland), playing with a toy gun in the park (Tamir Rice), using cash at a store (George Floyd), or going for a jog (Ahmaud Arbery), they can be criminalized. Ultimately, it comes back to "If only they hadn't . . . been Black."

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RACE

Racial cognition is the social psychological process that includes racial cognitive structures and racial cognitive processes. Racial cognitive structures are composed of racial schemas and racial attitudes (Brekhus et al., 2010; Mueller, 2020). *Racial schemas* are sociomental categories organized around a society's racial hierarchy. Information regarding a social phenomenon is filtered and categorized, to some degree or another, by racial schemas. These schemas hold a distinctive character as they interpret all information relationally. Vast amounts of information are condensed and simplified into these schemas in order to understand the social world. Schemas also affect the selection of information. Consequently, thoughts and behaviors associated with a particular social phenomenon are racialized and produce *stereotypes*, or

oversimplified sets of beliefs about members of a particular group, indicative of a society's racial hierarchy.

Stereotypes are racial scripts containing detailed stereotypical information and myths instructing members of a racialized society on how to perceive, feel, and behave toward members of other racial groups (Williams, 2007). More simply, stereotypes are beliefs about the personal characteristics of members of a group. Personal characteristics may include perceptions of intellectual ability, physicality, propensity to commit crime, and emotional well-being. Dace (2012) notes, enacted racial scripts or stereotypes “are based solely on ‘salient attributes’ or the aspect of one’s identity that are most visible (e.g. skin color)” (p. 182). Omi and Winant (1994) note that people often use salient physical attributes, such as skin tone, facial features, hairstyles, and articles of clothing, as mental shorthand for racial scripts. Foy and Ray (2019) find that basketball announcers discuss lighter-skinned players in terms of mental attributes like craftiness and cleverness, while they discuss darker-skinned players in terms of physicality and athleticism such as size and strength (though lighter-skinned players were taller and weighed more). Accordingly, the social psychological processes described here relate to other forms of stereotypical thinking, such as assuming that anyone who looks Mexican is “illegal,” that all Asians are good at math, that most Arab Americans are terrorists, or that all Native Americans are alcoholics.

Several studies illustrate Blacks are stereotypically categorized as perpetrators of violent crimes when compared to their White counterparts (Brekhus, 1998; Brekhus et al., 2010; Zuberi, 2001). This is reminiscent of the words written by Du Bois (1899/1903, 1996): “[Blacks] Being few in number compared with the Whites, the crime or carelessness of a few of his race is easily imputed to all, and the reputation of the good, industrious, and reliable suffer thereby” (p. 323). Similarly, Pager (2007) notes, in regard to Black men, that the effects of the prison industrial complex categorize law-

abiding Black men into a racial schema that stereotypes them as a criminal-deviant, even when they are not.

Given these empirical patterns, racial attitude research largely focuses on racial prejudices. *Racial prejudices* are prejudgments about attributes of individuals and groups based on racial categories (Bobo, 1988, 1999; Bodenhausen & Richeson, 2010). Pettigrew (1979) suggests that individuals who hold these types of racial prejudicial attitudes commit the *ultimate attribution error*. Ultimate attribution error asserts that undesirable characteristics exhibited by out-group members (i.e., Blacks and other people of color) are more likely to be perceived by those in the in-group (i.e., Whites) as innate and a part of one's personality. In other words, negative behaviors are perceived to be biological or rooted in the culture of the group (see Buffington; Patel, Meanwell, & McClure; and Zhou & Tran in this volume for further discussion). Conversely, positive characteristics (e.g., being a law-abiding citizen) are attributed to factors external to the individual, such as education. In addition, out-group members who are perceived positively are viewed as exceptions to the norm of "bad" behavior from their group.

Pettigrew (1998) highlights that attribution error occurs because of limited information about a particular group. As more information is obtained about out-group members, individuals are less likely to exhibit prejudiced attitudes. In turn, they start to view out-group members as more heterogeneous instead of more homogenous. However, Howard (2000) contends that people are "less likely to seek information about out-group members and therefore tend to have much less complex conceptions of out-groups than of in-groups" (p. 342). As we will show later, the type and quality of information is key for changing racialized stereotypes, prejudiced attitudes, and perceptions.

In a racialized society, racial stereotyping is inherently a part of perception (Allport, 1954). *Perception* refers to the filtered attention to and the impression by a particular phenomenon. *Racial perception*

is the visual selection and impression process by which others and ecological phenomena are categorized into a racial schema (Quinn & Rosenthal, 2012). *Racial impressions* are stereotypical feelings and perspectives shaped by racial perception. They work in tandem with racial perception through racial scripts about racialized groups or individuals within interpersonal interaction (George & Yancey, 2009; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2006).

Mainstream and social media play a critical role in shaping racial perceptions and stereotypical discourses, in part because there is a limited amount of interaction across racial and social class divides. U.S. neighborhoods and schools are just as segregated today as they were in the 1950s (Dixon, 2006). Therefore, social media, television, movies, and music are dominant forms of public discourse that often portray people of color in stereotypical ways. Communication scholars Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that Black suspects and criminals are more likely to be featured on the news than are White suspects and criminals. With limited interpersonal interactions across racial divides, these images lead to stereotypical thinking that all Black men are dangerous and threatening. For example, respondents estimated that Blacks commit 40% more violent crime than they actually do (see Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

Hogg (2000) highlights the importance of *subjective uncertainty*, which asserts that when there is minimal understanding about how someone should be categorized (e.g., individuals with hoodies or Black males), individuals express a “state of subjective uncertainty” where they infer stereotypes and, in turn, exhibit some form of discrimination against the person in question (Hogg, 2003). When individuals are categorized largely by group membership (under conditions of subjective uncertainty that are largely due to limited interpersonal interaction), others evaluate and interact with them based on the social scripts perceived to be associated with that group.

Similarly, individuals engage in *selective perception* by seeing only the types of behaviors that confirm their stereotypes and not those that refute them. So, when in-group individuals encounter a man in a hoodie or a Black man walking down the street and nothing happens (or they have a positive interaction), the combination of selective perception (i.e., seeing only what we want to see), subjective uncertainty (i.e., categorizing people inaccurately due to limited information about other groups), and ultimate attribution error (i.e., believing that undesirable characteristics are an innate part of out-group members, such as “all Black men with hoodies are dangerous”) means that positive interactions mostly lead to in-group members’ ignoring that example or selectively perceiving it as an “exception to the rule.”

In turn, when individuals experience *cognitive dissonance* their minds work to maintain stereotypical thinking. Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals encounter information that contradicts existing beliefs. To preserve those beliefs, our brains work to dismiss that disconfirming information. As a result, we attribute stereotypes onto group members even when they do not align with our existing views (Festinger, 1957). Brekhus et al. (2010) suggest normative White culture, or hegemonic Whiteness, operates as selective in-group racial perception and provides a cloud that often inhibits people from recognizing how Blacks are criminalized and experience police brutality, on one hand, and how Whites may be nonthreatening and perceived as friendly, on the other hand, based on their skin tone. According to Quinn and Rosenthal (2012), “Stereotypes appear to direct attention and influence which information gets encoded and how information is interpreted, such that people often notice instances that confirm their existing stereotype-based beliefs” (p. 250). The activation of racial stereotypes impacts impressions, and thus, affects memory.

The killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri that we discussed in the introduction exemplifies these social psychological processes. In the sections that follows, we apply these concepts to address the

social psychological factors of racial criminalization in the high-profile killings of George Floyd, Elijah McClain, and Ahmaud Arbery.

“IF ONLY HE HADN’T USED CASH”: THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old unarmed African American man, died after former officer Derek Chauvin placed his knee on the back of Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. As Floyd yelled out for his “Momma” (who was already deceased) and said, “Please officer, I can’t breathe,” three other officers stood watch as dozens of onlookers expressed their disdain for the brutal incident. A store clerk claimed that Floyd paid for cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. This is likely a case of the typical implicit bias Black people face when shopping, where the assumption is made that they cannot afford items in a store and thus revert to some form of theft. After being called, four police officers—two White men, one Asian American man and one Black man—approached Floyd while he was sitting in the driver’s seat of a vehicle.

There was an instant assumption of guilt. The officers engaged in subjective uncertainty by placing stereotypes about criminality onto Floyd. Officer Lane approached Floyd’s vehicle and within seconds pulled his gun on Floyd, who was unarmed. Lane weaponized Floyd’s Blackness and instantly viewed him as a threat. Even when Floyd said he was unarmed and did nothing wrong and his passenger said the same, the officers pulled Floyd from the car, handcuffed him, and threw him against the wall. The officers avoided cognitive dissonance and engaged in self-justification by convincing themselves that Floyd was guilty without obtaining all the facts, which would perhaps have facilitated their handling the situation in a nonviolent manner.

All four officers were fired and charged with murder. At the time of this writing, Derek Chauvin has been convicted and the others are

awaiting trial (Furber, 2021). The video of Floyd's murder went viral on social media and news across the world. It reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter protests and led to the U.S. House of Representatives passing the George Floyd Justice in Police Act, which is the most transformative piece of legislation on law enforcement in history.

“IF ONLY HE HADN'T BEEN DIFFERENT”: THE DEATH OF ELIJAH MCCLAIN

On August 24, 2019, Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old Black massage therapist in Aurora, Colorado, died after police officers restrained him with a carotid chokehold, which blocks blood flow to the brain, rendering a person unconscious. Two paramedics injected him with a sedative, which contributed to his death (Tompkins, 2021). The 911 call reported that Elijah McClain “looked sketchy” as he walked down the road. The words “looks sketchy” illustrates the caller's subjective uncertainty based on his perception that McClain looked questionable and out of place. It is an assumption that because he was Black, McClain did not have a right to be in the neighborhood he was walking in.

Body-worn camera footage showed three White officers (Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt, and Randy Roedema) approach McClain as he listened to music (Aurora Police Department, 2020). An officer commanded him to stop walking. McClain said he had the right to continue walking home. The following transcript details the encounter captured on the footage.

Officer #1: I have a right to stop you because you're being suspicious.

Elijah McClain: No . . . I am an introvert, please respect the boundaries that I am speaking.

Officer #1: Relax or I'm going to have to change this situation.

Elijah McClain: You guys started to arrest me and I was stopping my music to listen. Now let go of me. My name is Elijah McClain! That's all I was doing, I was just going home!

Officer #2: I heard some snoring.

Elijah McClain: I'm just different! That's all! That's all I was doing!

Officer #2: It was actually Rosenblatt's. He reached for your gun, dude.

Elijah McClain: I'm so sorry. I have no gun . . . I don't do that stuff. I don't do any fighting.... I don't do drugs. I don't even kill flies! I don't eat meat. But I'm not a vegetarian. I don't judge people or anything.

Although the officers knew McClain hadn't committed a crime, they still restrained him and told him to stop resisting and tensing up. One of the officers stated that McClain, who weighed only 140 pounds, was acting abnormally and had incredible strength, so much so that three officers jumped on top of him. The officers then called the paramedics to inject ketamine to subdue a handcuffed and grounded McClain. Despite his politely telling the paramedic to stop because he was experiencing severe pain, the paramedic still injected him with ketamine. The footage shows McClain frequently vomiting and apologizing for the vomit. His last words were, "I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to do that, I can't breathe correctly." Following the incident, McClain was pronounced brain dead and died three days later in a hospital. Elijah McClain's death happened nearly a year before George Floyd's murder, but the Floyd case brought renewed national interest in McClain's case and a criminal investigation into his death was reopened, the results of which criticize both police actions at the time and the contradictory reports that came afterward (Associated Press, 2021).

“IF ONLY HE HADN’T GONE JOGGING”: THE DEATH OF AHMAUD ARBERY

On Sunday, February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man in coastal Glynn County, Georgia, was shot dead in a suburban neighborhood after being confronted by three White men: Gregory McMichael, Travis Michael, and William Bryan. Gregory McMichael, father of Travis, was a former Glynn County police officer and former investigator for the county’s prosecutor’s office.

On the afternoon of Arbery’s death, Gregory McMichael was outside and saw Arbery “hauling ass” in the neighborhood. He ran inside his house and told his son Travis, “The guy is running down the street. Let’s go.” Gregory grabbed his Glynn County Police Department issued 686 Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum revolver and Travis grabbed his shotgun (State of Georgia, 2020). They told the police that they grabbed their guns because the night before, they saw Arbery put his hand down his pants, which made them believe that he could be armed; this assumption is another example of subjective uncertainty. Arbery did not have a weapon and was reportedly out for a jog.

The two got into their truck and drove after Arbery. Bryan got into his truck and blocked Arbery from running away from the McMichaels. The McMichaels claimed they were carrying out a citizen’s arrest on Arbery because he fit the description of a neighborhood burglary suspect. According to reports, the men thought he looked like a man suspected of several break-ins in the neighborhood. Before Arbery was shot, a neighbor called the police stating that a “Black man” was inside a vacant house. The vacant house was under construction and several people entered the home to view it. However, no one called the police when White people were entering the home.

The three men stated that while Arbery was jogging, they yelled, “Stop, stop! We want to talk to you.” After the two vehicles chased Arbery for several minutes, they blocked him off of the road. Travis

got out of the truck with a shotgun. Arbery ran at Travis to defend himself. Travis shot him several times. When police officers arrived on the scene, they did not render aid to Arbery as he took his last breaths. They also did not arrest the McMichaels or Bryan at the scene. Similar to the deaths of Floyd and McClain, there was an assumption of Black criminality and automatic guilt operating simultaneously with an assumption of White innocence. Due to political and police corruption in the county, the McMichaels and Bryan eluded prosecution until video evidence of the incident was released months later. As of this writing, all three men have all been charged with murder, indicted on federal hate crime charges, and are awaiting trial on the state charges in Georgia (Bowman, 2021).

BLACK MALE CRIMINALIZATION AND ITS EFFECTS

As mentioned earlier, the racial perception of Black people is in part due to Black male criminalization, or the inability to separate Black men from criminals (Muhammad, 2010). When Blackness intersects with masculinity, negative stereotypes about Black men are activated in ways that lead to their bodies being weaponized. Moreover, even when Black men do not have a weapon, it is perceived that their physical bodies are weapons that can cause bodily harm to others. Thus, Black men's racialized and gendered bodies become recognized and acted upon as threats, super predators, brutes, and savages not worthy of dignity or justice, but rather subjugated to criminalization and overpolicing.

These stereotypes are displayed when women clutch their purses when they see a Black man or when Whites scurry to the other side of the street or out of purview of an approaching Black man (Feagin, 2001). Criminalization is something that is all too common for Blacks. For example, following the 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, Black mothers responded with statements such as "that could have been my son." Other Black men commonly made

statements like “that could have been me.” Following the Zimmerman verdict, in fact, former President Obama stated, “Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago.” In the case of Martin, his life ended tragically before his 18th birthday. However, even Black men who are not killed still suffer psychologically, emotionally, physically, educationally, and economically from criminalization.

Psychologically, Black men have to deal with the effects of criminality and come to terms with the fact that socioeconomic status does not protect them from being perceived as suspicious and threatening (Gilbert & Ray, 2016). As a result, they have worse mental health outcomes than similar Whites (Jackson, 1997). Educationally, gender scholar Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) shows that Black boys in grade school are perceived by teachers as troublemakers, reprimanded more severely for the same behaviors as White students, and more likely to be suspended. Economically, sociologist Devah Pager (2003) shows a staggering trend. Comparing the job prospects of Black and White men (some with a criminal record and some without), she found that not only did White men without a criminal record get hired more than Black men, but White men with a criminal record got hired more than Black men without a criminal record. Physically, Black men’s health suffers. Sociologist Rashawn Ray’s (2017) research on the effects of the racial composition of neighborhoods on physical activity finds that Black men in predominately White neighborhoods are significantly less likely to be physically active than Black men in predominately Black neighborhoods. As illustrated by the stories highlighted earlier, Black men are less likely to exercise because their community engagement decreases due to criminalization when they decide to leave their homes in predominately White spaces (Ray 2020b). All of this begs the question: What can we do about the danger Black men face in everyday interactions as a result of stereotyping?

WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT STEREOTYPING?

Stereotyping and implicit bias are obviously huge problems that have grave ramifications, not only for criminalization and policing decisions, but also for hiring, home loan appraisals, health care provider–patient interactions, and interactions in schools between teachers and students. In order to address stereotyping, people first need to discover their biases and admit they have them. The acknowledgment starts the process of understanding the origins of bias and becoming conscious of them in order to dilute their impact. People can take implicit association tests and learning about the groups they stereotype. We provide some recommendations for starting this process in the “Reaching Beyond the Color Line” section at the end of this essay.

Contact theory asserts that the presence of a sizable proportion of a minority group offers opportunities for contact between majority and minority group members. Allport (1954) argues that the effects of contact on prejudice depend on the *quality of contact*: (1) Is the contact voluntary or involuntary? (2) When majority and minority group members come in contact, are they of equal status? (3) Does the contact occur in competitive or collaborative environments? Contact that is voluntary, equal, and collaborative should lead to less prejudicial attitudes. Along these lines, the *type of contact* also matters. Friendships among majority and minority group members decrease prejudice, while acquaintanceships moderately decrease prejudice. Repetitive, positive, informal contact at times decreases prejudice, while equal status contact (i.e., dorm or classroom of students) normally decreases prejudice.

However, Jackman and Crane (1986) find that the effect of contact on reducing prejudicial attitudes varies by socioeconomic status. Specifically, Whites’ negative attitudes toward Blacks become relatively obsolete when they have higher-status Black friends. Unfortunately, as Jackman and Crane note, rarely do higher-status Blacks interact with lower-status Whites in meaningful ways. Additionally, having Black friends and acquaintances hardly affects Whites’ policy attitudes about race-based policies. As a result, they

conclude that the *diversity of contacts* is more important than the intimacy of contacts because diversity contributes to changing stereotypes of the entire group compared to just changing stereotypes of a particular individual. This distinction is important considering that Bobo's (2012) research finds that Whites' positive interactions with Latinx and Asian people alter their perceptions of the entire race, while positive interactions with Blacks only alters their perception of that individual (see Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). This finding illustrates the impact of ultimate attribution error.

Collectively, this research suggests that the quality, type, and diversity of contact across racial divides facilitate meaningful conversations and knowledge exchanges about race relations. If contact facilitates more accurate knowledge about the lives of people of color, it helps Whites reassess their own group, form affective social networks with people of color, decrease prejudice, and change their ideas about racial stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Our essay highlighted a series of traumatic, and often preventable, incidents. Yet, Black people, and people of color more broadly, experience the ramifications of implicit bias and stereotyping on a regular basis in more mundane ways. There is ample video evidence over recent years showing how people of color, and Black people in particular, are criminalized when sleeping in their dorm, grilling at a park, swimming at a pool, and even living in their own homes. It is clear that a deeper understanding of the social psychological ramifications of racism, prejudice, and discrimination is essential to changing these outcomes.

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intersectionality to analyze the status effects that race and gender have on judgments and decision-making behaviors.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A class divided (Blue Eye/ Brown Eye Experiment). *Frontline* PBS documentary.

Harvard's Implicit Association Tests:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How do we reduce implicit bias?
2. Is conflict inevitable when distinct groups interact?
3. How do we encourage candid conversations across racial groups about how race/ethnicity, racism, discrimination, and White privilege impact their lives?

4. How do we encourage meaningful, equitable social interactions across racial groups?
5. How will you aim to reduce implicit bias in your own life with family and friends?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. On the Harvard University Implicit Bias website, take the Race IAT, Race and Weapons IAT, and Skin Tone IAT:
 - a. What were your preferences?
 - b. Why do you think you have these preferences?
 - c. What do you think these preferences mean?
 - d. How do you think these preferences may affect your daily life?
2. Watch the American Bar Association's video the Neuroscience of Implicit Bias
(<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/initiatives/task-force-implicit-bias/implicit-bias-videos/>).
 - a. How would racial ideology explain Dr. Mahzarin Banaji's statements about her IAT results?
 - b. How do the statements by Hon. Roger Warren about his IAT experience reflect cognitive dissonance and a racial project?
 - c. How would racial impression explain shooter bias?
 - d. How would racial cognition explain the racial bias associated with the "above-average effect"?

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ESSAY 10 “MY FAMILY HAD TO LEARN ENGLISH WHEN THEY CAME, SO WHY IS EVERYTHING IN SPANISH FOR THEM?” : RACE AND THE SPANISH LANGUAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

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We are lo que hablamos.

—Bill Santiago (2008)

In a café on Michigan Avenue, Chicago’s high-end shopping district, I, a White American woman, sat speaking Spanish with a group of Latin Americans and Spaniards when a White American man approached our group and, looking directly at me, stated: “You should not speak that language. It devalues you.” By contrast, in a recent conversation with the son of a Mexican immigrant woman whose English language skills are limited, he said that his mother has described her inability to speak English at a high level of proficiency as being similar to “wearing handcuffs.” These two experiences highlight ideologies and conventional wisdom around bilingualism, especially Spanish bilingualism, in the United States. Language ability and use are inextricably linked to race and racialization in the United States; simply put, we understand and construct language based on the perceived race and social position of the person speaking. Spanish has a very particular history connected with colonization and racial formation in the United States. Despite the fact that Spanish has been present in what is now the United States for hundreds of years, deep resentment of Spanish and Spanish speakers as parasitic and unwilling to truly “be American” persists to this day in everyday conversations, media,

politics, and the legal system. At the core of this belief is a strong anti-immigrant presumption that immigrants from Latin America, especially Mexico, refuse to assimilate and follow previous immigrant groups assumed to have joined the U.S. “melting pot” by learning English immediately and not relying on services in their native language.

A further examination of the two previously described experiences reveals some of the tensions around Spanish and misconceptions of Spanish speakers. First, in that café on Michigan Avenue, though addressing our entire group, why did that man look specifically at a fellow White American when speaking? Perhaps it was because he felt he needed to warn me not to relinquish any of the privileges of Whiteness I might lose by speaking Spanish? Also likely is that he felt my Latin American and Spanish friends were a lost cause and would resist learning English because he did not recognize them as “American,” though one member of the group was of Mexican descent but born in the United States and others were naturalized citizens or residents of the United States. With regard to the Mexican immigrant woman who likened not speaking English at a near native level to “wearing handcuffs,” she understands the importance of English in the United States but lacks the resources (e.g., access to adult education programs) to learn it. Moreover, at best she knows that she lacks access to the resources that come with English proficiency, and at worst she understands the connection between the criminalization of (undocumented) immigration and the Spanish language. Thus, this essay examines and debunks the following misconceptions about Latinx people and Spanish: (1) that they refuse to learn English, (2) that they are perpetually foreign and wish to live apart from dominant/White society by speaking Spanish, and (3) that Spanish is a foreign language spoken only by poor, undocumented immigrants.

SPANISH SPEAKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

The greatest myth attributed to Spanish in the United States is that it is spoken only by a population of undocumented and poor immigrants from Latin America. This population is much more complicated in terms of its ethnoracial and class profile. In fact, the United States is home to the world's fifth-largest Spanish-speaking population (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, p. 1). According to a study by the Pew Hispanic Center, not all Spanish speakers identify as Hispanic/Latina/o. According to this 2011 study, of the roughly 52 million persons of Hispanic descent over age 5 in the United States, 34.8 million (74%) speak Spanish. These data do not include about 11 million undocumented Latin American residents in the United States, nor do they include 2.8 million non-Latina/os who report speaking Spanish at home, according to U.S. Census and Pew Hispanic Center data (González-Barrera & López, 2013). Thus, all told, 48.6 million Spanish speakers reside in the United States (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, p. 1). This population includes all economic classes, from economic migrants in search of manual labor positions to what have been termed "brain drain" migrants, or educated middle- and upper-class Latin Americans and Spaniards who come to study in the United States and decide to stay or who come as trained professionals to practice in the more economically favorable U.S. labor market. The 2.8 million non-Latinx people who report speaking Spanish in their homes may speak Spanish as a result of privilege tied to education, employment, or travel/residence in a Spanish-speaking country. In the remainder of this essay, I will explore the complexities of this population with regard to the three aforementioned myths to complicate and challenge the conventional wisdom around Spanish and its speakers.

HOW SPANISH IS UNDERSTOOD BY WHITE PEOPLE

As noted in my experience at the café and with the Mexican immigrant who likened limited English skills to wearing handcuffs, we see manifestations of these three beliefs about Latinx folks and

Spanish not only in daily conversations but also in media and politics. Examinations of a few recent media and political events reveal the saturation of Latinx Spanish speakers as “un-American” and threats to the United States. In fact, media workers themselves receive criticism for speaking in Spanish in public speeches or for pronouncing words in Spanish using the sound system of Spanish on English-language newscasts. During her May 22, 2016, commencement address to the School of Communications at California State University, Fullerton, Univisión anchor María Elena Salinas delivered part of her speech in Spanish. Though Salinas spoke in Spanish for only 25 seconds, some in the crowd answered her with boos and screams of “Get off the stage!” and she was called “trash.” This also ignited a heated Internet dialogue in support of and opposing Salinas (Svrluga, 2016). Similarly, Phoenix NBC News 12 anchor Vanessa Ruíz came under fire with some viewers in September 2015 for pronouncing Spanish words as they would be pronounced in the Spanish language—particularly, rolling her *R*s—during her English-language newscasts (Santos & Hauser, 2015).

This policing of Spanish and English also extends to public figures and politicians, especially with regard to U.S. nationalism. The most salient example of this is Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign rhetoric, which included lambasting Mexicans and Spanish speakers as a means to marshal support from White Americans through White supremacist nationalist discourse. During the second Republican presidential primary debate that year, Trump stated, “We have a country, where, to assimilate, you have to speak English. This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish” (Marks, 2015). The Trump administration subsequently removed White House website content in Spanish (Couzens, 2017). The media and Internet debates mentioned here illustrate the strong connections among language, race, and nationalism. It is important to note that when applied to White American Spanish-language learners, these dynamics do not apply—a topic to which I will return in a later section. Nevertheless, these same debates occlude the reality of

Latinx people's use of, attitudes toward, and perceptions of Spanish and English.

WHAT LATINX PEOPLE REALLY THINK ABOUT SPANISH AND ENGLISH

Actual data on language use and attitudes/beliefs among Latinx people shows a similar pattern of linguistic assimilation as that found in other ethnic and racial groups, including European immigrants—namely, near to total loss of the family's heritage language by the third generation. In April 2012, the Pew Hispanic Center published an extensive study titled “When Labels Don't Fit: Hispanics and Their Views of Identity” (Taylor et al., 2012). The survey and report include a section dedicated to language use and attitudes among Latinx folks that challenges the beliefs that they don't want to learn English and are using Spanish as a way to live apart from dominant White society. When asked if they felt that adult Hispanic immigrants to the United States need to learn English to succeed, 87% responded yes while 11% responded no (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 23). When asked if it is important for future generations of Hispanics living in the United States to speak Spanish, 95% of the Latinx respondents said it was very or somewhat important, whereas 4% of respondents said it was “not too important” or “not important at all” (p. 23). Strong evidence of the shift from Spanish to English dominance emerges in the generational data on speaking and reading ability in English. While 61% of all Hispanics surveyed said that they speak English well and 60% reported reading English well, 96% of third-generation and higher respondents said that they speak English well and 94% said that they read English well (p. 24). An even more striking generational pattern emerges with regard to reporting of primary language spoken. Of all Hispanics surveyed, 38% reported being Spanish-dominant, 38% reported being bilingual, and 24% reported being English-dominant. By the third generation and higher, 1% reported being Spanish-dominant, 29% reported being bilingual, and 69% reported being English-dominant (p. 26). Recent data indicate

that the shift to English among Latinx people continues as 27% who are 5 years and older report speaking only English at home; among the U.S.-born, that number rises to 41% (American Community Survey [ACS], 2017). Because more and more Latinx people are born in the United States, the loss of Spanish is likely to continue rising. Given that these data parallel generational linguistic assimilation of European immigrant groups, where do dominant beliefs about Latinx linguistic use and attitudes come from?

WHERE DOMINANT BELIEFS COME FROM

There's a joke in Spanish that roughly translates as follows:

*What do you call a person who speaks three languages?
Trilingual.*

What do you call a person who speaks two languages? Bilingual.

What do you call a person who speaks one language? American.

This joke appears in a textbook that I use in my Spanish grammar and composition courses for both second-language learners and students who grew up in bilingual homes. The different reactions of the two groups illustrate how distinct experiences of race and language connect to nationalism and U.S. American identities. My bilingual students, for the most part, laugh and are glad that this joke calls out the English-language-centric nature of the United States. My second-language learners are often very uneasy with that same joke, either remaining silent or questioning the truth behind it. I definitely sense that these students feel threatened by this portrayal of U.S. Americans as provincial and even xenophobic. They want to believe that their country is egalitarian and welcoming to all and are disturbed by suggestions to the contrary. Also, most students have not given any real thought to the role of language in their lives,

especially its connection to privilege and race, so they read this joke as an attack on “America.”

There are many reasons for this, but first and foremost, the English language—specifically White middle-class English—has been inscribed into the history of the United States as a core component of U.S. nationalism, metaphorically used as the binding agent that supposedly brings U.S. Americans together. Media, politics, and the education system are three chief places where this ideology is indoctrinated as linked to U.S. citizenship and nationalism. As Lippi-Green (2011) argues in *English With an Accent*, in media and popular culture, accented English is used to inscribe characteristics such as trustworthiness and diligence or the lack thereof in different ethnic groups, and accented English is marked as “un-American.” Additionally, political debates and the structure of the educational system since the formation of the United States have focused on the need to control language use and impart English-language instruction. In the 19th century, when significant German communities populated Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, congressmen worried about the spread of German language and culture and its potential to displace English and Anglo-American culture in these states.

This belief that the English language ties together U.S. Americans also racializes and marks the Spanish language and its speakers as “un-American.” Two concepts—“Spanish as a racialized marker” and “mock Spanish”—help us systematically understand the relationship between race and language in the United States. In the documentary *Latinos Beyond Reel* (Picker & Sun, 2013), Latina/Latino Studies scholar Isabel Molina-Guzmán identifies Spanish as a “racialized marker.” This means that White Americans use the Spanish language and accents associated with Spanish as a means to identify who is Latinx and thus who should not gain full access to the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship. It is not enough to simply place Spanish and its speakers outside of U.S. national belonging. White American linguistic culture also subordinates Spanish and its

speakers to English and its speakers via what has been called “mock Spanish.” Hill (2007) defines this as both the pronunciation of words in Spanish with a heavy U.S. English accent and the invention of grammatically incorrect “Spanish” words by putting vowels on the ends of English words—for example, “no problemo” and “el cheapo.” According to Hill, mock Spanish functions both to deem Spanish as an illegitimate form of communication in the United States and to present a nonserious, joking persona among White Americans.

Feagin’s (2010), Bonilla-Silva’s (2003), and Chávez’s (2008) work on race, Whiteness, Latinx identity, and structural inequality is useful in unpacking and understanding the meanings and ideologies behind mock Spanish and Spanish as a racialized marker. In *The White Racial Frame*, Feagin (2010) documents the ways Whiteness is embedded in the historical, political, economic, and linguistic formation of the United States and has ensured the perpetuation of structural inequality in terms of poverty, residential segregation, and educational outcomes, among others. Similarly, in *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that White Americans currently articulate racism and White supremacy in ways that attempt to distance these acts from the individuals committing them and instead attribute them to perceived cultural deficiencies of people of color or structures they believe to be out of their control. Finally, Chávez (2008) uses the phrase “the Latino threat” to express the widely held perception that Latinx people (1) want to reclaim the U.S. Southwest as part of Mexico, (2) refuse to learn English so as not to assimilate into the United States, and (3) intend to gain power through massive reproduction and population growth. Taken together, these scholars’ work unpacks the histories and structures that have led to the conventional wisdom about Spanish and its speakers in the United States. These same historical measures continue today in the form of legislation at the federal and state levels, as well as formation of national groups promoting the connection between the English language and U.S. nationalism—namely, English-only and U.S. English (Golash-Boza, 2015).

THE LEGAL EDUCATION AND LABOR MARKET CONSEQUENCES OF THE RACIALIZATION OF SPANISH

Both the English-only and U.S. English movements seek to grant English a status that would cement its connection to U.S. American national identity. The English-only movement traces back to 1981 and the proposal of an amendment to the Constitution. If it had passed, this amendment would have severely limited the use of languages other than English in state and federal government business and function. Though this law did not pass, its proponents continue to propose it annually (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, p. 190). In the 1990s, English-only proponents changed strategies, renaming their movement Official English, thus focusing solely on a federal law, as opposed to a law at both state and federal levels (Crawford, 2008). Though this law did not pass, at this writing, 31 states have passed laws that declare English to be the official state language (<https://www.usenglish.org/>). Several states have also passed legislation targeting bilingual education and use of languages other than English. Under the guise of language, this legislation promotes a White supremacist agenda, tied primarily to hostility toward immigrants. Examples of this type of legislation include (1) Proposition 227, passed in California in 1998, which prohibited educational instruction in languages other than English; (2) Propositions 106 and 203, passed in Arizona in 2000, which named English as the official state language and eliminated bilingual education programs in state schools; and (3) English for the Children of Massachusetts, also known as Question 2, proposed in 2002 to limit bilingual education (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, pp. 192–193). Though these legislative measures do not specifically target Spanish and Latin American immigrants, sociolinguists such as Alim et al. (2016), Escobar and Potowski (2015), and Zentella (2008) argue that the true motive behind them is a concern over the increasing presence of people of Latin American descent in the United States.

In contrast, the U.S. English movement, founded in 1983, represents a somewhat less stringent but more strategic attitude toward language use and legislation. Its proponents do not advocate for English as the official language of the United States but do argue that learning English is essential for immigrants' success, thus also supporting the study of other languages in the United States for purposes of business and diplomacy (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, p. 190). This signals an important distinction related to race and language. The idea of studying language for reasons of business and diplomacy separates languages from the cultures and power differentials that surround them as it emphasizes U.S. political and economic dominance. One significant outcome is that it makes a difference who speaks and studies a language, particularly Spanish in the United States.

Aparicio's (1998) work on differential bilingualism is useful here. In her interviews with university students who were White American second-language learners or bilingual/heritage learners, Aparicio found that while studying Spanish is considered an important way to enhance career goals and marketability in the labor force for many White American language learners, the conventional wisdom with regard to bilingual or heritage Spanish speakers is that their home Spanish is deficient in some way and is not valued in the job market. This is the case even though bilingual/heritage speakers often speak a more fluent, if sometimes informal, variety of Spanish. Aparicio also found that most White American students had never considered the imperative around English in the United States in their own family's loss of language shortly after immigrating to the United States, further exemplifying the "unmarked" linguistic and cultural dominance of English, similar to the unmarked nature of Whiteness. A most striking example of differential bilingualism emerged when, during the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Rodham Clinton announced her vice presidential running mate, Tim Kaine. A media firestorm ensued when CNN pundit and Donald Trump supporter Scottie Nell Hughes criticized Kaine for a bilingual speech he gave in

Miami. Shortly before the start of the 2016 Democratic National Convention, she told Wolf Blitzer,

What Mr. Trump did, he spoke in a language all Americans can understand—that language is English. I didn't have to get a translator for anything that was going on at the [Republican National Convention]. I'm hoping I'm not going to have to start brushing up on my *Dora the Explorer* to understand some of the speeches given this week. (Golgowski, 2016)

Hughes was branded a hypocrite when it was revealed that her own children study Spanish. Despite her efforts to apologize, pointing out that her own children study Spanish and that she is not against Spanish, the damage was done. Such is the hostility toward Spanish that sociolinguist Kim Potowski (2020) maintains a website cataloging media coverage of incidents of Spanish repression in public spaces.

In addition to the legislation and uneven valorization of Spanish speakers, anti-Spanish policies have emerged in the public education system, as well. One of the chief mandates of schooling is to educate children in citizenship and nationalism. It is in schools where children often first encounter information about their country's history, laws, and social structure—all told from the point of view of those in power. In the United States, part of this indoctrination comes in the form of language and English instruction. For example, in 1906, the Nationality Act required that all immigrants learn English, and subsequently, in 1919, Congress decreed that all schools, both public and private, must teach only in English—a dictate that was not reversed until the intervention of civil rights activists in the 1960s (Escobar & Potowski, 2015, p. 224). As we have already seen in states such as California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, interventions persist to limit bilingual education and ethnic studies programs, largely targeting Spanish and Latinx Americans. Indeed, as Fuller

(2013) argues, the two dominant ideologies around language instruction and education in the United States are that (1) “monolingualism is the right and natural state for a particular political region,” and (2) “if individuals do speak two languages, they should keep them strictly separate” (p. 134). Despite the fact that research shows bilingual programs that maintain Spanish for bilingual children yield more successful educational outcomes (Lynch, 2013), most bilingual programs in the United States are what are called transitional bilingual programs, the goal of which is to teach children English as quickly as possible and do nothing to retain the home language. The relatively few dual immersion programs in the United States—a model that seeks to balance native speakers of English with speakers of another language, with curriculum and instruction in both languages—show successful educational outcomes for all students. These schools tend to be located in areas where Whites have committed to investing in their children’s bilingualism to give them an advantage in the labor market, a further example of how resources related to bilingualism cater to White privilege (Perea, 1998; Potowski, 2007).

Cases of linguistic discrimination and uneven valorization abound in the labor market. It is important to begin by noting that 59% of Latinx people work in manual labor or nonspecialized industries, a context that in and of itself is overly susceptible to discriminatory labor practices and lack of protections such as labor unions (Brown & Patten, 2013; Motel & Patten, 2013). Many companies have official policies limiting or prohibiting languages other than English and frequently reprimand their employees for speaking Spanish during breaks but expect these same employees to use Spanish with Spanish-speaking clients, often advertising services in Spanish to attract business. These same bilingual employees often receive neither extra compensation nor training in interpretation (Alarcón & Heyman, 2013; Heller, 2010; MacGregor-Mendoza, 2009). Worse still, despite the fact that it is illegal to discriminate against workers who don’t speak English or who speak English with an accent, as per the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in lawsuits filed by employees on the

grounds of linguistic discrimination, judges often side with employers, thus perpetuating and further entrenching systemic inequality linked to language (Gutiérrez & Amengual, 2013; MacGregor-Mendoza, 2009).

The history, legislation, and labor issues described here work together to sustain a White supremacist social system. The evidence amply demonstrates that linguistic discrimination is an outcome of the history and development of racialized social systems from the formation of the United States to the present moment. Simply put, speaking a language other than English or speaking English with an accent renders Latinx people as un-American in the eyes of dominant society. Faced with this knowledge, how then do they respond and how does this shape their identity formation within the United States?

SPANISH LANGUAGE AND LATINX IDENTITY

Comedian Bill Santiago (2008) has built a career on interrogating the complexities of Latinx language identity. His stand-up routines and his book, *Pardon My Spanglish ¡Porque Because!*, use humor to unpack how code-switching between English and Spanish, also referred to as “Spanglish,” impacts the daily lives of Latinx people. In a skit about baseball, Santiago jokes that it is sometimes unclear if a baseball broadcast is in English or in Spanish when announcers say things like, “Alex Rodríguez says *adios* to *la pelota*.” Santiago’s humor and performance style capture the tensions that Latinx people often negotiate with regard to the connection between language and identity. In addition to the social and institutional structures of dominant society mentioned earlier in this essay, within Latinx communities, there is much debate as to whether an individual is “Latinx enough” if they don’t speak Spanish or if they mix Spanish and English.

To understand these dynamics, Anzaldúa's (1987) construct of "linguistic terrorism" is extremely useful. *Linguistic terrorism* refers to the ways individuals and groups use language to maintain social hierarchies based on race, class, and gender. The following two examples illustrate how linguistic terrorism operates in Latinx lived experiences. First, when I was in high school, I talked to friends at a women's Catholic high school in a south suburb of Chicago who explained to me that there were two tables in the cafeteria where the school's significant Mexican American population sat—one for girls who spoke Spanish and one for girls who did not. The "authenticity" of those who did not speak Spanish was constantly called into question and the two groups rarely mixed. In a different instance and many years later, a Mexican American student at the college where I currently teach tearfully recalled her study-abroad experience in Mexico, where one of her Mexican instructors graded her work more harshly in terms of Spanish grammar and style than the work of the White American students in the class, explaining to my student that her Spanish should be better if she wants to claim Mexican identity.

It is very true that "we are *lo que hablamos* [we are what we speak]." Others inside and outside of our families and communities use the language we speak and the way we speak it to categorize us and to grant or deny us access to belonging, social institutions, and capital. Spanish in the United States is a perfect example of how race and class status shape our identities, as the White middle- and upper-class Americans who study it in large numbers to gain an edge in the labor market are valorized while Latinx people who grow up speaking Spanish in their homes are considered foreign and "un-American." As with other parts of our master identities, such as race, class, and gender, language works to uphold our place in the social hierarchies we inhabit. The question that follows is, what can we do about it? Ana Celia Zentella's concept of "anthropolitical linguistics" and Jonathan Rosa's (2019) work on "raciolinguistics" serve as an entry into language and social justice. According to Zentella, it "involves not only unmasking the hidden, it is also doing something about it" (quoted in Figueroa, 2015). Similarly, Rosa argues that race and

language are so intertwined, that language reproduces inequality since language is mapped onto our bodies such that we come to “look like a language” and “sound like a race.” As individuals, we can consciously choose not to criticize and judge others based on how they speak and we can reject media, political, and institutional messages that claim Latinx people refuse to learn English, are rejecting dominant/White society by speaking Spanish, or that Spanish is a foreign language spoken only by poor, undocumented immigrants.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Websites

Pew Hispanic Center: <http://www.pewhispanic.org>

The Pew Hispanic Center keeps up-to-date statistical data on the Latina/o population in the United States, including language use and attitudes.

Language Policy Web Site & Emporium:
<http://www.languagepolicy.net>

This website provides information on language policy and planning in the United States.

Institute for Language and Education Policy: <http://elladvocates.org>

The Institute for Language and Education Policy is an advocacy group for the preservation of heritage languages in the United States.

American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese:
<http://www.aatsp.org>

The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese provides information and tools related to the teaching of Spanish, including data on the significance and state of Spanish in the U.S. education system.

Modern Language Association: <https://www.mla.org/Resources>

The Modern Language Association provides data and information on the study of languages in the United States.

Linguistic repression in the USA:

<http://potowski.org/resources/repression>

This website keeps an up-to-date archive on media reporting on linguistic repression in the United States.

Audio/Visual

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Some linguists and educators have compared African American Vernacular English/Black English and the Spanish spoken by Latinx people born in the United States, in that both are considered by many native speakers to be “nonprestige dialects.” As such, some argue that the main goal of educating Latinx and Black children should be to teach them the prestige dialects of Spanish and English. Given what you now know about language, race, and power, what are your thoughts on this goal?
2. In some bilingual households, parents insist that their children speak only English or only Spanish, never mixing the two

languages. Their concern is that their children will not learn either language completely or proficiently. How do the two goals of language in the education system identified by Fuller in the discussion of language and education apply here? To what degree do you think parents have internalized ideologies of monolingualism and linguistic purity?

3. In the Tim Kaine controversy mentioned in this essay, in addition to Scottie Nell Hughes's criticism that he spoke Spanish and not "all Americans" understand it, others have criticized the Spanish he learned in Honduras as "butchered" and accuse him of "pandering to Latinxs," arguing that he does not have the "right" to speak Spanish. What is your position with regard to this debate? Is it possible to say that people do or do not have the right to speak a language?
4. Thinking about the concept of anthropological linguistics, which entails not only "unmasking the hidden" but also "doing something about it," what is one thing you can do in your life to address hierarchies related to race and language?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

Linguistic Autobiography

The goal of this exercise is to apply what you have read to your own experiences with language and race. Please read the following prompts and answer all that apply to you:

1. If you identify as a Black American, describe your identity in terms of class and gender. Has there been a time when others criticized the way you or your friends and family speak English? If so, describe where you were, who criticized you in terms of ethnic/racial identity, and the context of the situation. Was it someone you know well? Why do you think the person did that? How did you react/feel when it happened? Do you or others in your community change the way you speak when you are

outside of your home/community? If so, why do you think that is? What does how you speak have to do with your identity in terms of race, class, and gender? How much do you know about your African ancestry? Given that Black Americans are in the United States as a result of enslavement and have limited ties to their African ancestry, would you like to speak the language of your ancestors? If you don't know what language your ancestors spoke, do you wish that you did? Do you feel a connection to your ancestral language(s)? Why or why not? Do you ever feel like the language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are?

2. If you identify as White, briefly describe your social class and gender identity. Can you think of times when others criticized you or members of your family/community for the way you speak English? Why do you think the person did that? Can you think of a time when the way you spoke English helped you succeed? What does how you speak have to do with your identity in terms of race, class, and gender? Do/did you study a language other than English in grammar school, high school, or college? If so, what language(s)? Why did you pick that/those languages? Do you know much about your ancestry? If so, do you speak the language(s) of your ancestry? If so, where and how often do you speak that/those language(s)? If not, would you like to speak that/those language(s)? Do you feel a connection to your ancestral languages? Why or why not? Do you ever feel like the language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are?
3. If you identify as Latinx, describe your identity in terms of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. Do you speak Spanish or an indigenous language? Do the language(s) you speak have equal social power/privilege in the United States? Do you change the way you speak when you are outside your home/community? How? When? Why? Do some members of your family criticize the way you speak? If so, why do you think they do that? Does

anyone in your family directly or indirectly encourage you to speak a certain language or speak your language in a certain way? If so, please provide an example. Why do you think they do/did that? Do you ever feel like the language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are? Do you think Latinx people should speak Spanish?

4. If you identify as mixed race, describe your identity in terms of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. What language(s) do you speak? Do the language(s) associated with your racial/ethnic identities have equal social power/privilege in the United States? Do you change the way you speak when you are with the different racial groups you identify with? How? When? Why? Do some members of your family criticize the way you speak? If so, why do you think they do that? Does anyone in your family directly or indirectly encourage you to speak a certain language or speak your language in a certain way? If so, please provide an example. Why do you think they do/did that? Do you ever feel like the language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are?
5. If you identify as an immigrant, describe your identity in terms of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. What are the circumstances of your immigration? What is the political relationship between your country of origin and the United States? What language(s) do you speak? Do the language(s) associated with your racial/ethnic identities have equal social power/privilege in the United States? Do you feel safe speaking the language of your country of origin in the United States? Do you change the way you speak when you are with the different racial groups you identify with? How? When? Why? Do some members of your family criticize the way you speak? If so, why do you think they do that? Does anyone in your family directly or indirectly encourage you to speak a certain language or speak your language in a certain way? If so, please provide an example. Why do you think they do/did that? Do you ever feel like the

language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are?

6. If none of the previous prompts accurately describe how you identify, describe how you identify in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. What language(s) do you speak? Do the language(s) associated with your racial/ethnic identities have equal social power/privilege in the United States? Do you change the way you speak when you are with the different racial, ethnic, class, and gender groups? How? When? Why? Do some members of your family criticize the way you speak? If so, why do you think they do that? Does anyone in your family directly or indirectly encourage you to speak a certain language or speak your language in a certain way? If so, please provide an example. Why do you think they do/did that? Do you ever feel like the language(s) or way(s) you speak cause conflict in your identity? Do you ever use language to mark your identity or to evoke pride in who you are?

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ESSAY 11 “ASIANS ARE DOING GREAT, SO THAT PROVES RACE REALLY DOESN’T MATTER ANYMORE” : THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL REALITY

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I never asked to be white. I am not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors, hundreds of generations of them. But like so many other Asian Americans of the second generation, I find myself now the bearer of a strange new status: white, by acclamation. Thus it is that I have been described as an “honorary white,” by other whites, and as a “banana” by other Asians . . . to the extent that I have moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life, I have become white inside.

—Liu (1999, p. 34)

The “model minority” image of Asian Americans first appeared in the mid-1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement and the ethnic consciousness movements, but *before* the rising waves of immigration and refugee influx from Asia. Two articles in 1966 —“Success Story, Japanese-American Style” in the *New York Times Magazine* (Petersen, 1966) and “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.” (*U.S. News and World Report* Staff, 1966)—marked a significant departure from how Asian immigrants and their descendants had been traditionally depicted in the media. Both

articles extolled Japanese and Chinese Americans for their persistence in overcoming extreme hardships and discrimination to achieve success, unmatched even by U.S.-born Whites, with “their own almost totally unaided effort” and “no help from anyone else.”

Since then, Asian Americans have been celebrated as a “model minority” for their “superior” cultures that encourage a strong work ethic, a respect for elders, and a reverence for family. More important, they have been celebrated for their high rates of educational, occupational, and income attainment and low high school dropout rates, as well as low rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration. They are declared to be on their way to becoming “White.” These expectations are a burden and the predictions surely premature given the “foreigner” image people in the United States still have of Asians and the rise of anti-Asian sentiment during times of social and economic uncertainty. In classrooms, as well as in society at large, the apparent success story of Asian Americans is often used to justify that race is no longer a determining factor in American life. This essay speaks to the actual existing realities of the diverse range of communities encompassed by the panethnic “Asian American” label and also considers the power and role of the model minority myth in the overall discourse of race and equality.

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ISSUES OF TERMINOLOGY AND CLASSIFICATION

Asian Americans have occupied an in-between status in the U.S.’s racial hierarchy. They are often distinguished from other underrepresented racial groups, such as Blacks and Latinos, and are classified with Whites for equal opportunity programs. Although Asian Americans as a group have attained levels of education,

occupation, and income equated with or even surpassing those of Whites,¹ and although many have moved near to or even married Whites, they still remain culturally distinct and suspect in society.

At issue is how to define Asian American and White. The term *Asian American* was coined by the late historian and activist Yuji Ichioka during the ethnic consciousness movements of the late 1960s. To adopt this identity is to reject the Western-imposed label of *Oriental*. Today, “Asian American” is an umbrella category that includes both U.S. citizens and immigrants whose ancestors came from Asia east of Pakistan. Although this label is widely used in public discussions, most Asian-origin Americans are ambivalent about it, reflecting the difficulty of being American and still keeping some ethnic identity: Is one, for example, Asian American or Japanese American?

Similarly, “White” is an arbitrary label having more to do with privilege than biology. In the United States, groups initially considered non-White, such as Irish and Jews, have attained White membership by acquiring status and wealth. It is hardly surprising, then, that some people of color would aspire to become “White” as a mark of and a tool for material success. However, becoming White can mean distancing oneself from one’s own ethnicity or people of color.

VARIETIES OF ASIAN AMERICANS

Privately, few Americans of Asian ancestry would spontaneously identify themselves as Asian, and fewer still as Asian American. They instead link their identities to specific countries of origin, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and so on. In a study of Vietnamese youth in San Diego, for example, I found that 53% identified themselves as Vietnamese, 32% as Vietnamese American, and only 14% as Asian American, and that nearly 60% of these youth considered their chosen identity as very important to them (Zhou, 2001).

Some Americans of Asian origin have family histories in the United States longer than many Americans of eastern or southern European origins. However, Asian Americans became numerous only after 1970, rising from 1.4 million to 17.3 million (including those who identify as multiracial), or nearly 5.4% of the total U.S. population, in 2018. Before 1970, the Asian-origin population was largely made up of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos. Now Americans of Chinese, Asian Indian, and Filipino origin are the largest subgroups (at 4.9 million, 4.1 million, and 3.9 million, respectively), followed by Vietnamese (2.1 million), Koreans (1.8 million), and Japanese (1.5 million). Some 20 other national-origin groups such as Cambodians, Pakistanis, Lao, Thai, Indonesians, and Bangladeshis were officially counted in government statistics only after 1980, and together amounted to more than 3.1 million in 2018.

The exponential growth of the Asian-origin population in the span of 40 years is primarily due to the accelerated immigration subsequent to the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which ended the national origins quota system, and the historic resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. Currently, about 60% of the Asian-origin population are foreign-born (the first generation), another 30% are U.S.-born of foreign-born parentage (the second generation), and just about 10% are born to U.S.-born parents (the third generation and beyond). The only exception to this pattern is Japanese Americans, who have a fourth generation and many U.S.-born elderly.

Unlike earlier immigrants from Asia or Europe at the turn of the 20th century, who were mostly low-skilled laborers looking for work, new immigrants from Asia have more varied backgrounds and come for many reasons, such as to join their families, to invest their money in the U.S. economy, to fulfill the demand for highly skilled labor, or to escape war, political or religious persecution, and economic hardship. For example, Chinese, Taiwanese, Asian Indian, and Filipino Americans tend to be overrepresented among scientists, engineers, physicians, and other skilled professionals, but less

educated, low-skilled workers are more common among Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong Americans, most of whom entered the United States as refugees. While middle-class immigrants are able to start their American lives with high-paying professional careers and comfortable suburban living, low-skilled immigrants and refugees often have to endure low-paying menial jobs and live in low-income urban neighborhoods. Asian Americans tend to settle in large metropolitan areas and concentrate in the West. California is home to about a third of all Asian Americans. But recently, other states such as Texas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, which historically received few Asian immigrants, have become destinations for Asian American settlement. Traditional ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Manilatown, Koreatown, Little Phnom Penh, and Thaitown persist or have emerged in gateway cities, helping new arrivals cope with cultural and language difficulties in their initial stage of resettlement. However, affluent and highly skilled immigrants tend to bypass inner-city enclaves and settle in suburbs upon arrival, belying the stereotype of the “unacculturated” immigrant. Today, more than half of the Asian-origin population live in suburbs surrounding traditional gateway cities, as well as in new urban centers of Asian settlement across the country.

Differences in national origin, timing of immigration, affluence, and settlement patterns profoundly affect the formation of a panethnic identity. Recent arrivals are less likely than those born or raised in the United States to identify as Asian American. They are also too busy settling in that they have little time to think about being Asian or Asian American, or for that matter, White. Their diverse origins evoke drastic differences in languages and dialects, religions, foodways, and customs. Many nationalities also brought to America their histories of conflict (such as the Japanese colonization of Korea and Taiwan, Japanese attacks on China, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam). Immigrants who are predominantly middle-class professionals, such as Taiwanese and Asian Indians, or predominantly small-business owners, such as Koreans, share few

of the same concerns and priorities as those who are predominantly low-skilled refugees, such as Cambodians and Hmong.

Finally, Asian-origin people living in San Francisco or Los Angeles, among many other Asians and self-conscious Asian Americans, develop sharper ethnic sensitivity than those living in, say, Latino-dominant Miami or White-dominant Minneapolis. A politician might get away with calling Asians “Oriental” in Miami but face criticism in San Francisco. All these differences can create obstacles to fostering a cohesive pan-Asian solidarity. As sociologist Yen Le Espiritu shows in her research, pan-Asianism is primarily a political ideology of U.S.-born, American-educated, and middle-class Asians rather than of Asian immigrants, who are conscious of their national origins and overburdened with their daily struggles for survival.

UNDERNEATH THE MODEL MINORITY: “WHITE” OR “OTHER”

The model minority has been a stereotype imposed on Americans of Asian ancestry since the 1960s. On the surface, Asian Americans seem to be on their way to becoming White, just like the offspring of earlier European immigrants. But the model minority image implicitly casts Asian Americans as different from Whites. By placing Asian Americans above Whites, it also sets them apart from other Americans, White or non-White, in the public mind.

One consequence of this new form of stereotyping is to buttress the myth that the United States is devoid of racism and accords equal opportunity to all, and that those who lag behind do so because of their own poor choices and inferior culture (see also Patel, Meanwell, & McClure in this volume). Celebrating a model minority can help thwart other racial minorities’ demands for social justice by pitting groups of color against each other. It can also pit Asian Americans against Whites when Whites resent Asian Americans for succeeding at higher rates than the White population. This myth also simplifies

the Asian American population as one monolithic community and erases inequality in economic and educational attainment between Asian ethnic groups. This erasure has long-term effects by reducing the amount of focus and support low-income Asian American populations receive.

Let me point to two less obvious effects. The model minority stereotype holds Asian Americans to higher standards, distinguishing them from average Americans. “What’s wrong with being a model minority?” asked a Black student in a class I taught on race. “I’d rather be in the model minority than in the downtrodden minority that nobody respects.” Whether people are in a model minority or a down-trodden minority, they are judged by standards *different* from average Americans. Also, the model minority stereotype places particular expectations on members of the group so labeled, channeling them to specific avenues of success, such as science and engineering, which in turn unintentionally reinforces barriers for Asian Americans in pursuing careers outside these designated fields. Falling into this trap, a Chinese immigrant father might be upset if his son told him that he had decided to change his major from engineering to English. Disregarding his son’s passion and talent for creative writing, the father would rationalize his concern by saying, “You have a 90% chance of getting a decent job with an engineering degree, but what chance would you have of earning income as a writer?” This rationale reflects more than simple parental concern over career choices typical of middle-class families; it constitutes the self-fulfilling prophecy of a stereotype.

In the end, celebration of Asian Americans as a model minority is based on the judgment that many Asian Americans perform at levels above the American average, which sets them apart not only from other people of color but also from Whites. The truth of the matter is that the larger-than-average size of the middle and upper-middle class in some Asian-origin groups, such as the Chinese, Asian Indians, and Koreans, paves a much smoother path for the immigrants and their offspring to regain their middle-class status in

the new homeland. The financial resources that immigrants brought with them to this country also help build viable ethnic economies and institutions, such as private after-school programs, for the less fortunate group members to move ahead in society at a much faster pace than they would if they did not have access to these ethnic resources.

“IT’S NOT SO MUCH BEING WHITE AS BEING AMERICAN”

In everyday reality, most Asian Americans seem to accept that “White” is mainstream, average, and “normal,” and they look to Whites as their frame of reference for attaining higher social positions. Similarly, researchers often use non-Hispanic Whites as the standard against which other groups are compared, even though there is also great diversity among Whites. Like most other immigrants to the United States, many Asian immigrants tend to believe in the American dream and measure their achievements materially. As a Chinese immigrant said to me in an interview, “I hope to accomplish nothing but three things: to own a home, to be my own boss, and to send my children to the Ivy League.” Those with sufficient education, job skills, and money manage to move into White middle-class suburban neighborhoods immediately upon arrival, while others work intensively to accumulate enough savings to move their families up and out of inner-city ethnic enclaves. Consequently, many children of Asian ancestry have lived their entire childhood in White communities, made friends with mostly White peers, and grow up speaking only English. In fact, Asian Americans are the most acculturated non-European group in the United States. By the second generation, most have lost fluency in their parents’ native languages. Sociologist David Lopez (1996) finds that in Los Angeles, more than three quarters of second-generation Asian Americans (as opposed to about one quarter of second-generation Mexicans) speak only English at home. Asian Americans also intermarry extensively with Whites and with members of other

minority groups. Sociologists Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (2010) find that more than one quarter of married Asian Americans have a partner of a different racial background, and 87% of intermarried Asians marry Whites; they also find that 12% of all Asian Americans claim a multiracial background, compared with 2% of Whites and 4% of Blacks.

Even though U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Asian Americans are relatively acculturated and often intermarry with Whites, they may be more ambivalent about becoming White than their immigrant parents. Many only cynically agree that “White” is synonymous with “American.” A Vietnamese high school student in New Orleans told me in an interview, “An American is White. You often hear people say, hey, so-and-so is dating an ‘American.’ You know she’s dating a White boy. If he were Black, then people would say he’s Black.” But while they recognize Whites as a frame of reference, some reject the idea of becoming White themselves. “It’s not so much being White as being American,” commented a Korean American student in my class on the new second generation. This aversion to becoming White is particularly common among well-educated and privileged second-generation college students who have taken ethnic studies courses, or among Asian American community activists. However, most of the second generation continues to strive for the privileged status associated with Whiteness, just like their parents. For example, most U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Chinese American youth end up studying engineering, medicine, and law in college, believing that these areas of study will guarantee well-paying jobs and middle-class living and enhance social contact with Whites (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Second-generation Asian Americans are also more conscious of the disadvantages associated with being non-White than are their parents, who as immigrants tend to be optimistic about overcoming the disadvantages. As a Chinese American woman points out from her own experience,

The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default. . . . You can certainly be as good as or even better than Whites, but you will never become accepted as White.

This remark echoes a common frustration among second-generation Asian Americans who detest being treated as immigrants or foreigners. Their experience suggests that Whitening has more to do with the beliefs of White America than with the actual situation of Asian Americans. Speaking perfect English, effortlessly adopting mainstream cultural values, and even marrying members of the dominant group may help reduce this “otherness” at the individual level, but they have little effect on the group as a whole (Chin, 2016). New stereotypes can emerge and “un-Whiten” Asian Americans anytime and anywhere, no matter how “successful” and “assimilated” they have become.

The stereotype of the “honorary White” or model minority goes hand in hand with that of the “forever foreigner.” In the 21st century, globalization and U.S.–Asia relations, combined with continually high rates of immigration, affect how Asian Americans are perceived in American society. Many historical stereotypes, such as “yellow peril” and “Chinese menace,” have found their way into contemporary American life, as revealed in such highly publicized incidents as the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese and beaten to death by a disgruntled Michigan auto worker in the 1980s and the trial of Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist suspected of spying for the Chinese government in the mid-1990s (eventually proven innocent).

More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the “forever foreigner” image has been raised again to invoke anti-Asian sentiment. The rise of hate crimes toward Asian Americans illustrate

the conditional nature of acceptance where Asian Americans are now being blamed for the spread of COVID-19 and some political leaders have taken to calling the virus the “China virus.” Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, 31% of Asian adults report being the subject of slurs or jokes about their race or ethnicity, compared with 21% of Black adults, 15% of Hispanic adults, and 8% of White adults (Pew Research Center, 2020). Hate crimes against Asian Americans have increased as a result of COVID-19, and the false blame on Asian Americans has also hurt ethnic enclaves who rely on tourism and retail trade to survive. The economic effects of COVID-19 have disproportionately hurt small business owners and low-income Asian Americans, working-class groups ignored by the model minority stereotype.

Asian Americans are still in an ambivalent position as neither White nor Black, and neither “American” nor “Asian.” During times of growth, Asian Americans are touted as a model minority group whose success proves that racism is less of a factor in mobility. But when facing turmoil, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans are treated as foreign threats who do not belong in White America. Ironically, the conditional nature of White acceptance of Asian Americans prompts them to organize pan-ethnically to fight back—which consequently heightens their racial distinctiveness. So becoming White or not is beside the point. Asian Americans still have to constantly prove they are truly loyal Americans, especially in times when U.S.–Asia relations are in the spotlight.

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NOTE

1. The 2015 American Community Survey shows that 52.3% of Asian Americans age 25 and over had at least a college degree (20% had an advanced graduate degree), compared with 34.2% of non-Hispanic Whites. The median family income for Asian American families was \$77,368, compared with \$59,698 for non-Hispanic Whites.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What are the origins of the model minority stereotype? How does this compare with previous depictions of Asian Americans

- as “yellow peril”? What, if anything, is significant about the evolution of these stereotypes over time? What, in your opinion, has prompted these changes in the model minority myth? Is it still used with the same political agenda in mind?
2. To what extent—if any—does the model minority myth factor into contemporary debates about Asian American identity? Can you think of any ways the media continue to perpetuate this stereotype? What negative effects does it continue to perpetuate for contemporary Asian Americans?
 3. What are some stereotypical representations of Asian Americans on prime-time television? What are some of the positive or neutral representations of Asian Americans that you’ve seen? How do the representations of Asian Americans compare to those of other racial groups? Why do you think there are discrepancies?
 4. What do you think are the key mechanisms for stereotyping Asian Americans in American society? How would Asian Americans and the society as a whole act to counter the negative effects of stereotyping?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Consider the blog post by the California State University at the link provided below: “Racism and Xenophobia in the Age of COVID-19”

<https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/racism-and-xenophobia-in-the-age-of-covid-19.aspx>

Consider Professor Reyes’s quote in the post: “Model minority myths often cause our Asian Pacific Islander community to forget how we are racialized in the U.S. Our ‘American-ness’ is always fragile, so at any given moment, we can be reminded that we are less than.”

How does the reaction to COVID-19 connect to issues with the model minority myth? What does it add to your understanding of how and why the model minority myth is problematic?

2. Using the data provided by the American Community Survey Data Tables tool (<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/all?d=ACS%205-Year%20Estimates%20Data%20Profiles>), locate the racial composition data on your home county and compare it to the United States overall. How do they compare? What does this tell you about the in-group variation hidden by the label “Asian American”? Why is this important?

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ESSAY 12 “BUT IT’S HONORING! IT’S TRADITION!” : THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIALIZED INDIAN MASCOTS IN SPORTS

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In the midst of the summer 2020 protests against the police murder of a Black Minneapolis resident named George Floyd, some other, curious reactions toward entrenched racism began occurring. Various statues that critics argued whitewashed historical racial atrocities started to be pulled down by everyday people. Notably, statues of Christopher Columbus, known not only as the first European to travel to the Americas in centuries, but also a notorious enslaver and killer of Native people, were torn down or damaged across the United States. Other statues were beheaded in Boston, thrown in bodies of water in both Baltimore and Richmond (Virginia), and knocked over in St. Paul (the town next to Minneapolis). The damaging of historical symbols—especially of those involved in settler colonialism—as an act of protest has a long history; most famously a bronze statue of the Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate had its foot chopped off in New Mexico in 1997, an amputation that mirrored Oñate’s reputed practice of cutting off the feet of older Native males.

During this whirlwind of social movement activism, another great surprise occurred: The Washington Redskins football team announced they would change its name. Of all the professional sports teams that use Indian imagery or names—and there are many—the Washington team has not only been considered the most offensive but also appears the most entrenched and resistant to change.

According to the defenders of Native American mascots and team names, these monikers are meant to honor and show respect for Native American culture. All sorts of “positive” stereotypes are used to support this claim: Native people are said to be brave, noble, and fierce warriors. Thus, these nicknames are said to compliment Native American peoples. Additionally, advocates argue that this practice is a way to remember Native Americans’ important place in U.S. history. Why else use these names and this imagery if they are not part of a “noble” past? Finally, some argue that there are other racial and ethnic mascots in the sports world, such as the Notre Dame Fighting Irish and the Minnesota Vikings, so what’s the big deal with using Native American mascots and team names?

Native American mascots and team names are remarkably common in the United States. Whereas there are only a handful of White ethnic team names, hundreds of high school, college, and professional teams reference Native Americans. This phenomenon is also unique because these teams are not typically owned by Native Americans, nor are they composed of Native American athletes, nor are the teams or schools usually located in areas with large Native American populations (with only a few exceptions). The most common nicknames include Braves, Chiefs, Indians (by far the most popular), Redmen, Savages, and Warriors, as well as numerous specific nations, such as Apaches, Hurons, Mohawks, and Seminoles. For most of the history of this practice, few non–Native Americans have complained about these team names.

However, sports are not as apolitical as people typically assume. They are often a battleground for struggles over important societal symbols, including those related to race. For example, in 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) declared that 18 American universities had “hostile or abusive” Native American team names and determined that it was the NCAA’s ethical obligation to prevent those teams from performing in conference playoff games. In the resulting uproar, numerous schools—including Newberry College, Arkansas State University, and Indiana University of

Pennsylvania—changed their mascots and team names, others sought (and sometimes received) support from local Native American tribes, and some sued the NCAA.

As the most controversial team name in professional sports, the Washington Redskins nickname is considered by some Native Americans to be as offensive as many Blacks consider the N-word, and they thus write the word as “r*****n.” Many Native Americans consider the term to be racist, and scholars have argued about whether the name also refers to the bloody red pulp from the top of someone’s head, called a scalp, that White settlers collected from dead Indians for government-paid “scalp bounties” (see Goddard, 2005; Holmes, 2014). The White owner of the Washington football team (itself worth over \$2 billion), Dan Snyder, vigilantly defended his team’s nickname, claiming that the term is used in “honor.” Despite Snyder’s claim, there were regular protests at stadiums where the Washington football team played.

How should we understand the controversies around such symbols? First, we must acknowledge that symbols are important to people, particularly people who believe in the values and meanings with which such symbols are imbued (Blumer, 1969). Consequently, people value symbols, often treating important symbols as sacred objects, and thus tend to avoid desecrating flags, religious symbols, and other items (Durkheim, 2001). Symbols that have existed for a long time have had the opportunity to acquire intergenerational significance for many people, where their meanings are passed down, year after year, via cultural transmission.

The support for symbols is not necessarily rational but far more emotional and psychological. Thus, patriotic individuals may get angry when their country’s flag is burned by others, even if the flag was not their personal property and even though the arson was of a piece of fabric and not an actual military attack on their homeland. People interpret those symbols based on their perspectives, social positions, group memberships, and histories. And with divisive

symbols, some people find themselves on the positive, self-esteem-enhancing side of the symbol while others are positioned negatively to it and find themselves insulted. This is problematic, since symbols form the ubiquitous background to our daily lives. For symbols that generate offense for some, those people may feel as though they are under attack by others or even by the entire society around them. In a country such as the United States where there are thousands of place names that are considered offensive to people of color, such names normalize the mistreatment of those groups. Subordinate groups who lack social power usually do not have control over the dominant symbols used by the powerful dominant majority (see Dennis's discussion on cultural hegemony in this volume). The offense felt by people of color from the symbols that target them serves as the unavoidable background to their everyday existence. To understand this, let's take a closer look at Native American mascots and team names.

NATIVE AMERICAN MASCOTS AND TEAM NAMES

The many critics—Native and non-Native alike—of Native American mascots and team names point out that the common justifications ignore many important facts and social dynamics. For example, for something to be an honor, it must be a sentiment accepted by those whom it is intended to honor, not just those who are saying the words. Thus, it is important to know whether Native people consider this practice to be honoring or not, since it is largely *not* Native people who are in control of the sports teams in question.

Stereotypes—even “positive” ones—minimize all other, supposedly irrelevant characteristics that many Indigenous cultures also possess, such as collectivism and communalism, protection of the earth, and resistance to American expansionism. The choice of Native cultures to represent combative sports (e.g., hockey, football) is sometimes claimed to be flattering to Native people but still narrows the characteristics attributed to Native Americans to only

combat skills (see Black, 2002), which is a key emphasis in the “bloodthirsty savage” stereotype (Berkhofer, 1978; King et al., 2002). Stereotypes are problematic because they *always* reduce entire groups of people to certain limited characteristics, presuming that all members of that group share those characteristics and do not vary from that stereotype. In addition, the stereotyped personas that accompany all these mascots are troubling. For instance, the Cleveland Indians’ Chief Wahoo logo (only recently retired) was a smiling, buffoonish caricature, reminiscent of the historic Little Black Sambo character.

Notably, claims of honoring Native American stereotypes associated with the past also designate the contributions and very presence of Native Americans as something only from the past, thus subtly denying and ignoring their existence in the present. The Native American representations emblazoned on jerseys and logos rarely look like the actual people who live in 21st-century America but instead romanticize the so-called “noble savage” that settlers encountered when they attempted to clear the American frontier of the Native peoples who already lived there. These mascots also exist in a sporting universe alongside other mascots that include historical relics, such as the 49ers, Pirates, Kings, Patriots, 76ers, and Yankees, as well as mythical characters, such as the Wizards and Devils, and many aggressive animals (the Lions, Tigers, Bears, Hawks, Bulls, Sharks, Coyotes, and others). Thus, in the U.S. imagination, Native Americans reside in the past and can be easily forgotten, just as easily as they can be compared to nonhuman animals and fantastical figures.

Finally, team names that represent White ethnicities and are often used as counterexamples are very different in nature from Native American mascots. First, Whites are indisputably better off than Native Americans. Whites are the dominant group and experience better health, possess substantially more political power, earn greater salaries, have nicer and safer communities, and experience far greater social status than do Native Americans as a group. For

example, Native Americans have a far higher mortality rate than Whites—715 deaths per 100,000 versus 456 per 100,000, respectively (Kunitz, 2008). In addition, only five self-identified Native Americans serve in the U.S. Congress while almost 80% of Congress is White (Bialik, 2019; Bump, 2015). Moreover, the median Native American household earned \$32,227 compared with \$53,657 for all households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), and Native American reservations are significantly more likely to be sites with “extremely dangerous” unexploded military ordnance (Hooks & Smith, 2004). To compare a White mascot to a Native one is to compare a highly privileged group to one that is uniquely and profoundly disadvantaged. Second, the majority of the associated populations around those White sports teams and even the students attending those schools are overwhelmingly White and often have the same ethnic makeup of those mascots. For example, Notre Dame is a Catholic university, founded by Whites, including Irish Americans, while the Vikings football team is in a state with one of the country’s heaviest concentrations of Scandinavian Americans. Native Americans, on the other hand, constitute one of the smallest racial populations in the United States and are often sequestered on reservations or isolated in urban areas. Further, most Americans perceive Native people as homogeneous and thus do not differentiate among the hundreds of different nations that possess different cultural traditions, languages, and histories. Consequently, many Native American sports mascots use the same generic appearance stereotyped in popular American culture, such as the large feathered headdress, which is more representative of certain Great Plains nations than any others. The University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux logo was at one point copied from the Chicago Blackhawks logo, with no apparent irony that the Sioux (Lakotans) are an entirely different nation of people than the Blackhawks. (That would be like representing Italians with imagery of Norwegians.)

The competition of sports dredges up the old dichotomy of “cowboys versus Indians,” wherein “Indians” are an enemy to be fought by brave settlers and ranchers. Placing an entire people in a position

where mockery and denigration occurs from opposing teams ought to be an immediate concern. Since the fans of other teams can be expected to chant insults during games, like “Indians suck!” (or “Braves suck!” “Chiefs suck!” “Blackhawks suck!”), how ethical is it to place an entire ethnicity or racial group in that position? This consequence is often ignored, even when claiming the nicknames are an honor. For example, the Cleveland Indians claim that their team name honors a Native American player named Louis Sockalexis. This claim is simply incorrect; the name was used to generate interest in the team and media coverage, but Sockalexis’s ancestry was regularly ridiculed and insulted with slurs by fans, including fans in Cleveland (Staurowsky, 1998). The broader practice of associating Native Americans with an *entire* team expands this practice.

Even under the best of conditions and regardless of best intentions, serious and troubling problems result from the use of Native American mascots and team names. Using scientific experiments, scholars have been able to demonstrate that basic stereotypical images have psychological consequences for youth. For example, simply viewing the Cleveland Indians logo decreased Native youth’s self-esteem and future aspirations while raising self-esteem and future aspirations for White youth. Essentially, it hurts Native youth—regardless of any claims of honor—while also improving White youth’s sense of self, presumably because it reinforces Whites’ awareness of their privileged position in the racial order (Burkley et al., 2017; Fryberg et al., 2008).

THE POWER BEHIND SYMBOLS

Despite justifying Native American mascots as “honoring,” there is a system of racial hegemony operating behind these symbols, even as their defenders claim to be “color-blind.” When Native Americans’ cultural identities are used without their permission, race is clearly a central component. For Native peoples, it is difficult to forget the

United States' deliberate attempts at genocide. Both the near genocide of Native Americans, which involved appropriating the land of an entire continent, and the enslavement of African peoples helped the United States become the most powerful capitalist economy in the world (Baptist, 2014; Feagin, 2015). While genocide and slavery have officially ended, the U.S. government refuses to face that history, assume responsibility for it, and make reparations with the groups it victimized for centuries. Thus, lurking behind these sports symbols are formidable hierarchical systems whose historical legacies are more acute for people of color than for the average White American. The defenders of these symbols are able to avoid grappling with moral questions by failing (or refusing) to acknowledge the historical legacy of genocide the symbols represent to Native Americans.

The power of these institutions extends to the present day. The ownership and management of sports teams is rarely under the control of Native Americans. The billions of dollars wrapped up in these racialized brands are thus not at the disposal of those communities who drastically need capital infusions to overcome, for instance, widespread impoverishment; 27% of Native Americans were impoverished in 2011, compared with 9.9% of non-Hispanic Whites (Macartney et al., 2013). The entertainment provided by these sports teams is mainly consumed by White sports fans, whose “dominant gaze” is the only real concern of owners and managers of sports teams. Indeed, most sports fans, especially those who have the money to donate to university teams as alumni or can pay for expensive stadium tickets to attend professional games, are White. Consequently, sports fans—for example, people who own jerseys and other gear related to sports teams—are more likely to support Native mascots (Lang, 2018).

Who should have the power to dictate what an “honor” is? Whites as a group are far more supportive of racialized mascots than are people of color. Racial minorities are far more critical of the use of Native American mascots than are Whites, and Native Americans

are the most critical of all (Sigelman, 1998; Williams, 2007). The criticisms of this racial group whose identities, tribal names, and likenesses are used for sports teams should be the most important concern, even though they are a small minority of the overall U.S. population. Native Americans are rarely consulted and are asked only when it's mandated, as with the NCAA decision that required tribal endorsements for universities to retain Native American team names and mascots. Yet their point of view is clearly important if these representations cause structural harm to their communities, without benefiting them at all.

Defenders of these representations often point out that many Native people support the practice, which is true. A number of national surveys have found a surprising amount of abstract support among people who claim Native identity (see King et al., 2002). However, most major Native American organizations (as well as other civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]) have consistently opposed the practice. A survey of Native American leaders found them to be significantly more offended by sports teams employing their imagery than the general public (Laveay et al., 2009). Thus, while some individual Native people support the nicknames, those who have considered the group effect and have worked to defend Native interests over many decades, such as the American Indian Movement, think very differently. Also, Native Americans who do support these representations are often distant from any particular direct resulting harms. At the University of North Dakota—a school with a substantial enrollment of Native American students, in a state with many Native Americans and reservations—my own analysis (Williams, 2007) has shown that Native students were the most critical of the school's Fighting Sioux nickname, with many of those students being Sioux (Lakotan). Because these Native students are the ones who are geographically and socially closest to this practice, why not listen to their voices first and foremost? When, in 2012, the University of North Dakota dropped the nickname (as of 2021, the team is called the Fighting Hawks), the reason was mounting costs

of a long legal fight and the risk of lost NCAA tournament play, not the opinions of offended Native students.

THE HISTORICAL ARC OF NATIVE AMERICAN TEAM NAMES IN THE UNITED STATES

Many of the names that were originally established in the first half of the 20th century now often appear as unfortunate, cringe-worthy relics. But their origins are clear enough when we examine U.S. history. Many decades after the closure of “the frontier,” the suppression of the last resistant Native nations’ military campaigns for independence, and the consolidation of the reservation system, White Americans created Native-themed monikers that stood in stark contrast to those same White people’s earlier view of Native people. In a classic example of differential racialization, the “noble savage” caricature replaced the feared warrior stereotype from the 19th century. Instead of fear-mongering about Native Americans, White Americans instead lionized the abstract bravery of those targeted for ethnic cleansing.

But it is not a mere coincidence that such names appeared during an era dominated by robust White supremacy, when Jim Crow ruled the American South and brutal segregation the North. The popular reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan reached its zenith in the mid-1920s with possibly millions of members. Thousands of racialized lynchings struck fear into the hearts of people of color throughout the country.

Additionally, according to sport sociologist Laurel Davis-Delano, the rise of modern sports addressed the early 20th century’s crisis of masculinity (Davis, 1993). The use of feared Native imagery suited this purpose well. Additionally, the rise of the Boy Scouts and YMCA channeled White Americans’ attention and energies; the Boy Scouts of America were founded in 1910 with the considerable appropriation of Native American imagery and knowledge. Such new imagery rewrote and celebrated American nationalism—and frontier symbols

like pioneers and Indians—in a fashion that was convenient for the American narrative of progress, success, and superiority.

The early 20th century also saw an expansion of mass public education, in which many new schools were created to socialize youth—especially immigrant youth—as patriotic Americans and disciplined workers for the emerging industrial economy. These schools featured sports teams for boys that required new nicknames and mascots, ripe opportunities for the appropriation of Native culture funneled through the lens of a settler America.

Native American mascots and other imagery endured for much of the long 20th century. It wasn't until the crescendo of the social movement of the 1960s—and particularly the rise of Native American civil rights organizations and “red power,” such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968—that such symbolic backdrops began to be called into question. In fact, one of the earliest demands of this movement was for greater respect for Native culture in American society. AIM has made the fight against these symbols one of its persistent demands over the decades. These long-standing traditions and practices finally gained popular attention in the 1990s, as innumerable professional sports teams saw protests against their Native imagery, and public schools and universities began changing their names. There are a number of factors that seem to matter for social movements aiming to eliminate Native mascots. The nature of their opposition—their organizations, race, culture, and ability to recruit more opponents—as well as mascot supporters' resources and power, and the opinions of school leaders, all matter for how easily or quickly Native mascots are changed (Davis-Delano, 2007).

Largely due to protests by the affected groups, many schools have dropped the use of Native American mascots and team names. Because universities are represented by diverse interests—and also are often public institutions—there has been considerable pressure to stop the use of Native mascots, in particular. As Minthorn and Nelson (2018) have argued, Native mascots are seen as part of the

visual racial environment of such universities. Students and alumni have still put up stiff resistance to change; University of Illinois students who wanted to retain the Chief Illini mascot were more likely to adhere to a color-blind racial ideology (Neville et al., 2011), while Miami University alumni felt that anti-nickname concerns were simply an imposition of political correctness and an erasure of their school traditions (Toglia & Harris, 2014).

The list of schools that have dropped Native mascots includes Stanford University, Dartmouth College, Syracuse University, Carthage College, Southern Nazarene College, the University of Illinois, St. John's University (New York), Marquette University, Miami University, Eastern Michigan University, Stonehill College, University of West Georgia, Springfield College, Arkansas State University, the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, and the University of North Dakota. While a few university teams—such as the Florida State University Seminoles and Mississippi College Choctaw—appealed the NCAA ban and won as a result of positive support from nearby tribes of the same name, there is less support for these schools' nicknames among Seminole and Choctaw people who reside in large numbers in Oklahoma due to various forced relocation campaigns in the early 1800s. For example, King and Springwood (2000) report that none of the four Seminole tribes of Oklahoma have endorsed the Florida State University team, unlike the Florida-based Seminole Indian Tribe. Whereas many high schools have changed their team names, many others have not. In Massachusetts alone, 40 high schools have Native American team names (Pohle, 2015), and nearly 500 high schools nationally use just the Indian moniker (Munguia, 2014). According to the National Congress of American Indians, over 100 U.S. elementary, middle, and high schools ceased the use of Indian-related nicknames and mascots between 2015 and 2020. Changes occurred in half of all U.S. states, and 71% of schools changed since 2019 alone.

Perhaps the most resistant to change have been professional sports teams; not until the late 2010s did any of the national teams, which

are ultimately privately owned corporations with large fan bases, change their team names. In addition to the 2020 pledge from the Washington, D.C., football team to drop their name, the only other professional team to make similar moves is the Cleveland Indians baseball team. In 2018, the team said it would cease use of its mascot, Chief Wahoo. While the team would still be called “Indians,” team jerseys and other paraphernalia would be replacing Wahoo with a classic letter “C” for Cleveland. By December 2020, the Cleveland baseball team announced it would finally drop the “Indians” name, too.

We can better understand the “life cycle” of Native mascots—from their origins in the early 1900s to their dramatic abandonment in recent decades—by returning to the University of North Dakota’s (UND) history, which offers a specific, noteworthy example. As discussed earlier, UND’s former “Fighting Sioux” nickname and mascot present an interesting example from a large, public university in a part of the United States with a considerable Indigenous population. UND’s stubborn retention of its nickname, even after decades of protest before finally acquiescing in 2012, is a story worth a closer look.

UND adopted the “Fighting Sioux” moniker in 1930, replacing the previous name of “Flickertails” (a small, prairie-dwelling bird). This change occurred at a time when no Native students attended UND. Indeed, the first Native student didn’t enroll until 1935 (Tovares, 2002). North Dakota in 1930 was 98.6% White and only 1.2% Native American. It took many decades for popular opposition to emerge on campus. The UND Indian Association—formed in 1969—pointed to the nickname as one of multiple grievances that Native students had against the university (in addition to a lack of meeting space for Native students and an inadequate Indian Studies program). In 1972, confrontations occurred between anti-nickname Native students and pro-nickname fraternity members (who had created offensive snow sculptures), resulting in the arrest of a Native student (who the university president subsequently bailed out of jail). Protests

continued until the 1990s when an avalanche of resolutions opposed to the nickname were drafted by a wide range of North and South Dakota-based tribes and national civil rights organizations; notably, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Spirit Lake Nation of North Dakota, as well as the Civil Rights Committee and the NAACP, called for the end to UND's nickname. At UND itself, the 1990s saw a bevy of opposition, including resolutions from the Faculty Senate and Student Senate (which the student president vetoed), as well as a joint statement of opposition in 2000 from 21 Indian-related programs and organizations on campus, including Indian Studies, the Native American Law Project, and Indians Into Medicine.

To respond to the anti-nickname movement's momentum, UND's president created an official university "commission" to study the nickname and the opinions held by various constituencies. The commission surveyed students (including a special sub-sampling of students of color), faculty, staff, and alumni. Analysis of these data found a few key things: Students became more critical of the nickname the longer they studied at UND; sports fans (particularly football fans) were more resistant to change; and despite claims that there were divisions among Native students, there was no significant differences between the major Indigenous ethnicities within the student body. Lakotan (Sioux), Chippewa/Ojibwa, Three-Affiliated tribes, and all other nations were equally unsupportive of the nickname *and* wished to see it changed (Williams, 2007).

Thus, this was a conflict between nickname critics (the majority of whom identified as Indigenous) and White Americans, including the White student body. Alumni—also largely White—were vocal proponents of keeping the Fighting Sioux nickname, too, as it reminded them of their time as students. One of UND's wealthiest alumni was a casino magnate named Ralph Engelstad, who regularly donated to the university and in 1999 promised to give \$100 million to build a new hockey arena—on the condition that UND retain its nickname (Wetzel, 2001). Offended that the UND administration would agree to a deal that bargained with their culture

—and did so with a controversial alumnus like Engelstad, who was fined by the Nevada Gaming Commission for embarrassing it (e.g., by hosting two Nazi-themed parties in the 1980s at his Las Vegas casino)—Native students resumed their vigilant protests. The nickname commission's survey findings are again illuminating here. Eighty-nine percent of alumni disbelieved the claim that there was an atmosphere of discrimination at UND. Indeed, over two thirds (68%) *strongly* believed that the nickname was honoring to both UND and to Lakotans, and that the university used the nickname in a respectful fashion. Consequently, 77% of alumni disagreed that the name should be changed (even if it offended Native Americans), that the university should abide by requests to change the name, or that a change would create a positive perception of the university. Threats like Engelstad's to withhold funding were also reflected in the alumni survey, in which 23% claimed they would reduce their financial contributions to UND if the name were changed; only 7% stated that a progressive change would lead to an *increase* in their financial support. UND's knowledge of alumni opinion and their economic threats were clearly a major factor behind the North Dakota state government's and the UND administration's reluctance to change the nickname. It wasn't until a dozen years after these survey results—and threatened lawsuits, a potential NCAA ban on tournament participation, and other political pressure—that the name was officially dropped.

CONCLUSION

Unsurprisingly, the main racial divisions for support and opposition to Native mascots and nicknames remain between Whites and people of color. However, increasing numbers of Whites have begun changing their traditional support of offensive symbols, even participating in often challenging multiracial anti-racist alliances (Jacobs & Taylor, 2012). This is a noteworthy development, as it became increasingly difficult to honestly discuss racial issues in the Obama era, when color blindness was a central narrative. Color

blindness has not only made the lingering practice of Native mascots hard for many to stomach—considering their racist origins and conclusions—but it has also made it necessary for supporters of these symbols to deny any racial dimensions. Because few Whites wish to be perceived as “racist,” they ultimately explain their support for Indian mascots using arguments that are race-neutral and deny historical practices such as Native American genocide. On the contrary, those who oppose Native mascots rarely adopt a color-blind approach, as seen in newspaper letters to the editor (Silva et al., 2018).

During the Trump presidency—where racial dog-whistling became commonplace and the far right was emboldened by Trump’s speech—race returned to the forefront of many conversations in the United States. The repulsion that many feel about this reemergence of open racism—including from those who would otherwise prefer a color-blind world—may have generated more forceful attacks on Native American mascots and other racist symbology in the United States. It remains to be seen if this resistance will persist.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Before reading this article, how did you feel about Native American mascots? Having read it, has your opinion changed? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe that teams with Native American names or mascots would lose fan support and funding if they changed their team names or mascots? How much should this be taken into consideration when considering changing team names or mascots?
3. Can you think of any other racist or ethnocentric traditions that we continue to uphold or celebrate? For instance, some argue that Thanksgiving is one such tradition. How should we think about these kinds of traditions? Should they be abolished altogether, or can they be modified in some way?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Do an Internet search to find Native American tribal nations in your area. Research their histories and struggles. How does this knowledge shape your opinion of Native American mascots? Do any of the schools in your area use Native American team names or mascots? If so, what does this tell us about how we think about Native American people?
2. In small groups, research Native American team mascots in the NCAA and professional sports teams (e.g., Florida State Seminoles, Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks, etc.). What information can you find about the origins of their mascots or team names? What do those origins tell us about how Native Americans exist in the public imagination? In your search, also look at how these teams have responded to the controversy over their mascots. What do their responses tell us about how Native Americans continue to exist in the public imagination? Has there been any change since the time when the mascot or team name was created?

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ESSAY 13 “GOOD GUYS WITH GUNS PROTECT US” : THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND GENDER IN GUN OWNERSHIP

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An estimated 16 million people in the United States possess a license that allows them to carry a firearm in public (Carlson, 2019). Like gun use generally, the majority of license holders are men, and men are more likely than women to support handgun licensing (Carroll, 2005; Jones, 2005). This essay explores how gender dynamics shape the motives of [mainly White] men who are licensed to carry firearms in public.

Previous studies have argued that guns are symbols of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Gibson, 1994; Melzer, 2009). As Stange and Oyster (2000) explain, “In [men’s hands], the gun has served a symbolic function that exceeds any practical utility. It has become the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force, aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality” (p. 22). Because of these associations, it seems logical that men could use them to perform masculinity. However, the only studies of how men actually use guns have focused on criminals (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). In my own research, I investigate how masculinity motivates law-abiding men in their use of concealed handguns.

To understand the relationship between carrying a concealed firearm and masculinity, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with men in Texas who currently have a concealed handgun license (16 of whom identified as White, 2 as Hispanic and White, and 2 as Hispanic). Though Texas has a “Wild West” image in popular culture, its firearm laws can be considered “middle of the road.” Whereas some states do not require a license for people who want to carry a firearm (e.g.,

Arizona, Vermont, New Hampshire), with a few exceptions, the permitting process in Texas requires a person to be at least 21 years old, pass state and federal background checks, attend a licensing course, submit two sets of fingerprints, and remit a fee to the state.

In what follows I use the concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine motives of men who have a concealed handgun license. Hegemonic masculinity is Connell's (1995) term for the discursive practices and embodied dispositions that legitimize male domination. I argue that by having a license, economically privileged White men are able to define themselves in contrast to femininity and to alternative versions of masculinity that are vilified or ridiculed. In so doing, they shore up White male privilege in society.

From Stroud A. (2012). Good guys with guns: Hegemonic masculinity and concealed handguns. *Gender & Society*, 26(2), 216–238. Reprinted with permission from the publisher.

Race and class are central to hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) but have been virtually ignored in the literature on guns and masculinity. This elision is significant particularly because the image of the ideal gun user (i.e., a White man) constructed by the National Rifle Association (NRA) emerges alongside controlling images of Black masculinity that frame Black males as “threats to white society” (Collins, 2006, p. 75; see also Doude and Rodriguez's and Ray and Bailey's essays in this volume). Given the Whiteness of hegemonic masculinity, as a symbol that at once signifies violence and protection, gun use will likely take on different meanings when analyzed at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

My research, which is discussed below, suggests that some of these men, most of whom were White, see their gun carrying as central to what it means to be a good husband and father who is able to protect his wife and children from danger. For older men, who fear that they are losing their ability to physically dominate others,

concealed firearms can act as a [way] to boost their confidence in their interactions with men. Men also justify their need for a license by positioning themselves in contrast to vilified forms of masculinity. While these men see their own gun carrying as noble and just, they attribute violence and aggression to others, particularly Black and Latino men. Hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for understanding these [conversational] practices and for connecting the use of concealed handgun licenses to continued male domination in society.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SHOW?

The literature on firearm use and gender has focused on three main themes: how firearms contribute to cultural constructions of masculinity (Gibson, 1994; Jeffords, 1994); how organizations such as the NRA utilize masculine tropes to mobilize members (Connell, 1995; Melzer, 2009; O'Neill, 2007); and how masculinity is implicated in violent acts in which firearms are used (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Each of these themes is important for understanding why men want to carry a concealed firearm.

The first theme in the literature on firearm use and gender explores the relationships between firearms, violence, and masculinity in fantasy life. Gibson (1994) argues that movies celebrating war and the warrior ethos, such as the *Rambo* series, emerged on the cultural landscape as a response to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. The warrior ethos was an extension of the larger cultural shift that linked masculinity to muscularity and physical toughness (Jeffords, 1994). The body is central to how this operates because “to be fully, appropriately masculine, a male person must exhibit physical control of his space and be able to act on objects and bodies in it” (Crawley et al., 2008, p. 59). This post-Vietnam ethos ushered in a more militarized version of masculinity that helped to popularize the use of guns for personal defense, led to a proliferation of paramilitary

organizations, and contributed to the popularity of simulated war games such as paintball (Gibson, 1994).

The willingness to engage in violence is central to meanings of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2000) because “real men” must show others that they are not afraid (Kimmel, 2010). Yet few men have culturally legitimate occasions to express this violence, making simulated scenarios ideal settings to engage in violence fantasies. They promote a “New War ethos” where power, force, and might are celebrated as socially necessary when used to protect “good people” from evil. In this worldview, firearms endow “good guys” with the strength, power, and moral right needed to defend the world from “bad guys.”

As Gibson suggests, the fantasy of using guns to fight “bad guys” is not only an acceptable form of violence in U.S. culture, it is also celebrated. Unlike Gibson’s subjects, the vast majority of people who carry a firearm will never be in a position to enact this New War ethos in combat, though they may use their guns in militaristic displays of strength as is increasingly the case at armed protests. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 883), exalted versions of masculinity need not be based in reality, and might instead “express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” that justify masculinity’s dominance over femininity. In the case of carrying a concealed firearm, an object that is particularly useful for communicating strength, it is important to ask how fantasies of domination allow men to construct masculine selves, whether or not their guns are ever fired.

The second theme in the literature on gender and firearms focuses on the gun lobby’s role in linking gun use with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Melzer, 2009; O’Neill, 2007). Connell (1995) argues that the gun lobby is engaged in masculinity politics, “those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue and with it, men’s position in gender relations” (p. 205). The gun lobby has been active in producing meanings of masculinity

as it works to expand gun rights, even in the face of public outcry over the danger of guns. Connell (1995) argues that the gun lobby has been able to defeat opponents of gun control by explicitly appealing to discourses of masculinity. By evoking concepts like security, family values, or individual freedom, the gun lobby works to make masculinity “a principal theme, not taken for granted as background” (p. 205).

Melzer (2009) utilizes Connell’s framework to analyze how the NRA has exploited popular understandings of guns as masculine symbols to mobilize its members. Melzer attended NRA conventions, analyzed the history of the organization, and interviewed its members to understand how it has used masculinity discourses to become the most powerful lobby in the United States. He argues that gun ownership is associated in NRA discourse with self-reliance, rugged individualism, and a strong work ethic, a constellation of traits that Melzer refers to as “frontier masculinity.” He writes that “guns and masculinity have long been inseparable” (Melzer, 2009, p. 30) thanks to mythologized narratives of the American frontier. These narratives appeal to working- and middle-class White men who are threatened by the civil rights and feminist movements. According to Melzer, the predominantly White male membership of the NRA is motivated to act in defense of guns because they symbolize individual freedom.

The NRA’s magazine *The American Rifleman* is the most popular of the organization’s monthly publications. O’Neill (2007) examines how the magazine’s section “Armed Citizen” relays stories of violent crimes thwarted by private citizens using guns. For example, the author cites one story that tells of a man whose children rushed into his room in the middle of the night to tell their father that two men were breaking into their home. The father, who was disabled, grabbed a handgun, shot one of the intruders and held him at gunpoint until the police arrived. O’Neill finds that most of the victims in these stories are women, the elderly, or in some way disabled or in failing health. He argues that these “classically vulnerable” people

heighten the narrative structure of the stories, because as otherwise helpless victims, they are able to “achieve masculinity” with firearms. According to O’Neill (2007), the NRA uses discourses that simultaneously construct masculinity and terror, and they produce an “especially vigilant kind of citizen who is distinctly masculine in character” (p. 459). Though defensive gun uses are statistically rare events (see Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Kleck & Gertz, 1995),¹ the NRA is able to use its monthly publication to circulate stories of “real-life heroes” who use guns to defend the defenseless.

The literature on the NRA illustrates how this powerful lobby links gun use with hegemonic masculinity: Gun users heroically defend the defenseless (O’Neill, 2007) and they care deeply about “American virtues,” particularly individual freedom (Melzer, 2009) and family values (Connell, 1995). These NRA discourses “provide a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions” and thus represent what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 850) call a “regional” hegemonic masculinity. Though it is important to understand how masculinities emerge in particular contexts, what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call the “local level,” dominant culture frames and shapes the possibilities for enacting preferred versions of masculinity in everyday life. Below, I explore how this regional discourse is materialized in the daily practices and interactions of men who are licensed to carry concealed handguns.

The third set of studies on guns and gender examine how some men actually use firearms. However, these studies have focused on the commission of violent crimes and on what Connell (1995) might label “alternative” or “marginal” masculinities. Some researchers consider criminal behavior an attempt by some marginal men to accomplish masculinity when they lack alternative resources to do so (Britton, 2011; Messerschmidt, 1993).

In this vein, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) analyze random school shootings in the United States. All of those shootings were

perpetrated by boys and young men and “all or most of the shooters had tales of being harassed—specifically gay-baited—for inadequate gender performance” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1440). By using firearms to commit acts of violence, these boys attempted to move from margin to center, from being the wimp who was picked on to the aggressor who dominated and controlled others. Similarly, Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) interviewed gang members serving prison time for violent crimes. The authors found that the reputations of both the gang and the individual gang member were determined by their willingness to defend their honor and to be seen as masculine. The primary way this was accomplished was by using firearms. The authors write, “Guns provide gang members with a sense of power” and guns “help gang members project a tough image” (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007, p. 90). Because guns are so lethal, they imbue their users with traits associated with masculinity—control and power.

Taken together, the literature on guns and masculinity reveals a gaping hole that has implications for how we understand both the way guns factor into cultural constructions of masculinity and how hegemonic masculinity operates. On the regional level, guns factor heavily in displays of masculine violence that are celebrated in action films through fantasies of “good guys” killing “bad guys” (Gibson, 1994), and the gun lobby taps into and expands this discourse by tying guns to American virtues (Connell, 1995; Melzer, 2009; O’Neill, 2007). But the only analyses that examine how real men use guns to construct masculinity have focused on criminal uses by men who embody marginalized masculinities (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). Thus, while on the regional level it is clear that guns are discursively linked to hegemonic masculinity, it is unclear how men on the local level might use guns to construct versions of masculinity that are celebrated in culture.

The men that are the focus of my research are positioned quite differently from the marginalized men in the literature: Instead of being defined as “criminals,” they consider themselves law-abiding men and are licensed by the state to carry concealed guns.

Furthermore, they are predominantly White and upper-middle class and thus are socially privileged. To fully explore the significance of their gun carrying, it is important to interrogate the various meanings they assign to this practice in light of their race, class, and gender.

I chose to focus on White men in this study because they constitute the overwhelming majority of license holders in the state: They have been the recipients of 65% of the nearly 3.4 million licenses issued between 1995 and 2019 (Texas Department of Public Safety [DPS], 1995–2020). This is particularly notable given that White men represent only 37% of Texas residents 18 years and older. (Critically, Texas does not offer an option for “Hispanic/Latinx” on the license application, so we cannot parse this important ethnic group when trying to understand how this practice is racialized.) At the time this research was conducted, the fees associated with getting a license were typically between \$200 and \$250, and so it is likely that the expenses associated with licensing made the practice cost-prohibitive for Texans with low incomes. Nearly all of my interviewees had high household incomes, though two refused to answer this question.

Through my analysis of the interviews, three primary themes emerged in men’s explanations of why they want to carry a firearm in public: (1) to protect their wives and children from violent crime, (2) to compensate for lost physical strength as they age, and (3) to make them feel more secure in places they feel vulnerable. I argue that each of these themes is connected to fantasies of violence and heroic defense that contribute to White hegemonic masculinity.

FAMILY DEFENDER

Defending the family is significant in men’s accounts of carrying a concealed firearm. Nearly all of the men I interviewed are married, and 10 have children living at home. In almost every case, the men I interviewed explained their gun use as deeply tied to defending their

families. Adam, 36, says that he first bought a gun around the age of 21 because, having just finished college, he could afford to live only in “lower income neighborhoods where there’s more crime and there’s more shootings and violence.” Adam described that neighborhood as “a bad part of Houston” and said he used his gun only for protection in his home and was never very serious about self-defense. All this changed when he and his wife were expecting a child. He explains his perspective: “I’m the dad. I think my role is that I have to protect my family. That’s my number one duty as a dad: to provide . . . food, shelter, and protection for my wife and my child. I mean that’s what being a dad is.” I asked Adam if that is a role he is trying to learn or if it’s one a man automatically assumes when he gets married. He responded,

I think you automatically assume it when you get married. And, then especially when you have a kid. And I don’t know if that’s my belief, or it’s just the way I grew up or whatever. But you know, when you get married, you’re supposed to do certain things. You know, you have roles. And I know that in today’s society [pause] a lot of people like to think well, men and women, they’re the same and you know, the women work and so do the men and all that stuff. Which, to some extent, I agree. But there’s other certain inherent parts of being a man and being a woman that you have certain roles. I can’t have a baby! You know, physically I can’t have a baby and physically I’m stronger than my wife. And, it’s just up to me to protect her, in every situation. And if, you know, if we were ever attacked or accosted or something then, then it’s up to me to protect her until she can, you know, be safe.

Adam became very animated about what he termed “his role” in his family and seemed exasperated by the suggestion that men and women are equals in all senses. Adam sees his wife and child as dependent on him for their safety. Rooting his argument in bodily

differences makes the distinction seem natural and inevitable (Connell, 1995; Hollander, 2001).

Though these men may never be in a position to carry out heroic fantasies of masculine bravery, their concealed handgun suggests to them that they could. By signifying that their wives and children are dependent on them for protection (whether or not this is actually true), the men I interviewed are positioning themselves as brave leaders of their families; thus, their concealed handgun license is very useful as a symbol that allows men to construct hegemonic masculinity. In many respects, it is an ideal symbol because it signifies to them that they are good fathers and husbands, even when they are away from their wives and children.

THE AGING MALE BODY

Few respondents younger than 40 said that they needed a gun primarily to defend themselves; however, 5 of the 12 respondents 40 years and older explained that age factored into why they have a concealed handgun license. For example, Jeff, 48, is an affable gun enthusiast. He regularly participates in shooting competitions and carries a firearm with him whenever he can. Like many respondents, Jeff reports that he cannot carry his gun at work. When I asked him how that makes him feel, he replied, “Vulnerable. [Laughs]. As I’m being reminded, like today at my orthopedist, trying to get my knee fixed, I’m not as young as I used to be. And [pause] I don’t, I don’t want to have to dance with somebody if they want to do me violence.” Jeff explains that with a gun he does not have this sense of vulnerability and instead feels relaxed knowing he has “a superior ability to deal with a situation harshly if I have to.” He then tells the following story:

Years ago I was practicing martial arts regularly. And a friend of mine at the office—a good friend of mine—was just always

real aggressive. And, he had his usual fifteen pots of coffee that day, and got vulgar like he always did, and I think . . . he said, “I’ll kick your ass” or something like that. I just turned around and smiled at him. And he said, “Oh man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I was just joking.” I said, “I know. I know you were joking, don’t worry about it” [laughs]. Then we laughed it off. And he was very visibly shaken. I wasn’t gonna do anything to him, but he knew and I knew that I could’ve. No big deal.

Jeff felt proud that his officemate feared him. Though he is older now, and not able to do martial arts, carrying a firearm gives him the same sense of confidence. Jeff’s firearm supplies him with a virility that his aging body has surrendered. He says he feels “calm and relaxed” when he’s carrying a gun and that when he is armed, if someone threatens him, he can just smile back, rather than worrying about how to handle the situation. Without having to show his firearm to others, Jeff’s gun makes him feel at ease, confident he can handle any confrontation.

Another example of how firearms can compensate for lost capacities as bodies age comes from Larry, 54. When we met, Larry arrived on a Harley motorcycle and was wearing a black bandanna and black leather vest. A tall, stout man, he sported a goatee. Throughout the interview Larry projected a very tough, almost threatening persona. When Larry told me he carried a gun long before he had a license to do so legally, I asked him if that was because he had experienced a violent incident or if it was because of a “generalized fear that something could happen.” Larry quickly dismissed the notion that he feared violent crime. Instead, Larry says, he’s realistic: “Most people have this delusion that the world’s this warm happy place, and for most of them, it is. But that’s only because nothing’s happened to them yet.” Similar to the New War ethos Gibson (1994) studied, Larry has constructed a worldview in which there is a perpetual struggle between forces of good and evil. This worldview justifies Larry’s

tough and aggressive, thoroughly masculine, self-presentation. Later in the interview, I asked him if he had ever felt physically threatened when he was not armed. Again, Larry dismissed the idea that he would feel threatened, attributing it to his military training in hand-to-hand combat:

If I've got a stake or a pool cue, I will own your ass. As far as not having anything? When I was a little bit younger and in a little bit better shape, I was comfortable with up to three people. So, no, I didn't particularly feel threatened. If worse gets to worst, I can grab one person, they will scream like a little girl before it's all over with and the other two people will not want to get that close.

In this moment, and in many others during the interview, Larry seemed purposive in communicating to me that being tough and capable of violence are important attributes in a man, attributes he has always had. He is both willing to engage in violence and capable of domination, traits deeply tied to masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2000; Messner, 1992). However, he also admits that growing older has taken a toll on his body. Because he was so quick to dismiss suggestions that he might feel vulnerable or threatened, and because he feels like he can dominate other men without a gun, I asked Larry, "So, then, why do you carry [a gun]?" He responded, "Because you never know."

Kimmel (1996, p. 6) has argued, "Manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us." Though men like Larry might scoff at the notion that he carries a gun because of fear, he is motivated by a desire to prevent his domination at the hands of another man. Getting older has meant that these men have begun to lose access to a fundamental aspect of masculinity: the capacity to physically dominate others (Crawley et al., 2008). Carrying a gun allows them

to recoup the sense of dominance that stems from having an ability to fight back. Unlike subordinate men who are unable or unwilling to fight, “real” men are able and ready to defend themselves, a position that allows them to claim dominance and assert hegemonic masculinity. It is striking how elaborate the fantasies of potential domination can be. Larry describes an imaginary fight scene with a group of three men; Gil wishes he were armed when a group of young men, who did not physically threaten him, walked by him in a parking garage; and Jeff uses a gun to essentially recapture a kung fu warrior fantasy.

Though these men say that their guns are simply tools to prevent victimization, they are also symbols of virility, and, thus carrying one impacts how they see themselves as men. This helps to explain the appeal of concealed firearms for some men: not that they are communicating to others their ability to dominate them, but that they are reassuring themselves that they will “not be a victim.” Gil makes this clear when he says, “You know, none of us want to be victims. [It’s] not that any of us are cowboys or going out there looking for a fight, but nobody wants to be a victim.” Rather than serving as tools of aggression, for these men, having a concealed gun means that they will never have to “scream like a little girl.” The gun functions as a [symbol] of masculinity, giving them calm assurance that they can defend themselves against attack—despite their aging bodies.

DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOODS

When I asked the men I interviewed how they make decisions about whether or not to carry a gun, 11 of them said they carry a gun wherever it is legally allowed and 9 said they make decisions based on where they are going. For example, they will carry a firearm if they go somewhere they have never been, if they are traveling out of town, or if they go to a part of town with a reputation for being dangerous. “Bad parts of town” were always marked as areas with high poverty and often, though not always explicitly, as areas that are

predominantly Black or Latino. When I asked Adam if he regularly carries a gun he said no, because he now lives in a safe city. Adam sets this in contrast to his experiences growing up in Houston, parts of which he describes as a “war zone.” Adam says he always carries a gun when he travels to Houston because, unlike his current city, where the “bad parts of town” are relegated to one side of the city and the “nice” parts of town are on the other, Houston isn’t “zoned.” Adam says his friends who live in Houston carry their firearms daily because “the gas station right down the street is totally different than the gas station one mile down the road. I mean you can have the one that’s right by your house is fine and you’ve got no problems, there’s no people hanging out there drinkin’ beer and acting crazy. But you decide not to go to that one and you just drive down the street and all of a sudden it’s like, you know, Compton down there. Adam invokes “Compton” as a euphemism for race; it is code for a space he sees as predominantly poor, Black, dangerous, and scary. Like many White Americans, Adam links Blackness with criminality (Feagin, 2010). Because of Houston’s uncertain racial landscape, he feels compelled to be armed.

Respondents’ perceptions of danger were often loaded with similarly racialized notions of criminality and vulnerability. For example, Jack, a 46-year-old licensing instructor, blames Hurricane Katrina evacuees from New Orleans for what he perceives to be a steady increase in violent crime in Texas. Jack carries at least one gun on him whenever possible. When I asked him if he has ever had the occasion to use his gun, he told the following story:

I got lost and ended up in a predominantly Black neighborhood. [A man in] an old beat-up truck in front of me was driving around and he stops . . . in the middle of the road where I couldn’t go around him. And he gets out, so I pulled my weapon out and put it right where he couldn’t see it just below the door. Rolled my window down about an inch and he comes back and he asks me some stupid question about

how to get to the freeway and I told him, “Don’t know, can’t help you.” And he’s like, “Thanks, God bless you,” or something, gets in his truck and leaves. I don’t know if that was legitimate or what, but I wasn’t going to take the chance.

Explanations of threat that link perceived criminality to Black men create a “racialized fear of crime” (Davis, 2007) whereby feelings of vulnerability are heightened when Whites make contact with the racial Other. Jack is able to use his firearm to quell this sense of vulnerability, and to protect himself should the need arise.

Another example comes from Mike, 36. We met at a café in a predominantly White, upper-middle-class part of town. Despite claims that he carries wherever he can, Mike was not carrying a firearm when we met; he had left it in his truck. As we talked he said, “I don’t feel strange sitting here and not having it. I think if I did have it, it would probably make me a little bit more aware of my surroundings.” I was taken aback by this comment, having assumed that the power a firearm bestows would allow a person to relax. Mike explains:

When I have it with me, I’m paying a lot more attention to people . . . somebody walks in, looks like they’re lookin’ for trouble. Somebody that doesn’t fit. You know, not to play the, uh, race card or anything, but there aren’t too many Black people around here. So if you . . . walk into a place and you don’t really fit in. Like if I went over to [a predominantly Black part of town] and walked into Martin Luther King, Jr., church on Sunday morning, I’m betting I’d be one of the few white guys. And people would probably look at me and go, well what’s this white guy doing here?

Mike's explanation of how race factors into the way he imagines risk is cloaked in discourses of "color blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Equating the experience of a Black man being seen as a potential criminal to Mike's being seen as oddly out of place in a church minimizes racial inequality. Yet race plays a profound role in how Mike imagines risk. In this predominantly White space, Mike feels safe enough to not bother bringing his gun in; however, he suggests this safety could be disrupted if a Black man were to come into the café.

Three of the four men in my sample who identified as Hispanic/Latino did not differ dramatically from the rest of the sample in how they talked about the link between race and crime. For instance, Joseph, a 45-year-old gun license holder, who identifies as White on forms but says that his father is Hispanic, explained that he used his "Hispanic appearance" to intimidate others when he lived in a high-crime neighborhood that was predominantly Black and Latino. He said that looking "pure white" would have made him a target. The only person in the sample who resisted racist constructions of threat was George, a 44-year-old licensing instructor who is Mexican American and lives in a predominantly Hispanic city along the Texas–Mexico border. He says that he grew up with guys who are now involved in the drug trade and that he tries to not have a "black and white" view of who is a threat. George says, "Some of the nicest guys I know . . . have tattoos from [head to toe]. Some of the meanest guys I know are the stereotypical middle-aged . . . white male professionals [who are] hot-headed, hot-tempered, on edge, on the defense all the time." Of the 20 men I interviewed, George was the only one who did not rely on a racialized fear of crime. It is significant that George was the only person interviewed who was reared and currently lives in a region that is not predominantly White/Anglo. It seems his perceptions of criminality were not developed according to the White racial frame (Feagin, 2010).

Connell (1995, p. 80) writes that "in a white supremacist context, Black masculinities play symbolic roles for white gender

construction.” In this case, many of the men I interviewed identified Black men and areas of town marked as poor and predominantly Black or Latino as threatening. Indeed, race is conflated with social class, such that Mike sees it as impossible that a Black man would have a legitimate reason to enter a café in a wealthy part of town.

It is significant that in the previous descriptions of fear-inducing events none of the respondents describe being physically confronted or overtly threatened by the Black men they encounter. Instead, they report that simply coming into contact with Black men induces a desire to be armed. The men I interviewed project violence, aggression, and criminal intent onto the Black men they encounter. These characterizations are a form of “gendered racism” that are used both to “validate inequality [and] also to contrast Black masculinity with White masculinity as a hegemonic ideal” (Harvey-Wingfield, 2007, p. 198). The men I interviewed construct their sense of masculinity in contradistinction to what Black masculinity represents to them: They presume the men they see are criminals, thus they are armed in defense. They imagine the men they see will be violent; thus they are prepared to respond. Whiteness is critical to these dynamics not because these men see it as an evident marker of status, but because (to them) Whiteness signifies nothing at all.

DISCUSSION

Concealed handguns, by definition, are not visible to others and the vast majority of license holders will never fire their guns in public. Despite this, concealed handguns prove profoundly meaningful in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. For some of the men I interviewed, carrying a concealed gun in public allows them to position themselves as defenders of their families, and as embodiments of the American virtues of self-reliance, strength, and courage (Connell, 1995; Melzer, 2009; O’Neill, 2007). Having a license is critical to how this operates because only people without a criminal record can obtain one, and only with a license can someone

carry a gun legally. Being law-abiding is the lynchpin that distinguishes “good guys” from “bad guys” (Gibson, 1994).

Ironically, although men say they need a gun to defend their families, they are often away from their wives and children and thus would be unable to carry out their role of the defender should the need arise. Second, men who say it’s their job to defend their families because they are physically stronger than their wives are among the same people who say that guns are needed for self-defense because as “equalizers” they reduce whatever physical differences might exist between a perpetrator of violent crime and themselves. Third, these men say that they wish their wives would be armed (a claim that is not surprising given that the threat of ever-present victimization is precisely what justifies the need for a concealed handgun license). These contradictions suggest that concealed handguns function as props for doing masculinity by asserting the “father/husband as protector.” The consequence is that it heightens the extent to which White women are presumed to be vulnerable, in need of protection by the men in their lives (Hollander, 2001). Having a concealed handgun license is a material practice that sustains their belief in essential gender differences by enabling men to fantasize about being the defenders of their families.

The men I interviewed also have elaborate fantasies of potential violence at the hands of other men. As they age, some begin to see themselves as less capable of self-defense. Because the body’s capacity for aggression and violence is central to what it means to be masculine (Crawley et al., 2008), some older men feel that their masculinity is diminished. According to Kimmel (2010, p. 120), this gets to the root of men’s fear, a fear that others might “unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men.” With a concealed handgun, the capacity for aggression and domination is restored. As Jeff explained, this can boost a man’s sense of confidence, as he is able to regain access to the muscular version of masculinity and the

capacity to dominate other, weaker men that is celebrated in American culture (Gibson, 1994; Jeffords, 1994).

No figure makes these men feel more physically vulnerable than the specter of the Black criminal (see also Doude and Rodriguez and Ray and Bailey's essays in this volume). They ascribe a violent masculinity to men of color and construct a sense of self in contradistinction. Because they assume that the Black men they encounter are potentially armed and dangerous, they want to carry a concealed handgun. Having a gun allows them to maintain a confidence that they are capable of responding to any threat, like Adam at the gas station: Should he get out of his car or drive off? Will he stand up to the threat or shirk from it?

It has been established that gang members—and other marginal men—can brandish and shoot guns to assert control and dominance over other men (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007). The men I interviewed use guns in a similar way but with profoundly different implications. When gang members use guns, they may be empowered in that instance by their masculine performance of domination, but it is also a sign of their marginalization. Indeed, the men Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) interviewed were all incarcerated. In contrast, the men I interviewed are among the most privileged in society and already have access to culturally celebrated versions of masculinity: Most of them are White and middle- or upper-middle class, and all of them are heterosexual. Their state-issued license to carry a concealed handgun, a license that is expensive and available only to those who can afford it and who are not legally restricted, gives them an added level of privilege: It gives them a symbol around which they construct both an empowered and culturally celebrated masculinity.

This essay illustrates how dynamics between masculinities of privilege and marginalization lead to qualitatively different meanings for the same object. Criminals use guns to do masculinity (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007), and so do law-abiding men. Unlike boys who shoot their classmates in a desperate attempt

to be seen as “manly” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), or gang members, for whom masculine bravado is a valuable currency (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007), the men I interviewed gain access to aspects of masculinity that are celebrated at the regional level of culture by media and the gun lobby (Connell, 1995; Gibson, 1994; Jeffords, 1994; Melzer, 2009; O’Neill, 2007). That these men are able to tap into these discourses—to cast themselves in the light of versions of masculinity celebrated by dominant culture—reveals the extent to which they are privileged. By contrast, Black and Latino men are assigned masculine traits of dominance, aggression, and violence, but this happens in a cultural context in which their skin color makes them suspect and they are assumed to be criminals (Collins, 2006). As has become all too clear in recent years, this can have deadly consequences for men of color; in the case of Philando Castile and E. J. Bradford, this is even true for those who are legally armed. It seems the “good guy with a gun” is a figure that only White men can safely inhabit.

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NOTE

1. It is impossible to determine the exact number of defensive gun uses (DGUs) that occur in a given year, and estimates vary from 600,000 to 2.5 million (Cook & Ludwig, 1998). While Kleck and Gertz (1995, p. 180) argue that there is “little legitimate scholarly reason to doubt that defensive gun use is very common in the U.S.,” many scholars provide evidence that does just that. For example, Cook

and Ludwig (1998) argue that reported incidents of DGUs are wracked with methodological problems that lead to highly inflated numbers. McDowall et al. (2000) argue that reported DGUs often involve scenarios where the defender had no way of knowing the motives of their alleged offenders and so could not reasonably argue that their gun stopped a criminal act. Though the overall number is debated, what is known is that the vast majority of DGUs happen at home, while DGUs in public, the type that concealed handgun licences (CHLs) are intended for, are rare (Cook & Ludwig, 1998).

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Why might some men make claims that they are biologically better suited than women to be the “family defender”? How does using a gun undermine this claim? What do you think this paradox reveals about gender? How might this differ by race?
2. How do ideas about physical strength shape perceptions of vulnerability among the men interviewed in this article? How does it connect to race, age, physical ability, body size, etc.?
3. How did the men interviewed in this article conflate Blackness and crime? How does this connect to the social construction of

the “good guy,” and what is the role of Whiteness in this dynamic? Why is this a potentially deadly construct for Black men and boys?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. What is your own background with guns and gun ownership? Do you find guns empowering? If so, why? If not, why not? How might your experiences with guns shape your reactions to the ideas shared in this article?
2. The social construction of the “good guy” is a common theme in popular culture. Consider a movie in which the hero of the story battles a “bad guy.” What narrative conventions are used to construct a moral framework that allows us to root for the “good guy”? What cultural conventions exist that recruit us into seeing certain groups of people as “good guys” and others as “bad guys”? How is this tied to race, class, and/or gender?
3. What kinds of data are needed to understand how gun violence exacerbates inequality? (Explore data on gun violence at gunviolencearchive.org.)

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PART III INSTITUTIONS, POLICIES, AND LEGACIES OF OPPRESSION : FAMILY

ESSAY 14 “BLACK PEOPLE HAVE MONEY NOW, SO WHY ARE THEY STILL COMPLAINING?” : EXPLORING THE FRAGILITY OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS FAMILY

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During the 2016–2017 NFL season, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick made headlines by kneeling during the national anthem. This act of protest was done as a way of shedding light on the murders of Black boys, girls, men, and women at the hands of law enforcement and the subsequent injustices (e.g., failures to indict, the acquittals of officers, etc.) surrounding their court cases. Kaepernick’s act of resistance led to other athletes choosing to “take a knee” during the anthem, many of them Black athletes. People of various races, genders, and class backgrounds voiced their opinions on the matter as onlookers argued whether kneeling/protesting during the anthem was a sign of disrespect to the military. While most people tweeted, posted, and talked about the issue of race and racism in sports and in the United States, presidential nominee Donald Trump suggested in a tweet that these athletes had no right to protest given their elevated class status:

If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. (@realdonaldtrump)

Although Trump appeared to be making a statement about social class, inflected in that statement were ideas about race as many of the athletes protesting were from the NFL, NBA, and WNBA—leagues where the majority of the athletes are Black. The tweet implied that a person of color who is economically advantaged should not be allowed to engage in a peaceful protest and should remain silent amid injustice. Notably, he is not the only person to hold similar views. In 2017, LeBron James’s 21-million-

dollar LA home was damaged when someone spray-painted the N-word on his property. James responded to the incident saying that it is tough being Black in the United States, to which Fox Sports One broadcaster Jason Whitlock (a Black man) responded:

I get when I was a young person people called me a bad name—the n-word, whatever—it hurt my feelings. But did it stop me from rising? Hell no! Did it stop LeBron James? And LeBron’s comment about “no matter how rich you are, no matter how famous you are, it’s tough being Black in America.” That is a lie. It’s not tough being Oprah Winfrey. It’s not tough being LeBron James. It’s not tough being Jason Whitlock. (Ruiz, 2017)

Whitlock’s argument is a more blatant version of Trump’s racism. He sees racism as a problem only for poor people of color, where those with more money have no right or reason to complain. Whitlock followed up his previous statement with the following retort: “Racism is an issue in America but is primarily an issue for the poor. It’s not LeBron James’ issue . . . He has removed himself from the damages and the ravages of real racism” (Lynn, 2017).

The notion of class mitigating the effects of race and racism on people of color is not limited to upper-class athletes. College professors have also been excoriated for theorizing the structural and individual oppressive methods that victimize people of color. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor of law at Columbia University, coined the phrase *intersectionality*, as a framework to address the ways multiple social identities intersect to form unique modes of oppression toward minority groups. Ben Shapiro, conservative editor in chief at the *Daily Wire*, responded to this widely accepted theory by lambasting Crenshaw. He accused her of being tucked away in an ivory tower and suggested that “America is the most open, least racist nation, on the planet. That professor Crenshaw is free to spin her nonsensical racist theories and get paid well for it should offer adequate proof of that” (PragerU, 2018, 3:06). In a video that, as of November 2020, had reached 3.8 million views, Shapiro, similar to Trump, uses the social class of some people of color to dispel the systemic oppression ingrained in U.S. culture, policies, and actions (PragerU, 2018). In these previous examples, we see the ways critics use the perceived financial comfortability

of upwardly mobile Black people to devalue and ultimately silence their calls for racial equality and social justice. This demonstrates the inability for some people to recognize the inextricable link between race and class that affects even middle-class Black people, whose lives still differ quite dramatically from middle-class Whites. Essentially, the Black middle class remain experientially connected to poor and working-class Black folks in a variety of ways, and unlike their White counterparts, they are frequently compelled and called upon to use their class privilege to address continuing oppression toward all Black people. In these ways, race continues to play a role in the lives of upwardly mobile Black people despite assertions to the contrary.

“IF YOU BLACK, YOU POOR”

In 2017, civil rights icon and Atlanta congressman John Lewis, a vocal critic of President-elect Donald Trump, stated that he would not attend Trump’s presidential inauguration. In response to this statement, Trump accused Lewis of ignoring his duties as a congressman and encouraged him to focus on his predominately Black congressional district, which he claimed was in “horrible shape,” and “crime infested” (Bluestein, 2017). Trump’s exaggerated assertions about Lewis and his district propagated a falsehood to which many people hold fast. Although the poverty and unemployment rates in Lewis’s area are higher than the national average, the percentages of people with high school and college degrees are also higher than the national average. Since 1992, shortly after constituents voted the now-late John Lewis to Congress, the crime rate in his district has been on a steady decline (Qiu, 2017). Unfortunately, the lack of balance between stories of Black poverty, Black economic advancement, and the gray areas in between leave many people to assume, like Trump, that most Black communities are plagued with crime, poverty, and social disorganization.

That is, in the minds of many Americans, Blackness is synonymous with poverty, disenfranchisement, and economic struggle. This perception can be traced back to the days of Jim Crow and, some people may argue, slavery. While the Black poverty rate has been on a decline for almost a century, falling from 87% in 1940 to 47% by 1960, the issue of racialized poverty (Sowell, 2014) led civic leaders and politicians to call for economic reform in the 1960s. During this decade, 40% of African Americans lived in

poverty amid an overall U.S. poverty rate of 19%, thus making Black people almost one third of America's poor population (DeSilver, 2014). However, the political gains of the civil rights movement resulted in increasing opportunities for middle-class Black people (Wilson, 1978) in the following decades. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954), Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), Fair Housing Act (1968), and subsequent affirmative action policies helped to end overt racial discrimination in housing, employment, and education, thus resulting in socioeconomic mobility for many Black people. Some middle-class Black people were able to purchase homes and live in predominately White neighborhoods with appreciating land value, while others seized the opportunity for their children to attend predominately White and Ivy League colleges. The access to land, jobs, political positions, and elite education helped to create and secure a generational Black middle class (Lacy, 2004; Landry, 1987; Pattillo, 1999).

Hollywood began to reflect this shift. Television shows and movies such as *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, *Claudine*, and the blaxploitation genre of the 1970s explored the lives of economically disadvantaged Black people, entertaining White audiences by giving them a peek into the audacious, edgy, and sometimes comical life of the Black poor. However, entertainment in the 1980s and 1990s brought to light a higher social class of African Americans that saw their stories displayed in Hollywood through shows and movies like *The Jeffersons*, Spike Lee's *School Daze*, *The Cosby Show*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which all showed that Blackness was not synonymous with poverty and disadvantage.

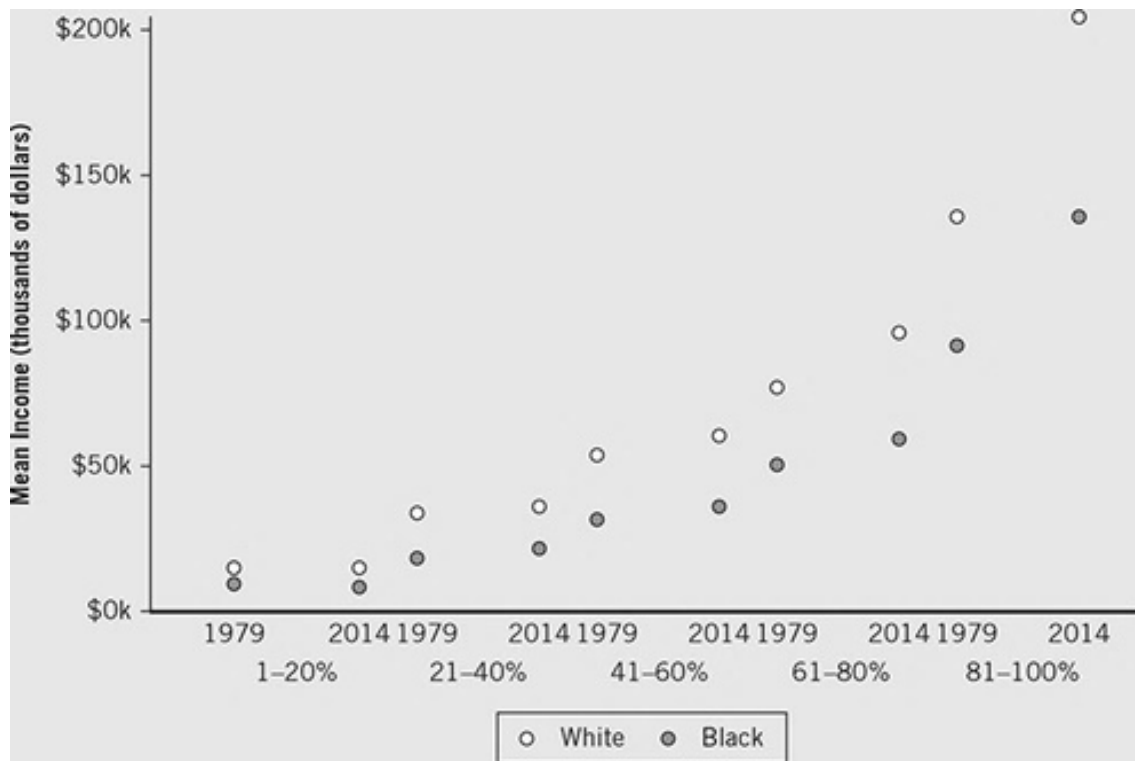
In addition to various forms of entertainment, much of the previous academic scholarship on African Americans explored the poor, with most of the attention focused on the negative aspects of Black "ghetto" communities (Alexander, 2010; Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1987). This overemphasis in poverty research also helped to perpetuate a false illusion about many Black communities. Books such as *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), *Code of the Street* (1999), and *Dark Ghetto* (2016) highlight the sinister and often grim portions of Black life. Scholars have focused so much attention on the burden of Blackness, without entertaining the possibility that there is something enjoyable about being Black and living around Black people, across class location (Lacy, 2007, p. 17). And, while approximately 18.8% of Black people in the United States live in poverty

(Creamer, 2020), the other approximately 80% are considered working, middle, or upper class. Yet, research and entertainment highlighting African Americans seem to focus disproportionately on the disadvantaged, and the stories of the Black middle class go largely ignored (Pattillo, 1999). However, in the past few decades, scholars such as Cose (1993), Brown (2013), Lacy (2007), and Harris (2013) have given voice to the triumphs, tragedies, and unique perspectives of middle-class Black people.

MIDDLE CLASS IS NOT THE SAME FOR EVERYBODY

As previously mentioned, since the political and social victories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the population of the Black middle and upper-middle classes have doubled and quadrupled, respectively (Marchese, 2020; Newsome, 2018). Access to jobs in governments and universities have led to the formation of a Black political class in major cities such as Atlanta, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. (Newsome, 2018). This level of class advancement for people of color suggests that the United States is making honest attempts at true democracy and racial equality. However, a closer look at middle-class trends and experiences reveals deeper levels of complexity. Mary Pattillo (1999), professor of sociology at Northwestern University, claims the upward strides of many African Americans into the middle class have given the illusion that race cannot be the barrier some make it out to be. The reality, however, is that “even the Black and white middle classes remain separate and unequal” (p. 2).

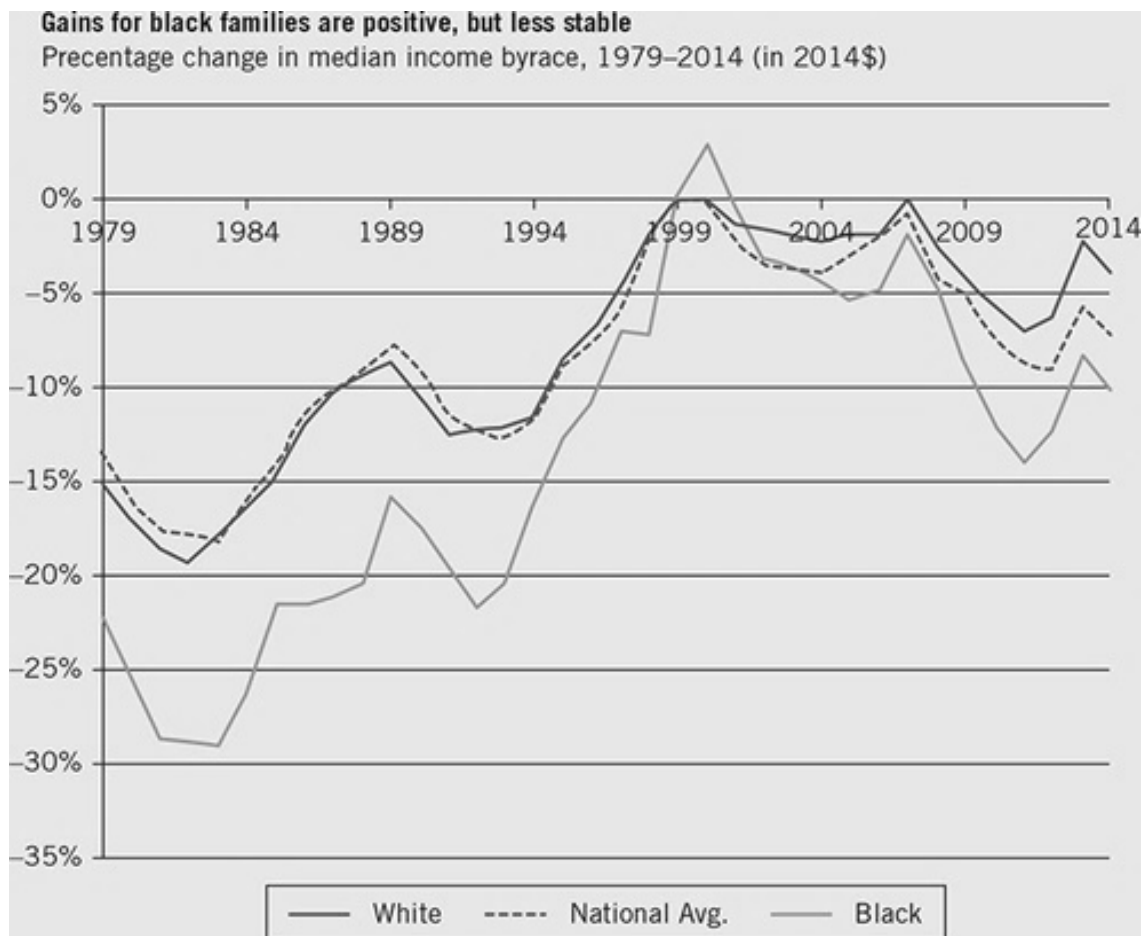
A recent Pew Research Center report shows that although the average income of Black Americans has seen growth since 1979, in comparison to their White counterparts, the increase nonetheless shows a persistent and strong racial divide. In 2014, the average income for middle-class African Americans in the top quintile was roughly \$140,000, a steep increase from \$95,000 35 years earlier. However, when we examine across racial groups, we see that the mean income for the top Black quintile in 2014 is virtually the same as the mean income of a middle-class White person in 1979. In other words, the top average middle-class Black earner lags 35 years behind the top middle-class White earner. Within the same tier, the top White middle-class earner makes, on average, \$70,000 more than the top Black middle-class earner (Brown, 2016).



Description

Figure 14.1 Mean Income by Race and Income Quintile, 1979 to 2014

The median income for U.S. citizens saw its peak around the end of the 20th century. Since the 2008 recession, the change in median income has seen a stark decrease for both Black and White families. Even here, we can see a disparity, however, with Black families falling by 14%, while White families' lowest point only reaches approximately 7%. In 2014, the decrease rose to 10% among Black people, making their change in median income equivalent to a White family in 1994 (Brown, 2016).



Description

Figure 14.2 Gains for Black Families Are Positive but Less Stable

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

These data show that while Black people have seen economic gains in the past 35 years, the increase is still far greater among White Americans in the same class group, meaning that class doesn't protect Black people from the effects of racism. And although class progress is real across racial groups, securing and retaining middle-class status is much more difficult for Black Americans than it is for White Americans. Indeed, the vulnerability of the Black middle class leaves them much more susceptible to downward mobility during economic downturns such as the 2008 Great Recession and

less likely to bounce back to their previous class status. According to the data presented in [Figure 14.2](#), the Recession set White families back 5 years, whereas the same downturn set Black families back almost 20 years. This research supports Kalil and Wightman's (2011) study, which shows that middle-class Black people's ability to exist intergenerationally may be highly dependent on their ability to avoid economic shocks such as parental job loss or, in this case, nationwide economic downturns.

Significantly, income is only one measure of social class; wealth and the ability to transfer financial resources to one's progeny play a key role in facilitating middle-class status across generations (Collins, 1998; Conley, 2010). Included in wealth are income, property, stock market investments, and other assets. Evidence shows that the average income for both Black and White Americans has increased since 1979. However, Long and Van Dam (2020) report, "in the decades since [1968], white wealth has soared while Black wealth has stagnated." In other words, the wealth gap among middle-class Black and White families since the 1960s has not decreased but, in fact, has gotten worse. According to research from the Historical Survey of Consumer Finances, in 1968, a typical middle-class Black household maintained \$6,674 in wealth, while the typical middle-class White household boasted \$70,786 in wealth, resulting in a racial wealth gap of \$64,112. Forty-eight years later, in 2016, this racial wealth gap has seen a 113.19% increase with the average middle-class Black household maintaining \$13,024 in wealth in comparison to the typical White median household maintaining \$149,703 (Long & Van Dam, 2020). Although income has increased for Black people, wealth is generally passed down from parent to child and is compounded with every generation. Due to centuries of racist policies, redlining, and economic oppression, many Black people have only recently been able to transfer wealth to their children and grandchildren. By contrast, many White families have had this option for centuries. Addressing the issue of wealth inequality across racial groups is important because it shows a lucid racial stratification model that exists in the United States and connects our historical realities of race to present-day conditions (Shapiro, 2006).

One of the more common ways in which wealth is obtained and maintained in American society is through the procuring of homes and property. Shapiro (2006) argues that closing the racial wealth gap through homeownership should be a main policy strategy on the country's civil

rights agenda. Unfortunately, property value based on race and housing segregation have played key roles in deferring mobility for the Black middle class in comparison to the White middle class. For decades, middle-class White people have had state-sponsored support that provides legal and financial assistance for homebuyers. Those same policies were not afforded to middle-class Blacks. Coupled with years of *redlining* (i.e., “selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured . . . [forbid] the sale of the property to anyone other than whites” [Coates, 2014]), Black people in particular were pushed out of appreciating homes and communities. The Fair Housing Act officially outlawed this pattern in 1968, but by then millions of dollars had already been funneled into segregated White neighborhoods. Research provides evidence that banks continued the practice after the U.S. government deemed it illegal (Coates, 2014). Coates (2014) argues that redlining destroyed investment opportunities in Black areas of the city. Even after the years of legal redlining, more modern forms of residential racism and segregation functioned on the individual level. Sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) write in *American Apartheid* that overt racism by realtors had negative effects on the residential patterns of Black people. The gatekeepers between Black homebuyers and White neighborhoods often refused to show available spaces to Black people in order to ensure that certain neighborhoods remained all/or majority White; this practice still continues. These kinds of residential racism keep many Black people from integrating White neighborhoods and gaining access to the capital that can become the foundation for generational wealth. In other words, even if they had the economic means, racist policies and practices have forced, and continue to force, many working- and middle-class Black people to live in mostly Black areas that will eventually be underfunded, thus resulting in places of concentrated poverty, concentrated crime, and poor education (Wilson, 1987; see also Massey et al., 1994; Pattillo, 1999). In addition, realtors and landlords will refuse to offer housing to Black people, which can lead to middle-class Black people being reseggregated into poor/working-class areas. This history and these data raise questions about just how well off more privileged Black Americans are and whether or not they have the right to complain about racism and social injustice. Given this information, the answer is unequivocally yes. We would also arrive at the same answer when considering the shared lived experiences of middle-class and low-income Blacks.

The Connection Between the Black Middle Class and the Black Underclass

In 2012, a 17-year-old Black boy from Miami, Florida, traveled to Sanford, Florida, to spend some time with his father. While watching the NBA All-Star game with his father and his fiancée, he decided to walk to the corner store to purchase some Skittles candy and iced tea. The community was a racially segregated, middle-class gated community. On his way back from the store, a volunteer neighborhood watchman, later identified as being White Hispanic, confronted the young boy and questioned him about his whereabouts. Physical contact ensued and Trayvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman.

In 2009, renowned Harvard professor of African American studies, Henry Louis Gates, returned home from China where he was conducting research on the famous classical cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. He reached his door only to find that that it was jammed shut. Both Gates and his driver successfully forced the door open. Amidst the situation, a White woman called the police around 12:45 p.m. and reported seeing two Black men on the porch of the home. Cambridge police Sergeant Crowley arrived and requested Dr. Gates step outside. Gates refused and, according to his lawyer, he explained to the sergeant that he lived in the home he was standing in. He later provided the officer his Massachusetts driver's license and Harvard identification card. Crowley reported that Dr. Gates followed him outside and yelled at him after the officer said he was being disorderly. An arrest ensued and Gates was forced to wait at police headquarters before being released on his recognizance (Goodnough, 2009). This issue sparked a nationwide conversation about race as many people, including the then president of the United States, Barack Obama, commented on the long and tense history of Black people being victims of unequal treatment by law enforcement.

In 2013, billionaire and media icon Oprah Winfrey visited Switzerland to attend her friend Tina Turner's wedding and decided to go shopping. While there, she was interested in buying a \$38,000 Tom Ford bag. The store clerk, not knowing who she was, told Oprah that the bag was too expensive for her. Oprah eventually left the store without buying the bag. Once this story was released, the larger public made claims that Oprah was a victim of the racist microaggression, called "shopping while Black."

What these stories have in common is how race remains an important part of Black life, regardless of additional social identities like income and education. Examining the intersections between race and class allows us to draw out the nuanced complexities that exist when discussing what it means to be Black in the United States (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Harris, 2013; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999). Although Martin, Gates, and Winfrey occupy various levels of Black economic privilege, their similar racial characteristic displays the common experience that Black people face regardless of class differences. The concept of linked fate has been used in research to explain cross-class connections within the Black community (Dawson, 1994). It describes the assertion that what happens to people on an individual level is inextricably tied to the group experience (Simien, 2005). In other words, Black people across class groups can have similar racial experiences, encouraging them to navigate life with the mindset that any issue affecting one group within the race can affect the whole race. Although Martin, Gates, James, Kaepernick, and Winfrey all occupy different sections within the Black middle/upper classes, their common racial experiences and linked fate make their stories a necessary part of this discussion. The goal of this intersectional analysis is to understand how these varying social identities work together to explain new and unique experiences (Chow, 2016). Although, middle-class and working-class Black people have experienced racism in similar ways, with both groups reporting negative interactions with the police and discrimination in the workplace (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kelley, 1993), financial privilege allows middle- and upper-class Black people to combat racism in ways that are unavailable to working-class and poor Black people. Some of these ways include lawsuits and use of the media (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Both Gates and Winfrey were able to utilize their position, power, and influence with the media to shed light on their individual racialized encounters. Yet, poor and working-class victims of racism often lack the resources to respond in like manner (Grant, 2018).

In her classic sociological text, *Black Picket Fences*, Mary Pattillo provides a detailed examination of “Groveland,” a Black middle-class area in Chicago, and the social and spatial realities of this demographic. What Pattillo (1999) demonstrates is that through neighborhood ties, friendship, and family connections, the Black middle class are geographically and ideologically linked to the Black poor in ways that are not true for middle-class Whites (see also Anderson, 1999; Grant, 2018). Pattillo (1999)

suggests high poverty rates in predominantly Black neighborhoods continually push affluent Black people away from these areas, but the mechanisms of residential segregation continue to consign them back to these areas or areas close by. Underfunded schools, poor housing, and poor social services are shared by both advantaged and disadvantaged Black people (Pattillo, 1999) in ways that do not match the patterns we see for White middle-class families. Middle-class Black people are not far enough from poor neighborhoods to avoid these structural barriers, which makes the Black middle-class experience markedly different from the White middle-class experience (Grant, 2018; Pattillo, 1999). Policies that hurt the Black poor can negatively affect the Black middle class as a result of their common neighborhood effects and linked fate. Therefore, legislation that continues affirmative action, comparable wages, and residential equality is necessary to cement the gains made by the Black middle class since the civil rights movement (Pattillo, 1999). Yet many, including policymakers, don't invest in policies they think only support the poor and don't understand (or don't care about) how much middle-class Black people are also affected by faulty policymaking. In other words, race continues to be a factor in the lives of upwardly mobile Blacks. This assertion is made even clearer when examining the various strategies middle-class Black people must invoke in everyday interactions.

The Black Middle-Class Artillery

Over decades, scholars have discussed the myriad strategies middle-class Black people use to negotiate the social world (Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Harris, 2013; Pattillo, 2007). Sociologist Karyn Lacy's (2007) book *Blue Chip Black* explores the corpus of strategies both upper and lower middle-class Black people use in the context of social interactions and how they make sense of those interactions (i.e., "the Black middle-class toolkit"). Lacy (2004) writes, "The Black middle-class toolkit is composed of public identities, status-based identities, racial and class-based identities, and suburban identities. . . . [These identities are employed] to establish their position in American society relative to white strangers, their white middle-class neighbors, lower-class Blacks and one another" (p. 14).

While Lacy's concept of the Black middle-class toolkit focuses on identity negotiation practices, making meaning of cross-racial and cross-class interactions, I call for the concept of the *Black middle-class artillery*, which

can be used to explore the weaponry this group uses to fight racism and class inequality. These weapons include finances, networks, the law (Feagin & Sikes, 1994), and social media. For example, in a 2018 interview, basketball stars LeBron James and Kevin Durant were discussing the current state of politics. Using their First Amendment right to free speech, they castigated then president Donald Trump for the many public visceral and vindictive statements and actions he had made in the past few years. Laura Ingraham, a Fox News journalist, began to diminish the men's athletic skills by saying they were paid 100 million dollars a year to "bounce a ball." She concluded that LeBron James should stay out of the political discourse and "shut up and dribble" (Sullivan, 2018). Many people, including Durant, perceived her remarks as racist (Folley, 2020), suggesting that Black men who were athletic and rich were not intelligent enough to give commentary on the state of the country. This notion supports research that demonstrates "that Black male student-athletes are often stereotyped as dumb jocks" (Edwards, 1984; Hughes et al., 2007; Oseguera, 2010). While many people responded verbally and through social media to express their disdain for Ingraham's comments, James decided to go into his Black middle-class artillery and use his finances and networks to produce the three-part documentary series, *Shut Up and Dribble* (2018), which explores the ways athletes have used their talents and skills to make a positive impact on culture and society. In that same year, he opened the "I Promise" school, which is supported by his foundation and was established to help "at-risk" children and families have access to equal education and opportunities for mobility through a STEM-based curriculum and a Family Resource Center that helps provide basic needs for children and families in the school.

As a millionaire, James is not part of the rank-and-file Black middle class. However, like James, wealthier Black people still wield social, political, and economic power that they can deploy in order to address racism and class inequality in the United States. For instance, shortly after Dr. Gates was arrested, he was released largely because of his networks (i.e., social capital) as a world-renowned Harvard professor. The next day, President Obama criticized the Boston Police Department for acting "stupidly" (Goodnough, 2009). Two days after that, Dr. Gates and the arresting officer were invited to the White House for what would become known as the "Beer Summit," where they discussed the long-standing issue of race and law enforcement. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Gates, unlike LeBron, used large amounts of money to address this systemic problem,

his connections and networks from his social class and education status allowed his negative encounter with the police to reach the ears of the president and prompted him into action (however symbolic it might have been).

Sociologists Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes's (1994) book *Living With Racism* describes how some middle-class Black people use the legal system as part of their artillery. In the following quote, a respondent offers this story of mistreatment in the workplace:

I got to a certain level, which is to say a middle-management level of the corporation. I was in line for a *major* increase in position, and that position was given to a white male who was brought from outside the area, outside the area of expertise of the project. . . . He had lesser education, he had lesser experience, so it would seem fit to use the old boy network to bring him into it and to see evidence that that probably happens to many people. And I believe the reaction on the part of a lot of other Blacks is to either resign themselves to putting up with it, and a large number of others end up simply quitting and going elsewhere, and all the effort that they've put into getting where they've gotten at that point in time goes down the drain. . . . Now in my particular case, I am currently unemployed; you know, I'm pursuing a lawsuit. (p. 292)

While using the legal system to combat discrimination can be a useful strategy for some middle-class Black Americans, this process can have negative repercussions both personally and professionally for others. Depending on the industry, individuals who decide to take such actions can be isolated and/or fired from their current position. Yet, the legacy of the civil rights movement's strategy of legalism has caused many Black people to seek fair play using the courtroom. Middle-class Black people have the financial resources, connections, and education to utilize this tool as a way to fight discrimination. In 2017, a Black police officer filed a suit against the Detroit Police Department claiming that it maintained a "racially hostile work environment" (Craig, 2018). In January 2020, ABC News reported two African American women executives at McDonald's Corporation sued the fast-food chain for discrimination (Eubanks, 2020). These examples show

that the use of the courts by middle-class Black people continue to function as a way of fighting injustice in the United States.

The onset of social media and smartphones has allowed Black folks another avenue of both legal and social recourse when evidence of discriminatory behavior is recorded. For many Black Americans, showing footage of mistreatment on their social media pages with information about the perpetrator allows for mass protest, boycotts, and successful complaints. When these incidents are shared by individuals with a large following, racists caught on camera have lost jobs and opportunities because of social media. For instance, Kaylan Colbert, a Black attorney, and her husband made dinner reservations at a local Atlanta restaurant. When they arrived, they were refused service because the husband was wearing sneakers. Another patron at the bar was wearing sneakers, making a strong case that the issue was less about fashion and more about race. An argument ensued between the husband and Farshid Arshid, the employee at the restaurant, which was caught on video (McKibben, 2020). It was viewed 90,000 times on Instagram and caught the eyes of well-known attorney Benjamin Crump and celebrity rapper T.I., who suggested boycotting the restaurant. Subsequently, Farshid admitted that they handled the situation poorly and showed remorse for his behavior. It is likely that without the combination of the victims' class status, video, social media following, and influential Black people like Crump and T.I., this incident would have easily been swept under the rug with no recompense.

CONCLUSION

Since the year of Colin Kaepernick's public protest, he has not been signed to an NFL team and has not played in a professional game. However, his name, social class, and celebrity status have allowed him to donate a million dollars to organizations working in oppressed communities, to start a "Know Your Rights Camp," and to continue the legacies of Muhammad Ali, Craig Hodges, and other sports figures who have merged athletics and activism despite great scrutiny. Thus, while monied and propertied Black people have the financial, social, and cultural means to fight racism and injustice, they still share some of the same struggles around racism as their poorer counterparts, regardless of their elevated social class. In comparison to middle-class Whites, they are more economically vulnerable

and less likely to obtain and maintain wealth for themselves and their children. Therefore, it is important that we dispel the myth that Black people with money have the same advantages as White people and should ignore racial and economic injustice. Their class position gives them the economic and social means to help rectify injustice, but systemic changes in the racial wealth gap, homeownership, law enforcement interaction, and education systems are necessary to strengthen their existence and role in U.S. society.

Jonathan Grant is an assistant professor of sociology and Africana studies at University of North Florida. He has a B.A. in theology, an M.A. in African American studies, and a Ph.D. in sociology. He is also the director of Ah-Shay Institute LLC, a diversity, equity and inclusion organization. He has spent years teaching classes on social inequality, social theory, race, place, Atlanta studies, research methods, and social stratification Black studies. He has published on issues related to race, social class, and educational disparities in the South. He has forthcoming research in the *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, and the *African American Activism and Political Engagement: An Encyclopedia of Empowerment*. Currently, he is working on his first book on race and class in Atlanta, which is under contract with Temple University Press.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How does class shape the way you interact with people inside and outside of your racial group?
2. What preconceived ideas did you have about economically advantaged Black people prior to reading this essay? Did this essay change your understanding of the Black middle class? Why or why not?
3. What are some policies that can be used to help minimize the racial wealth gap?
4. Reports suggests that the U.S. middle class is shrinking across the country. What implications might that have for people of color?
5. It is a popular notion that the Republican Party is less likely to raise taxes on the upper middle class. How would an increasing Black middle class influence their role in the Republican Party? What are some other political implications for increasing the U.S. middle class across racial groups?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Given the author's discussion of the impact of racial segregation on wealth generation, review the findings of this project by *Newsday*. What are the mechanisms they used to detect discrimination? What were the outcomes? Could you replicate this same approach in your neighborhood or community?

<https://projects.newsday.com/long-island/real-estate-agents-investigation/>

2. Access the James documentary, *Shut Up and Dribble*. Considering the issues raised in this essay, which arguments in the film resonated with you or didn't and why?

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Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Approximate data from the graph are as follows.

Income quintile in percentage	Race	Mean income, in thousands of dollars, in 1979	Mean income, in thousands of dollars, in 2014
1 to 20	White	14	14
	Black	13	12
21 to 40	White	38	38
	Black	15	16
41 to 60	White	55	58
	Black	26	28
61 to 80	White	75	90
	Black	50	58

Income quintile in percentage	Race	Mean income, in thousands of dollars, in 1979	Mean income, in thousands of dollars, in 2014
81 to 100	White	145	200
	Black	80	144

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The horizontal axis is labeled year and ranges from 1979 to 2014, in increments of 5. The vertical axis is labeled median income percentage and ranges from minus 35 to 5, in increments of 5. All data are approximate. The curve for median income percentage of White race is plotted through (1979, minus 15), (1982, minus 18), (1984, minus 16), (1989, minus 9), (1991, minus 12.5), (1994, minus 10), (1996, minus 7), (1999, 0), (2004, minus 2), (2007, 0), (2009, minus 5), (2011, minus 7), and (2014, minus 2). The curve for median income percentage of national average is plotted through (1979, minus 13), (1984, minus 17), (1989, minus 8), (1994, minus 12), (1999, 0), (2004, minus 4), (2007, 1), (2009, minus 6), (2011, minus 8), and (2014, minus 6). The curve for median income percentage of Black race is plotted through (1979, minus 22.5), (1984, minus 26), (1989, minus 16), (1994, minus 22), (1999, 0), (2001, 3), (2004, minus 4), (2007, minus 2), (2009, minus 10), (2011, minus 14), and (2014, minus 8).

ESSAY 15 “BUT PARENTS JUST WANT WHAT IS BEST FOR THEIR KIDS” : SOCIOLOGICAL REALITIES OF PRIVILEGED PARENTING AND OPPORTUNITY

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In 2018, at one of the Whitest and wealthiest public schools in New York City, a group of parents packed into a middle school cafeteria. These parents were not happy. As depicted in a recording of the meeting, the parents shouted and gestured angrily at the school officials standing with stoic expressions at the front of the room. The parents were upset because the school district had proposed changes in how enrollment would work at the public schools their children attended. The school district had planned to extend the valuable educational resources of their school to students who were scoring below grade level on standardized tests. The proposal was part of a larger effort to bring together children of different race and class backgrounds in the public schools of New York City who currently had unequal educational opportunities and redistribute resources more equitably. In other words, the school district was attempting to “diversify”—and these White, affluent parents were outraged (Christ, 2018). As one White mom exclaimed:

You’re talking about telling an 11-year-old, “You worked your butt off and you didn’t get that, what you needed and wanted.” You’re telling them, “You’re going to go to a school that is not going to educate you in the same way that you’ve been educated. [Sorry kid,] Life sucks!” Is that what the [Department of Education] wants to say [to our children]?

In response, the principal stated:

There are kids that are tremendously disadvantaged, that I would love to be able to offer . . . [some of the advantages your children receive.] And to compare these students and say, “My already-advantaged kid needs more advantage. [My kids] need to be kept away from those kids!” is tremendously offensive to me.

This school fight is just one of many examples across time and place in the United States of privileged parents doing whatever they can to maintain what they perceive to be the “best” opportunities for their children, even if this comes at a cost to other people’s children—often kids who are BIPOC and/or economically marginalized. Indeed, powerful White parents have long demanded that their own children receive more resources and opportunities, especially when it comes to education (Andrews, 2002; Delmont, 2016; Ewing, 2018). Historical examples of this struggle to maintain control over valuable resources can be seen in the violent protests against racial desegregation. In Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, when nine Black children tried to enter Little Rock High School, they were met repeatedly with a mob of White parents committed to keeping these kids out—and more generally, keeping Black people away from opportunities that they believed “should” be reserved for White people. Certainly, many White parents have long used the material and symbolic capital of Whiteness to secure an educational experience perceived as superior for their own children, no matter the cost to anyone else. And that is what is on display in this example from New York City.

But, regardless of your reaction to the behavior of these privileged parents in New York, the notion of parents “just wanting what is best” for their kids is actually a widely accepted idea in U.S. culture. Regardless of people’s own positions in various intersecting social

hierarchies, many in the United States believe that the primary job of a parent is to provide their kid with the “best” childhood available—and by “best” they mean a childhood that they perceive to have the most opportunities for future success. Often, this translates into getting kids access to the best possible educational experience with hopes for future success in a competitive capitalist economic system, or providing a clear pathway for children to an elite professional class occupation and lifestyle later in life.

Wanting the “best” for your kid, in fact, is part of what many believe contributes to being a “good parent.” Indeed, this understanding of what it means to be a “good parent” is so taken for granted in contemporary U.S. society that as you read this essay, you may find yourself asking questions like: Who wouldn’t want the “best” for their child? Why wouldn’t a parent want to set their child up for the most success that they possibly can? And what does this commonly agreed upon approach to understanding “good” parenting have anything to do with race? Isn’t it “natural” for all parents, regardless of their race or class position, to engage in this kind of parenting? What else are parents who love their children supposed to do?

“WORKING YOUR BUTT OFF”: MERITOCRATIC IDEOLOGY

The idea of doing whatever one can to get the “best” opportunities for one’s own child is tied directly to the way that many of us understand how U.S. society works. The ideology of “the American dream,” or what sociologists commonly refer to as meritocratic ideology, is a way of seeing and understanding the social world (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2004; Johnson, 2014). Meritocratic ideology provides an explanation for patterns of inequality and serves to legitimize that inequality. And it operates both at the micro level as well as at the macro level. This ideology, or road map for understanding how our society works, is based on the premise that one’s situation in life is the consequence of individual hard work and

merit (or lack thereof), and not the circumstances into which one was born. This ideology promises that we all have an equal chance to do whatever it is we want, if we work hard. Meritocratic ideology promises that it does not matter whether you are born into a family that is rich or poor, White or BIPOC—what matters is how hard you work.

This ideology is powerful in how it helps us explain inequality in our own lives but also more broadly in our country. And, importantly, the ideology of the American dream not only explains the vast inequality in our society, but the ideology also *justifies* it. Meritocratic ideology is what shapes our national identity, or who we are—a country that can be proud of itself for how it distributes limited resources across the population based on personal determination and effort—not on the basis of what kind of family one is born into. And in this way, meritocratic ideology shapes not only individual-level explanations of how inequality works but so, too, does it shape public policies that are created. How one understands social problems such as poverty or wealth inequality (e.g., are they the result of an unfair system or people being “lazy”?) for instance, leads to support for certain public policies (Cullen, 2004; Johnson, 2014).

But outside of research on public policies, another key area of research on the ideology of the American dream addresses family life in the United States. Specifically, research shows that meritocratic ideology deeply shapes parenting practices and how parents think about their role as a parent. The angry White mom at the school meeting in New York has a child who has “worked his butt off.” Her argument is that her son is therefore entitled to get what he “needs” and “wants.” This mom believes that her son deserves the “best” because he has worked hard. This statement makes visible how the U.S. ethos of meritocracy, rooted in individualism, shapes not only how we understand ourselves or our nation but also how many of us understand raising children.

PRIVATE FAMILY WEALTH

One clear problem with the assumption that we live in a meritocracy, or a country where you get ahead based on hard work, is the reality that some children are born into families with far greater financial resources than others. We do not all start out on an equal playing field. In particular, some children are born into families with private family wealth. Wealth allows parents to make a wider array of decisions about their children's lives. Wealth provides families with the ability to purchase homes in neighborhoods associated with better resourced public schools (see also Ioannidis in this volume). If those schools are not ideal, wealth also allows parents to opt into exclusive private schooling options. Wealth offers children extensive extracurricular activities, travel to new places, summer enrichment programs, and access to the latest technology. Wealth means that families can afford to choose between different health care professionals when their kids get sick or hire expensive lawyers when their kids get in trouble. Wealthy families have the means to move out of cities during a pandemic or hire private tutors to homeschool their children in a "pod" with other wealthy kids. Wealth means having a safety net to fall back on and provides parents with many more options about how to design their children's experiences and opportunities (Shapiro, 2005).

As social scientists have extensively documented, however, private wealth is not spread evenly across racial groups. Rather, private wealth is disproportionately held by White families. According to 2019 estimates, typical White families have *eight times* the wealth of typical Black families and *five times* the wealth of typical Latinx families in the United States (Bhutta et al., 2020). Of course, some Black and Latinx families hold private wealth; but, when we look at the overall picture, much more wealth is in the hands of White families.

One reason for this racial wealth gap is the role of what sociologists refer to as "intergenerational transfers of wealth." When parents pass

financial resources on to their children, such as paying for them to go to college or leaving them an inheritance or even just giving them small amounts of cash from time to time, wealth is transferred from one generation to the next. And given the racial history of White supremacy and codified discrimination in the United States, typical White families have always had more wealth to pass on to their children than Black or Brown families. And this wealth gap persists. It is not shrinking as time goes on (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006).

GROWING UP WHITE AND AFFLUENT

Given how wealth is distributed in the United States, many children with access to private family wealth are not only growing up in families with class privilege, but they are also growing up White, or with racial privilege. Empirical research documents that people who are racialized as White, regardless of their socioeconomic status, belong to a social group positioned at the top of the racial hierarchy in the United States. With that position comes many material and symbolic unearned societal advantages (Blumer, 1958; Lewis, 2004; Sewell, 1992). The advantages that accompany Whiteness are commonly referred to as “White privilege” (Gallagher, 2003; Halley et al., 2011; McIntosh, 1989) or as W. E. B. Du Bois (1998) put it originally, the “wages” that accompany Whiteness. Of course, many White children do not experience the privileges of growing up White *and* in a family with private family wealth. Nonetheless, “all whites have access to the symbolic capital of whiteness” regardless of the disadvantages they may receive as a result of class or gender (Lewis, 2004, p. 628).

Many scholars have studied how being White shapes opportunities in adulthood; however, Whiteness certainly matters in childhood, too. Specifically, White children are commonly thought of as “innocent” and in need of protection, while Black and Brown children are often perceived of as “bad kids” or “dangerous” (Bernstein, 2011). These racist ideas can and do lead to life or death consequences for

children, especially as they interact with authority figures like police. The application of these racist ideas to entire groups of children have consequences that can be seen across a range of outcomes. For instance, how children are racialized shapes what version of sex education they receive in some places, or how they learn about their own body (Garcia, 2012). Children's race shapes how they are treated in the child welfare system (Roberts, 2002). Research shows that when White children go to the emergency room with appendicitis, they are more likely to receive more pain medication than Black children (Goyal et al., 2015). White children are often given second chances when they violate school discipline policies or face less harsh punishments than their Black peers for breaking the same school rules, even in preschool contexts (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011). When teachers look at photographs and determine who they think is most likely to be "gifted and talented," they are more likely to believe a White child with glasses fits the description than BIPOC kids (Carman, 2011). Similarly, White students are more likely to be assigned to more rigorous academic classes or "tracks" while Black students are more likely to find themselves in lower ones—a process that has major implications not only for access to educational resources but also children's self-esteem (Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

To understand how the material and symbolic capital of Whiteness operates in the lives of kids and parents, it is helpful to turn to qualitative research in schools. In an ethnography of a well-resourced "good" high school, titled *Despite the Best Intentions* (2015), scholars Amanda Lewis and John Diamond explored why racial differences in the experiences and outcomes of students persisted despite the "ideal" aspects of the school and the stated good intentions of teachers, school officials, and even parents. They consider why the White students continue to be more successful academically than their Black and Brown peers, even in this "good" school?

One of Lewis and Diamond's main findings is that the various kinds of resources wealthy White parents brought to the school were understood as more highly valuable by the school officials than those of other students and their families. In an effort to keep these White, wealthy parents happy, school officials responded to their desires and demands, many times without the parents even needing to ask. Because of how race and class were often conflated in this school, the operating assumption was that all the White children in the school were also wealthy children, and "whiteness [became] the primary signifier that [was] acted upon" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 54). In other words, "while it was sometimes true that white parents and students were operating with greater resources when negotiating with the school . . . it was also true that they often did not have to deploy such resources to benefit from their Whiteness" (p. 54). As the authors explain, "as busy [school] personnel move through their day and make decisions about academic concerns, they are not only responding to actual parental interventions but also often acting in anticipation of likely or imagined probably parental pressure or concern" (p. 91). The school wanted to avoid situations like the one with the angry mom in New York; it was easier for the institution to cater to the White parents than try to fight them. And in so doing, the school officials implicitly used Whiteness as a way to make choices about which kids should receive less harsh punishments for violating school rules or which kids should be in the honors classes or which kids should be given second chances. These school decisions meant that all the White kids at the school benefited, even the ones without the "squeaky wheel" parents who persistently harassed school officials to get what they wanted for their kids. Much like other racialized organizations, Whiteness takes the form of a credential in schools that allow schools to "appear racially neutral in principle, while in practice institutionalizing the property interest in Whiteness" (Ray, 2019).

Opportunity hoarding is the term sociologists use to describe "the process through which dominant groups who have control over some good (e.g., education) regulate its circulation, thus preventing out-

groups from having full access to it” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 155; Tilly, 1999). Opportunity hoarding is when parents call the school and successfully get their children what they want, like the “best” math teacher or into the best “track.” It is when the angry parents in New York advocate for the maintenance of enrollment practices that benefit their children despite the great harm they cause many other children. Though the example drawn upon in this essay comes from headlines in the media, scholars like Allison Roda (2015) and Roda and Amy Stuart Wells (2013) have long studied the ways that affluent White parents in New York City make school choice decisions and how inequality is reproduced as a result.

What is important to understand about this process of opportunity hoarding is that these parents do not believe that they are trying to sabotage others or reinforce inequality. Instead, they believe that they are just acting in the best interest of their child. “I just want what is best for my kid” is the narrative they believe justifies unfair hoarding opportunities.

It is also important to understand that these parents do not act independently of each other. As Lewis and Diamond (2015) explain, affluent White parents “are not just advocating for their own children. They are also advocating for the maintenance of the structures of inequality that facilitate their advantage” (p. 156). They band together with other, similarly positioned White parents, collectively packing into cafeterias and working together to maintain these systems and structures. Another compelling example of this is explored in the popular podcast *Nice White Parents*, produced by Serial and the *New York Times*. This podcast describes what happens over a period of 60 years between a group of “nice White parents” and a public school in New York City. As the podcast illustrates, White parents have a tremendous amount of power when it comes to school policies and practices and as such, education reform must take seriously the ways that White parents shape our schools, often to benefit their own kids at the expense of everyone else. Important to remember is that these examples, and so many more, unfold

within a nation in which most people, including privileged people, claim to value fairness and equal opportunity for all, at least abstractly.

LESSONS LEARNED BY WHITE KIDS

Kids benefit in material ways from growing up privileged, like having the best technology at their home to learn during a pandemic, or having enough food to eat to stay awake during the school day, or going to a school with small class sizes and highly trained and experienced teachers. When children are born into families with generations of private White family wealth, they are given tremendous advantages in our society. Research shows that affluent, expectant parents make decisions about where to live or which preschool waitlist to join or what financial investments to initiate, such as saving accounts for the child's future, before children are even born, in the hopes that these decisions will provide their child with the “best” life. Obviously, children benefit materially from these decisions.

But what about the ideological consequences? How do privileged kids come to learn how the social world works as a result of having more than other kids? How do they view their own position in the world and the position of people who belong to different social groups? What do they come to learn about racism, inequality, and privilege as a result of the social environment of privilege that they grow up within?

My research explores these exact questions. To write my book *White Kids* (Hagerman, 2018), I spent more than two years observing and interviewing 30 White, affluent families with a focus on how kids learn about race, racism, inequality, and privilege—and what they actually think about these topics. I found that these White affluent children developed ideas about the social world as a result of the choices their parents made about how to set up their lives. The

schools they attended, the neighborhoods in which they lived, the media they consumed, the extracurricular activities in which they were involved, and so forth, were all the result of strategic decisions their parents made about how to arrange their childhood. The patterns the kids noticed and the interactions they had as they went about their daily lives informed how they made sense of the world around them. And when their parents persistently fought for them to have the “best” of everything, the kids learned certain lessons that they then carried with them into their teenage years.

Take 11-year-old Aaron, for instance. Aaron attended a predominantly White private school. At home and at school, Aaron was told by his parents and teachers that he attended this school because he was “special” and “better” and “smarter” than the kids at the local public school. The majority of the Black and Brown kids in Aaron’s community attended public school, and most of the kids at the private school were White, like him. “It makes me realize how special I am to have these opportunities,” Aaron tells me when I ask him what it is like to go to a private school. He goes on to say,

My school puts quite a challenge on the kids. Like they really pile them [with work], so I think, definitely I’m getting more in a shorter amount of time than if I went to a public school. It’s just a better education.

Aaron knows that his race and class privileges help him succeed in ways that are inherently unfair, and he knows he gets a “better education.” We talk more about inequality and he explains,

A lot of times, Blacks don’t have as much money to send their kids to better schools. So they just send them to, sometimes, the bare minimum, so it’s not really fair. Because everyone

should kind of get the same education, but sometimes it's just not possible for that to happen.

Aaron believes that everyone should get the same educational opportunities because otherwise things are not fair. However, although Aaron realizes that he has an advantage compared to his public school peers, he simultaneously embraces his privileges. He even tells me that he hopes his parents will allow him to stay in private school in high school rather than sending him to a public school as they have planned. While Aaron does not outright tell me that he does not want to go to school with Black and Brown kids, he does tell me that going to school with “other kids” will present undesirable challenges to his educational achievement. In addition, he thinks that the “other kids” at that school will threaten his future potential at success. “My school is not for everyone,” he tells me with pride. Although it is only one part of how Aaron learns about Whiteness, privilege, and race, attending private school conveys many subtle messages about privilege to kids like Aaron. Aaron tells me that he hopes to go to Harvard one day, and that will require him to work hard and to continue going to elite schools that give him an advantage over other kids. This is what he has learned from his parents and community.

The schools that kids attend or the classes to which they are assigned shape how they think about themselves and others. And this is not simply a matter of whether children attend a private school or a public school. As Karolyn Tyson (2011) finds in her public school-based research, racialized tracking practices (of White kids being tracked into more advanced classes) “influence students’ perceptions of the link between race and achievement, their self-perceptions of ability, how they view one another, and where they think they and others belong” (p. 9). Further research shows that kids in “lower-level” classes do not receive as rigorous or high quality of a curriculum and perceive the school to not care as much about them, which has negative consequences on their relationship to school and

their academic work. Indeed, children interpret all kinds of messages from their schools and communities about which kids are valued in our society and which are not (Lewis, 2003; Shedd, 2015).

But children from privileged families are not simply learning where they fit into the world; they are also learning how to navigate privilege in ways that directly benefit them. As sociologist Jessica Calarco (2018) shows, children from middle-class backgrounds feel confident to ask their teachers for help when they are struggling with a math equation. Middle-class kids feel entitled to wave their hand in the air and demand attention from their teachers and seek accommodations. In short, privileged kids learn to adopt similar strategies to those on display by the angry White mom in New York. These kids learn to use their privilege to “negotiate advantage” and develop strategies for making the world work for them. In this sense, it is not just privileged parents who advocate for the “best” or the most for their kids; their kids also participate in this process of seeking unfair opportunities.

BEING A “GOOD” PARENT

Being a good parent is often connected to what sociologist Sharon Hays (1998) describes as “intensive mothering” or a modern form of parenting that is labor-intensive and expensive. Under this paradigm, “good” mothers (1) are the primary caregivers to children, (2) always nurture their children and think of their needs first, (3) read every expert’s book on raising children, and (4) consider their job as a mother as separate and distinct from—and ultimately more important than—their work outside the home. This term is often used in research on issues of gendered work–family injustice, but it also matters for the reproduction of other intersecting forms of inequality. Indeed, to many affluent White American parents in my research, being a “good” parent means wanting what is best for one’s kids. Being a “good” parent means buying a house in a neighborhood with the “best” schools, making sure your kid has the “best” math teacher,

getting your kid into the “best” summer program or on the “best” soccer team, ensuring that your child has the “best” pediatrician, and the list goes on and on (Hagerman, 2018).

In addition to their financial resources, parents use various forms of capital to make these things happen. They draw on social networks that provide personal connections to people in powerful positions or they use their own influence in a community to get what they want. They also have access to the cultural knowledge of how to help their kids apply for prestigious and selective opportunities. But when parents use their privileges to provide their children with the “best” of all the things, they subsequently participate in the reproduction of inequality. Because on average White parents have so much more wealth than their Black and Brown counterparts, and this White wealth is used to facilitate “good” parenting practices, this approach to parenting reinforces patterns of existing inequality and serves to maintain the status quo.

Of course, it is not only affluent White parents who want what is “best” for their kids or who engage in behaviors designed to give their children advantages. Many families use whatever resources they can to try to create the most opportunities for their kids. For example, scholars show that undocumented immigrant families take on tremendous risks, including being deported or killed, because they want their children to have more educational and economic opportunities than they would otherwise (Alexander, 2018; Clark-Ibáñez, 2015). Pawan Dhingra (2020) explores why affluent Indian American parents, alongside White parents, direct their children into extracurricular academic competitions like spelling bees in elementary school or enrichment programs designed to provide additional educational advantages outside of school. Scholars explore how middle-class Black parents, especially mothers, navigate class privilege alongside anti-Black racism and try to provide their children with the most opportunities they can while shielding their children from racism (Dow, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). And Ranita Ray (2017) explores how economically

marginalized Black and Brown youth who do everything in the so-called “right” way and seek as many opportunities for themselves as they can, still face structural barriers to upward social mobility.

Though many families “just want what is best for their kids,” some families are more easily able to secure the “best” opportunities for their kids. When parents who have a lot of power as a result of their race and class position use that power to advocate for their own kids at an expense to other, less powerful kids, they reproduce inequality. This is even true for parents who explicitly state that they are “progressive” or that they value “equality.” And this remains true, even if these parents claim or even genuinely believe that all they are trying to do is be a “good” parent. Given this reality, perhaps it makes sense to consider other ways of defining good parenting.

ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF BEING A “GOOD” PARENT

In her recent book, *Mothering While Black*, Dawn Marie Dow (2019) highlights how a group of Black middle-class mothers conceptualize what it means to be a good mom. Dow considers specifically how these moms make sense of “work-life balance” issues. As she writes, “For these mothers, employment was not reduced to providing for their families economically or pursuing individual professional pursuits. Rather, it was connected to giving back to their community” (p. 154). As one mom tells her, “I think that with all the work and everything I went through to get educated, I have to help other people besides just my family” (p. 153). Dow highlights how these mothers think carefully about ways to set up their children’s lives, especially with racial comfort in mind, or creating environments for their children that shelter them from racism so that they can build strong self-esteem. But these mothers are also thoughtful about the importance of other members of their community and how they can use their own educational advantages in ways that serve their larger

community. These Black moms provide a compelling model of an alternative understanding of what it means to be a “good” parent.

In *Making Motherhood Work*, Caitlyn Collins (2019) explores how different countries think about motherhood and work: “Sweden conceives of family support and the task of child-rearing not as private issues, but as collective responsibilities” (p. 29). As such, Sweden has many more supports in place to help working families, like paid parental leave and a public childcare system. Collins explains that some affluent parents still try to get their children into certain preschools that they think are the “best.” However, because of how Swedish society is set up at the structural level, and because of the lower degree of inequality in this nation overall, the consequences of parents behaving like this are far less dramatic than in a highly unequal society such as that in the United States. Though parents still focus on their own children, they live in a society that is organized such that resources are spread out among families rather than hoarded by one group.

The research of Dow and Collins are both examples of alternative understandings of the responsibility of “good” parenting: parenting that considers not just one’s own child but all children, whether it be at the micro level of living in a neighborhood or local community or at the macro level of state policy. These examples not only offer hope that a different way is possible, but they show us that some parents and countries approach ideas about “good” parenting differently.

CONCLUSION

If we hope for our children to live in a future society that is more equal and just and that lives up to the meritocratic values we claim to have as a country, this pattern of privileged families using their privilege to hoard opportunities exclusively for their own children must be disrupted. To do this, change needs to occur from the level of state policy all the way down to the individual level. For instance,

at the structural level, we could disrupt opportunity hoarding by implementing policies that redistribute resources more fairly across kids, families, school districts, and regions. At the institutional level, we could create changes to school practices; for example, school officials could refuse to acquiesce to privileged parents' demands for special treatment or remove practices like tracking from schools altogether.

Changes could also happen at the level of families and communities. Privileged parents, not just as individuals but in groups with other privileged parents, could choose to approach parenting in different ways and make different decisions that benefit all the kids in their community, not just their own. Of course, privileged parents must go about making these choices in thoughtful ways so as to not unintentionally reproduce the very problems at hand, like White parents entering new schools and then trying to take over and dominate them (Posey-Maddox, 2014). But privileged parents can leverage their privilege in ways that benefit more than just their own child. As I write elsewhere, "what it means to be a 'good' parent must [become] about more than securing various forms of resources for one's own child; being a 'good' parent must become intertwined with notions of good citizenship" (Hagerman, 2018, p. 209).

And so, I invite you to imagine new ways of defining what it means to be a "good" parent. What would happen if we collectively decided that parenting should be about supporting all kids rather than just our own? What would our future look like if educational opportunities were not simply hoarded by wealthy White parents for their kids to utilize but rather distributed fairly? What would happen to parents' behavior if all schools were similarly resourced? What would happen if privileged parents used their influence and power to disrupt unfair practices and systems rather than participating in them? And what would it look like to live in a society in which all children were truly valued, not just the ones with privilege, from the level of state policy all the way down to the individual level? For the United States to actually live up to our stated ideals of fairness and equal opportunity

and for it to be a country where all children are actually valued, these are the kinds of changes that we must work together to achieve.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Calarco, J. M. (2018). *Negotiating opportunities: How the middle class secures advantages in school*. Oxford University Press.

Dow, D. M. (2019). *Mothering while Black: Boundaries and burdens of middle-class parenthood*. University of California Press.

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Press.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What impact would equitable school funding have on parents' behaviors, especially opportunity hoarding? Do you think we would still see this kind of behavior if all schools were generally similarly resourced and funded?
2. How do you make sense of the American dream and the reality of private family wealth? Do you think parents should be allowed to pass on so much wealth to their children? If so, what is your solution for making American childhoods more equal?
3. As a child yourself, what messages did you receive about inequality? Do you remember noticing forms of inequality when you were younger? Where did these messages about the social world come from? How did they develop over time as you grew older?
4. Why do you think parents who claim to be politically progressive and who say they value social justice often give their kids advantages, even when they know this is unfair?
5. What social changes do you think are required to interrupt the transmission of privilege from one generation of affluent White people to the next?
6. In what ways do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed forms of inequality within families and between families? How do you think opportunity hoarding, racism, and private wealth matter in pandemic times?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Watch the film *Nursery University* (2009) produced by Marc H. Simon. What emotions do the parents express in this film, and what is your reaction to them? Reflect on this question and share your thoughts with others who have seen the film.

2. Listen to episodes from the *New York Times* podcast *Nice White Parents*. What parallels do you draw between the research discussed in this essay and the story told on the podcast?
3. Identify popular parenting websites such as *Parenting* or *Motherly* and look to see what kind of parenting approach these sites promote. Do these sites encourage parents to think about their communities, or is the focus primarily on individual children? What messages do you think parents receive when they look at these parenting websites? Compare what you find on these websites to the website *Embrace Race*. What similarities and differences can you identify?

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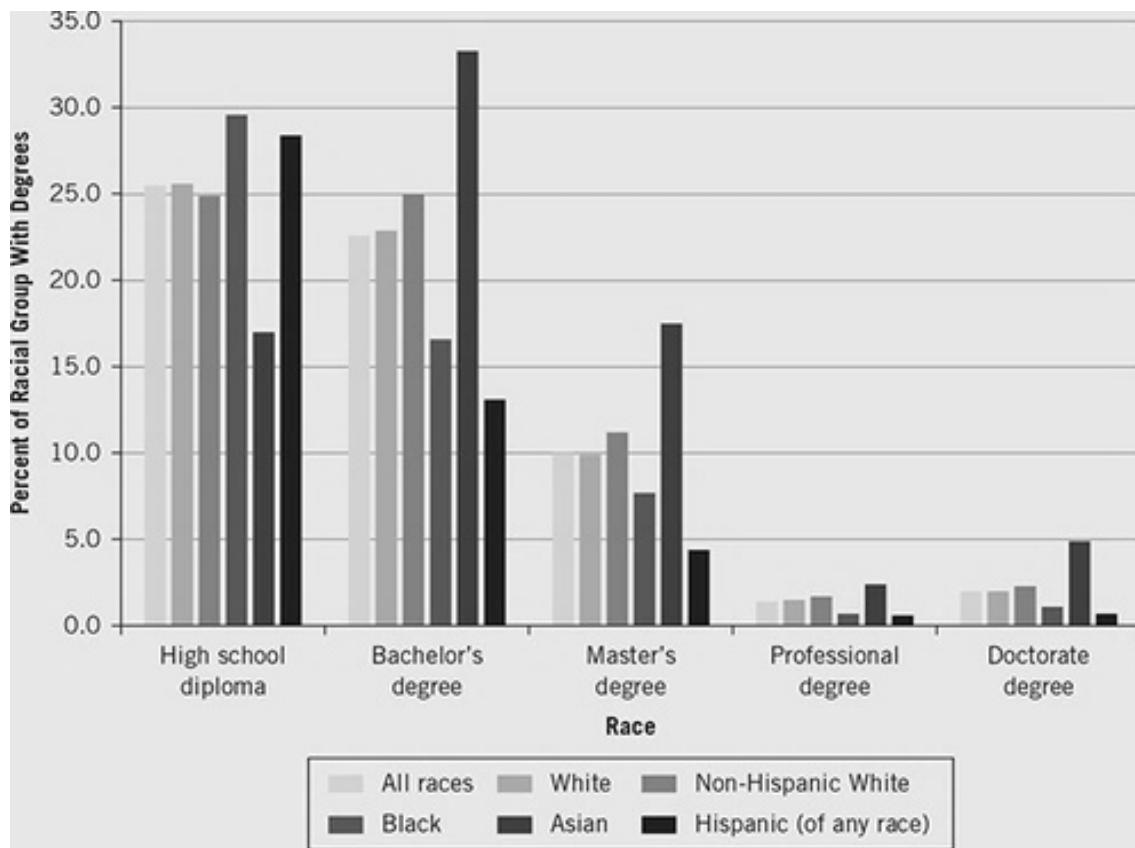
ESSAY 16 “WELL, THAT CULTURE REALLY VALUES EDUCATION” : CULTURE VERSUS STRUCTURE IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT EDUCATION

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Public education has long been heralded as one of the most important institutions in U.S. society and is considered a key mechanism of social mobility (Urban & Wagoner, 1996). However, racial inequality scholars in the United States frequently point to persisting differences in educational attainment (see [Figure 16.1](#)) as a failure of public education's ability to close racial divides in income and wealth. When attempting to explain these persisting differences, students often reach for cultural explanations, including the idea that Asian Americans' high levels of educational attainment can be explained by a shared cultural trait of valuing education. This belief is evident in popular culture and media discourse. From children's shows such as *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, where Cody's Asian girlfriend, Barbara, takes “A.P. Lunch,” to *The Network Guys*, a commercial campaign by AT&T, in which an Indian network tech is able to analyze complex network data but is inept at understanding social situations, stereotypical portrayals of highly academic Asian Americans appear, often in hyperbolized forms. When Asians aren't being used as stereotypical main or supporting characters, they are usually nothing more than shadows of the stereotype, such as the Asian nerds in the movie *Mean Girls* (2004), the technology-producing Asians of District Three in *The Hunger Games* (2012), and the NBC TV show *Community*'s all-Asian Math Club.



Description

Figure 16.1 2019 U.S. Educational Attainment by Race

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2019.

These popular portrayals of Asian Americans are also reflected in media discourse. Harkaran Singh (2011), a writer for the *Berkeley Political Review* (a magazine from the University of California), writes that Asians value education more than Americans do because of the importance of gaining respect for one's family in "Asian society." He also asserts that Americans do not value education and are more likely to idolize the class clown than the scholar (Singh, 2011). Similarly, after a 2012 Pew research report found that Asian Americans are more educated, wealthier, and value work, marriage, and family more than average Americans do, a *USA Today* article attempted to use these findings to argue that so-called Asian American cultural values are responsible for their success rather than historical and structural explanations. For example, as Paul Taylor, the executive vice

president of the Pew Research Center, says in the original research report, “recent Asian arrivals are the most highly educated . . . immigrants in U.S. history” (Nasser, 2012). Research shows that the skills and education immigrants bring with them are more likely to account for the high levels of education and wealth found in the study, yet even those who have access to these data use cultural arguments to explain these educational and wealth trends.

These seemingly positive portrayals of Asian American educational values are meant to create a juxtaposition with the supposed lack of positive educational values in Black and Latinx Americans. The myth of Asian Americans as having superior values that lead to their academic success suggests that poor values are to blame for the persisting educational attainment gap experienced by Black and Latinx Americans, thus making invisible the structural factors that lead to this gap.

To consider whether Asian educational attainment can be explained by the idea that “Asian culture really values education,” and the corresponding belief that lower levels of attainment among Black and Latinx Americans are explained by the absence of these values, we must first define and unpack some key terms used in these claims: *education*, *Asian*, *Black*, *Latinx*, *culture*, and *value*. While at first glance these terms may appear straightforward and easily definable, upon further examination, we see that their meanings are often quite murky, which significantly complicates the nature of these claims and ultimately debunks them.

CLARIFYING THE TERMS

To begin, in most of the research that has engaged these issues, either *education* has been defined as “educational attainment” and measured by category (high school, college, post-college) or with a continuous measure (years of education), or it has been defined as “achievement” and measured using standardized test scores. But on both of these measures, it is true that Black and Latinx Americans have lower levels of education, whether defined by attainment, category of education, or years of education. The question is: Why is this the case? And what can further examination of terms such as *Asian*, *Black*, *Latinx*, and *culture* tell us about the differences in how racial groups really think about education?

Terms such as *Asian*, *Black*, and *Latinx* require further examination because these are socially constructed categories that contain individuals from widely different backgrounds. For instance, the term *Asian* refers most overtly to the world's largest continent, from which many people who have immigrated to the United States originate. It is important to note that on the Asian continent, almost no one refers to themselves as "Asian"; they may refer to themselves by national identity (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) or by a more specific regional identity (e.g., Han, Zhuang, or Man). The use of the term *Asian* to refer to this widely diverse group is most often deployed in the United States, where it is attached to *American* to form the panethnic label *Asian American*. This label was originally developed by the U.S. government (particularly the Census Bureau) but has subsequently come to be used by people within the group as well. The process of panethnic identity development has been explored in some depth by several authors (Espiritu, 1993; Liu, 1998; Wu, 2003) and is well worth exploring further (see "Suggested Additional Resources" at the end of this essay). For our purposes, it is important to note that the label *Asian American* is socially constructed, was generated by the immigrant experience, and encompasses an incredibly diverse group of people with different histories, backgrounds, and immigration experiences (see also Zhou and Tran in this volume).

Thus, one of the problems with the stereotype that all Asians as a panethnic group are high educational achievers is that it obscures the fact that this stereotype does not hold across all Asian students. For example, Baker et al. (2000) find that Asian and Pacific Islander students have higher math performance than White students but that there are major differences between subgroups of Asian students—with Filipinx and Pacific Islander students (e.g., students of Indigenous Hawaiian heritage, Samoans, Guamanians, and Tahitians) showing significantly lower levels of math achievement (though Filipinx students outperform other Asian subgroups in reading achievement). Another analysis finds that Pacific Islanders are falling behind other Asian groups in obtaining bachelor's degrees (UC AAPI Policy Initiative, 2006; see also Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). These differences are important to consider when looking at differences in educational attainment and how Asian Americans have fared as a whole.

The terms *Black* and *Latinx* are equally complicated and also reflect panethnic racial categories that include individuals from very different

places whose reasons for being in the United States can be quite distinct. Further discussions of the development and diversity of these groups are available in Omi and Winant (1994), Davis (1991), De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003), and Rodriguez (2000); more of this diversity is also discussed later in this essay. All these terms form a sort of racial shorthand that can be deployed for various purposes (e.g., government data collection, social science description, political collective action), most of which are somewhat neutral. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind their internal diversity and socially constructed nature. This variation is particularly salient as we move to the next term: *culture*.

Culture has been defined by social scientists in diverse ways. For our purposes, we will use one of the most common definitions, which fits with what is implied by the myth itself: that culture is a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices that form a way of life for a particular group of people. With that definition in hand, and given our previous discussion of the panethnic racial labels, we see the first problem with this myth. Given the great variation contained in the group we call “Asian Americans,” it isn’t reasonable to assume that all the people within it share the same attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices. The assumption of within-group homogeneity is one of many problems with shorthand racial labels as they are used in everyday conversation. Determining who “values” education and how we can detect that “valuing” through data collection is even more difficult. When we try to decide who values education and who doesn’t using racial group categories, we are required to account for some of that within-group variation.

Additionally, though people in a given group may share certain experiences, there are many individual-level differences that greatly affect their values, lifestyle, and educational achievement. These variables include, but are not limited to, parents’ occupations, parenting styles, educational attainment of parents, family structure, number of books and other resources in the home, and Internet access (Fuligni, 1997; Kao, 1995; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Teachman, 1987). Two parents with well-paying jobs and college degrees who encourage positive educational practices in a nice house with books and Internet access form the ideal background for promoting high levels of educational achievement, but the presence of these characteristics varies both by group and within groups (Kao, 1995). Therefore, the idea that all people in any group value or do not value education and that the presence

or absence of such values alone can account for educational attainment becomes problematic.

Finally, the positive educational outcomes often attributed to “Asian values” have been found in other immigrant groups. For example, West Indian immigrants show higher levels of education, higher socioeconomic status, and higher standards of living than nonimmigrant Americans (Model, 1995, 2011). One can hardly make the argument that West Indian immigrants share Asian culture and values. It is more plausible that we find higher levels of educational success among immigrant groups due to the nature of individuals who self-select into the immigration process and possibly the nature of immigration itself (Xie & Goyette, 2003). In fact, some evidence suggests that the risks and challenges associated with immigration may contribute to increased pressure on first-, 1.5-, and second-generation immigrants to succeed academically to achieve upward social mobility. This pressure can come directly from families or through shared knowledge of the hardships that accompany immigration (Waters, 1996). This pressure crosses racial and ethnic lines and is evident in all American immigrant groups across time (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Over generations, we find that descendants of immigrants show equal levels of academic success as nonimmigrant Americans. It seems that once the intensity of the immigrant experience becomes diluted, the pressure associated with it lessens, leading to “normal” levels of academic achievement. This finding allows us to consider other variables that may explain differing levels of academic achievement across groups that do not rely on culturally essentialist explanations.

Determining who values education ultimately requires collecting data at two levels: (1) the individual level—such as information on family economic resources, parental educational attainment, and immigrant status (e.g., first or second generation, age at time of immigration, legal vs. undocumented, or visa status)—and (2) the collective or group level, which takes into consideration, for example, whether the group is a voluntary or an involuntary immigrant group, the historical timing of their arrival in the United States, reception on arrival, geographic concentration, and overt structural barriers to education. When we take these factors into account, simplistic narratives of which group values education more, and how that valuing is causally related to educational attainment, become more complex. For example, what were the resources immigrants brought with

them from their country of origin (including money, education, connections to people already in the United States)? What kinds of aid did they receive, and what structural barriers did they face upon arrival? These factors are rarely taken into account when considering who values education, and instead, we have come to rely on cultural explanations. In doing so, we conflate perceived valuing of education with the actual causes of educational attainment disparities. Even if we could determine if an entire group values education, we could not make the argument that valuing education alone is enough to explain the racial gap in educational attainment. To explain this gap, we must account for structural factors. This is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding Black Americans and education.

CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF BLACK EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The persistent differences in academic achievement between Black students and their peers are particularly troubling. Despite the centrality of education to the civil rights movement's agenda, one of the most common ways this achievement gap has been explained is by pointing to *cultural factors* and a supposed devaluing of education among Black Americans. Even former President Barack Obama has employed detrimental cultural explanations. For example, in a speech on July 27, 2004, then-Senator Obama stated:

Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. . . . Children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and . . . eradicate the slander that says a Black youth with a book is acting White.

Obama's reference to the idea that Black students who put forth academic effort are derided by peers for "acting White" connects to a theory that has been researched and debated by scholars for over 30 years, under the umbrella of *oppositional culture theory*.

Anthropologist John U. Ogbu's oppositional culture explanation for racial differences in academic achievement emphasizes academic

disengagement among Black students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978). Ogbu distinguished between different types of minorities in the United States, particularly between voluntary immigrant minorities who came to America in search of prosperity and involuntary, subordinate minorities such as Black Americans who were brought to the United States against their will. Whereas members of voluntary immigrant groups have an optimistic attitude toward schooling, Ogbu argued, Black Americans do not. He argued that faced with and frustrated by substandard schools, discrimination, and limited opportunities for success in the job market, Black Americans, over generations, developed coping mechanisms and adaptations—including a cultural orientation toward education that leads to a lack of effort and underachievement. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that academic achievement was further discouraged by negative sanctioning from Black peers, who labeled academic effort and good grades as “acting White.”

As this cultural explanation of academic achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups became more popular, some of its original points became muddled or lost. Whereas Ogbu emphasized that oppositional culture was an adaptation to social structural conditions, subsequent discussions tended to focus on problematic Black culture while overlooking the structural roots Ogbu emphasized. Thus, there was a tendency to explain racial achievement gaps by attributing them to a lack of valuing of education while ignoring the societal conditions that Ogbu said produced academic disengagement in the first place. This is a history and structure that must be taken into account when looking at Black and Latinx Americans’ relationship with education.

BEYOND CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS: THE ROLE OF HISTORY AND STRUCTURE IN EDUCATION

A major problem with cultural explanations of educational achievement, therefore, is that they disregard structural barriers to achieving success. *Structure* refers to the patterns and relationships among social institutions, social networks, and other participants in a society that affect the behaviors of all members of the society. Structure is both created by and regulates the actions, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals. Therefore, structural barriers are those roadblocks enacted by social institutions, social networks

that are outside of the immediate control of any single person in any racial or ethnic group.

Different racial and ethnic groups within the United States have faced these structural barriers with varying levels of resources (such as education and occupational training and skills). For example, most documented Asians that have come to America in the past 60 years have possessed high levels of education and training and have been able to replicate their success in America in terms of both education and occupation (Steinberg, 2001). Similarly, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, White ethnic groups were able to successfully assimilate and integrate into mainstream society because of the industrial skills they brought with them from Europe (Blauner, 2001; Steinberg, 2001). On the other hand, Black Americans were heavily concentrated in the South during this time and mainly had agricultural skills. During the Industrial Revolution, Black Americans moved to the North equipped with the most basic of skills and facing a 200-year-old system of racism and prejudice (Blauner, 2001; Steinberg, 2001). In the North, White ethnics were hired at higher rates than Black Americans. When Black Americans were hired in large numbers, it was a result of strikes by White ethnic groups, which meant Black Americans were paid much lower wages (Steinberg, 2001). All these historical and structural factors contributed to the inability of Black Americans to achieve success and overcome the economic barriers to gaining widespread access to higher education at the same levels as White ethnics and Asians.

College educations were long reserved for White, upper-class, Protestant men (Rudolph, 1962/1990). Though times have changed and other groups have gained access to higher education, many college campuses, particularly the most prestigious universities, remain predominantly White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Historical research indicates that many early Asian immigrant populations achieved educational parity with White Americans between the first and second world wars due to the highly restrictive immigration laws of the era and lack of specific anti-Asian policies at American universities (Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Wong, 1980). Race-based immigration quotas restricted the granting of new visas to as low as 2% of the current population of certain Asian immigrant groups, creating a selection effect in which only the wealthiest, most educated, and highly connected individuals were granted U.S. visas. Furthermore, most American universities during this time were focused on preventing mass

Black enrollment, leading to the creation and implementation of specific anti-Black admissions and enrollment policies. Although these institutions did not desire other minority groups, including Asian and Jewish immigrants, people from those groups were able to enroll due to loopholes in admissions policies that were written specifically to exclude Black Americans (Wallenstein, 1999). Census data suggest that there was no educational disadvantage between White Americans and native-born Japanese Americans at least as far back as 1910. For Chinese Americans, parity seems to have arrived by 1920, and for Filipino Americans, by 1940 (Hirschman & Wong, 1986). This early parity significantly influences intergenerational patterns at the group level today. In other words, higher educational attainment for any group is intimately connected to the educational attainment of previous generations.

On the other hand, prior to the mid-20th-century civil rights movement, Black participation in predominantly White institutions across the country was extremely limited. Between 1865 and 1895, about 194 Black students graduated from northern colleges, 75 from Oberlin College in Ohio alone, with the other 119 attending 52 other schools, for an average of little more than 2 per school. There is also evidence of some Black students graduating from southern colleges before their admittance was made illegal at the end of this period (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). This southern restriction was relatively consistent through 1953, with the exception of some minimal movement among primarily border state universities after key court cases in the 1930s (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). However, Bowles and DeCosta (1971) write that northern schools were not much better in this period:

The difference between the passive discrimination of the Northern colleges which, while permitting a few Negro students to enter, were by reason of financial requirements or social isolation, or both, discouraging to most Negro prospective students, and the active discrimination of the white Southern colleges was, essentially, only a difference in degree. (p. 40)

Despite the strong discrimination Black students faced at White universities, their determination to educate themselves did not waver. Dating back to the early 19th century, free Black Americans were attempting to create their

own higher education institutions, which were often met with White resistance. In 1831, the First Annual Convention of the People of Color voted to create a college for scientific, mechanical, and agricultural education in New Haven, Connecticut (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). Before the plans could be carried out, the White citizens of New Haven voted against the creation of the college, calling colleges aimed at educating “colored people” an “unwarrantable and dangerous undertaking,” and claimed they would resist the establishment of the college in Connecticut “by every lawful means” (p. 23). The group later attempted to fulfill their goal of educating Black Americans by partnering with an existing White college in Canaan, New Hampshire, but that school was forcibly removed from the town for enrolling Black students (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). This history of exclusion from White colleges and barriers in creating and funding Black colleges is evidence of the structural racism that has served to prevent Black Americans from closing the achievement gap despite the long history of valuing and fighting for access to education.

Beginning in the 1960s and influenced by a changing political climate, universities exhibited a rising concern with the participation of people of color in higher education. This led to the development of admissions policies designed to increase the number of students of color on campus, which was relatively successful at increasing Black student enrollment (Allen et al., 1991; see also Poon et al. in this volume). However, this varied significantly by region. Many southern states adopted a position of “massive resistance” to integration, including the signing of the Southern Regional Education Compact on February 8, 1948, by 14 states trying to avoid the desegregation of their institutions of higher education and the Southern Manifesto on March 12, 1956, by more than 100 southern senators, which denounced the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that declared separate as inherently unequal.

In spite of this history, the idea that a group’s valuing of education explains differences in attainment persists. In particular, the idea that Black and Latinx Americans do not value education has been present both in American society generally and in academic research (see Coontz, 1992, on myths about Black families’ culture more generally). As mentioned earlier, this myth does not square with the emphasis on access to education that has been central throughout Black Americans’ long fight for equality (Anderson, 1988; Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). For example, the landmark

decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that separate schools could not be equal, was one of the most important steps in the civil rights movement (see Tushnet, 1987). This decision removed some of the most crucial structural barriers that denied Black children equal educational opportunity and set in motion the long process of integrating schools. Yet more than 50 years later, the promise of equal education hasn't come to fruition, and due to the abandonment of specific integration programs and persisting neighborhood racial segregation, schools have lost much of the integration progress that was made from 1970 to 1990 (Orfield et al., 2002; Orfield et al., 2016).

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS: LACK OF SUPPORT FOR CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Scholars have researched the oppositional culture theory for more than a quarter century. Researchers have looked at attitudes toward education among different racial groups, as well as evidence of stigmatization of high-achieving Black students as “acting White.” This work has produced mixed findings but, overall, little empirical support for the cultural explanations of differences in academic achievement proposed by Ogbu's theory. First, researchers have found that Black students hold positive attitudes toward education. Research has found that education is valued by Black Americans as the chief pathway to upward social mobility (Cole & Omari, 2003; see also Ewing, 2018 on the fight against school closures in Chicago). Theoharis (2009) similarly finds that Black and Latinx students are committed to education and see it as holding promise even as they attend a failing urban school where they perceive there are adults who think them incapable of success. In one study that used data from a national survey, Black students reported more pro-school attitudes than White students (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; for similar findings, see Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Harris, 2006, 2008). While these studies used survey data of older students, another study using ethnographic data found positive attitudes toward education among younger Black students at two all-Black elementary schools (Tyson, 2002).

Second, research has also explored the idea that Black students' peer culture stigmatizes academic success. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) found that Black students who were seen by their peers as good

students were *more* likely to be popular than were White students seen as good students; Datnow and Cooper (1996) found similar results for Black students at a predominantly White elite school. These findings contradict the idea that successful Black students are stigmatized by peers as “acting White.” Some research has, though, found an increased likelihood for Black students who report being “very good” students to also report being put down by peers (Farkas et al., 2002; see also a response from Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002). Other research found that in some schools, Black students may be mildly socially penalized for certain public expressions of academic engagement or effort in the classroom—a “weak” version of the “acting White” hypothesis (Wildhagen, 2011).

Recent work on the “acting White” phenomenon gives a nuanced view that is instructive for considering the daily lived experiences of students. One study found that when students talk about “acting Black,” “acting Spanish,” and “acting White,” they are referring to ethnic or racial cultural tastes and styles and not really opposition to education or stigmatizing academic achievement (see also Harris, 2013). Another study found some evidence that high achievement among Black students was stigmatized, but only in one of the eight schools the researchers studied (Tyson et al., 2005). In addition to being relatively uncommon, the researchers also found that although the stigma of “acting White” was a painful experience for high-achieving Black students, it did not keep those students from pursuing academic achievement.

Tyson et al. (2005) in fact found important similarities between the experiences of high-achieving Black and White students. The authors found three types of oppositional culture to high academic achievement: a general type, labeling high-achieving students of any race as “nerds”; a racialized version (with race-based labels like “acting White” or “Oreo,” i.e., Black on the outside but White on the inside); and a class-based version that stigmatized high-achieving students of any race as “high and mighty” or acting like they’re better than others (Tyson et al., 2005). This work highlights the similar experiences of high-achieving students across different racial and even class groups.

Additionally, in the few cases where the racialized version of oppositional culture was present, the authors found that it was related to particular school environments and experiences: The “acting White” stigma occurred

in the context of racially mixed (but predominantly White) schools where high-achieving Black students in advanced classes were isolated from other Black students (Tyson, 2011) and is more likely to be part of local school culture when students see stark differences in socioeconomic status between Black and White students and perceive them as corresponding to academic achievement and class placement within the school (Tyson et al., 2005). This research thus points to the importance of the school context and structural factors—such as tracking or ability grouping and the resulting racial isolation in some schools—in shaping the “acting White” phenomenon more than the cultural values students bring with them to school. Instead of attitudes toward education shaping achievement, then, Tyson et al. (2005) emphasize how experiences at school can shape attitudes toward education.

Ogbu’s theory of oppositional culture has also been used to discuss academic achievement gaps between White and Latinx students, particularly Mexican American students. Ogbu (1978) argued that they were involuntary minorities conquered in what is now the southwest United States, with later immigrants from Mexico being given the same status as a conquered minority. Research on oppositional culture among Mexican Americans has been less widespread but has thus far found little support for the idea that Mexican American or Latinx youth do not value education (see Valencia, 2011; Valencia & Black, 2002). For example, alongside the Black civil rights movement was a Mexican American fight for equal schools (Donato, 1997; San Miguel, 1987). Studies found that in actuality, Mexican American and Latinx parents value education, hold high expectations for their children’s educational attainment, and may even emphasize higher education more than White parents (Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000; Valencia & Black, 2002). Carter (2005) found heterogeneous experiences but overall high rates of pro-school attitudes among low-income Latinx youth; though students did talk about “acting White” versus “acting Spanish,” these ideas were not related to academic achievement and instead tended to focus on dress and linguistic style.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, this work challenges the myth that racial differences in academic achievement simply result from differences in the value placed on

education across racial and ethnic cultures. The lack of empirical evidence for cultural explanations suggests that educators and policymakers need to look at other factors to understand and close the achievement gap. Tyson's (2011) work points to the importance of structural arrangements of schooling in America—including the racialized nature of ability tracking in many schools—and their impact on student cultures. Research also shows Black students are significantly more likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers than their White peers, contributing to differences in achievement (Clotfelter et al., 2005). Harris and Robinson (2007) point to racial differences in prior skills—cognitive skills developed before students enter high school—as the key underlying factor contributing to poor achievement among Black students in high school, regardless of their behaviors during high school (while in comparison, Asian American students' achievement in high school is statistically explained mostly by their behaviors during high school).

As these brief paragraphs indicate, access to and success in education have a long and complex racial history. Belief that culture itself is a sufficient explanatory variable in regard to education requires a vast oversimplification of the concept of culture itself, as well as blindness to the impact of history and structural opportunity that shape the outcomes of individuals and groups. It may be a comforting simplification, and it is certainly widespread, but it does not square with empirical reality. Continued commitment to the idea of a monolithic Asian culture or a monolithic Black or Latinx culture does little to forward our understanding of variation in intergroup educational attainment or our efforts toward educational equity.

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Audio/Visual

Hampton, H., Vecchione, J., Fayer, S., Bagwell, O., Crossley, C., DeVinney, J. A., Lacy, M. D., Stekler, P. J., Shearer, J., Pollard, S., Bernard, S. C.,

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think this myth that some cultures value education more than others has persisted, despite evidence to the contrary?
2. If cultural differences did explain differences in educational attainment, what kinds of policy changes would be necessary? If, on the other hand, the authors are correct in asserting that culture is not a sufficient explanation, how does that change the kinds of policies necessary to decrease group-level differences in educational attainment?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. The authors give several examples of these myths in popular culture. Choose a television show or movie mentioned in the essay and analyze the portrayal of the myth that some cultures value education more than others. Look at the portrayals of race, inequality, and structural and cultural factors. Where do cultural factors come into play? What about structure? You can find examples at the following website (which also assumes a cultural explanation):
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AsianAndNerdy>.

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Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Approximate data from the graph are as follows.

Degree	Percentage of racial group with degrees					
	All races	White	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Asian	Hispanic (of any race)
High school diploma	25.5	25.5	25	29.5	17.5	28
Bachelor's degree	22.5	23	25	17	33	13.5
Master's degree	10	10	11.5	7.5	17.5	4.5
Professional degree	1.5	1.6	1.8	1.2	2	1.2
Doctorate degree	1.9	1.9	2	1.3	5	1.2

ESSAY 17 “THEY DON’T WANT TO BE INTEGRATED; THEY EVEN HAVE THEIR OWN ORGANIZATIONS” : HISTORY, INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT, AND “SELF-SEGREGATION” ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Stephanie M. McClure

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When discussing issues of race on campus, students often correctly recognize that racial segregation in residence halls, dining halls, and student organizations on campus indicates the amount of work that needs to be done around race in society as a whole (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012; Saenz, 2012; Saenz et al., 2007). Such segregation is the result of a range of social forces connected to many of the topics discussed in this book. In a search for easy scapegoats for this segregation, students often turn their attention to campus sororities and fraternities—Greek-letter organizations, or GLOs (Collison, 1987; Crain & Ford, 2013; Dziadosz, 2006; Vendituoli & Grant, 2013). On most campuses throughout the United States, the composition of GLOs is noticeably racially homogenous. While this is true across the color line, many students single out and question those groups that are historically Black. These questions regularly come up on college campuses and in introductory courses on race. Even on campuses that do not include Greek organizations, students are much more likely to direct their concerns about “self-segregation” in the direction of students of color, whether it be formally or informally, as illustrated in the classic work by Tatum (2017), *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* In this essay, we consider how and why this is a problematic view, including some attention to the specific history of Black Greek organizations, as well as how same-race groups may at

times serve an important function for ALL students, in the course of their college career.

STUDENT INTEGRATION AND COLLEGE SUCCESS

College is potentially a time of great intellectual and personal growth. Students spend their days on campus not only engaging in the process of attaining a degree but also learning about who they are as individuals and figuring out who they want to become (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research shows that this process is most successful where students are able to develop meaningful friendships and get involved in clubs and organizations they enjoy (Braxton, 2000). That is, to gain the full value of a college experience, all students must be able to locate a group of people with whom they feel safe and valued, and through whom they feel connected to the wider campus community. This process is known as social integration and is fundamental not only for identity development but also for successful college completion (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2014; Robertson & Cheney, 2017; Tinto, 1993, 2006, 2010). This is true for all students, but research has clearly demonstrated that successful social integration can be particularly challenging for students of color on predominantly White campuses (Black et al., 2005; Feagin et al., 1996; Patton et al., 2011). Social integration has recently been related to a concept called “sense of belonging,” which several studies have demonstrated is an important predictor of student retention through graduation (Museus & Maramba, 2011). Self-reported “sense of belonging” is often lower for Black, Latinx, and Asian American students on predominantly White campuses (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Johnson et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018), in part because students of color are not afforded a safe haven from the historical, stereotypical prejudices ingrained in organizational structures (Manning, 2018; Peteet et al., 2015).

As any college student can tell you, campuses are made up of a variety of subcultures or communities that welcome different types of students into the life of the college. The greater the variety of campus communities available, the more likely it is that a greater range of students “will be able, if they so desire, to become integrated and establish competent intellectual and social membership” in the institution (Tinto, 1993, p. 124). The integrative effectiveness of these various communities is largely dependent on having a critical mass of diverse students on campus, including students with different social class backgrounds, geographic origins, unique interests, and racial or ethnic group membership (Tinto, 1993; Willie, 2003). But involvement in extracurricular organizations is unequivocally linked to higher levels of student satisfaction and college graduation (Fischer, 2007; Jackson & Swan, 1991). For example, Museus (2008) conducted an interview study with 24 Black and Asian American undergraduate students at a large public university that was 85% White. His data revealed that for students in both groups, their membership in “ethnic student organizations” gave them connections, emotional support, and space for identity exploration, which increased their sense of comfort on campus. Museus did not find that this membership also facilitated increased contact with faculty, another important factor for student success, although this has been a finding in other research (e.g., Guiffrida, 2003).

BGLOs on Campus

The history of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) on campuses and their impact on their members is rarely familiar to college administrators, much less to college students themselves (Hughey, 2007). It is worth considering this history and impact in more depth to understand common misperceptions. We will consider the reasons White students often call attention to these specific organizations, even as racial segregation occurs in many other on-campus settings.

For students of all racial backgrounds, Greek membership is one way to achieve the kind of beneficial social integration so important for success in college. All GLOs are characterized by restricted membership, as a specific type of voluntary association (Knoke, 1986). The student organizations that evolved to become the GLOs we know today were literary and study groups that attempted to provide avenues for discussion, academic development, and social outlets within a pretty restrictive, almost monastic, higher education environment (Jones, 2004; Rudolph, 1962/1990). These organizations also provided students with housing, built-in study groups, and social support, as well as the benefit of helping students find others who shared common interests and goals. Beginning in the late 19th century, sororities were organized along the same lines, with the first collective organization being formally founded in 1902. These Greek organizations were also always race and class selective at a time when American higher education itself was primarily, although not exclusively, available to a select proportion of the U.S. population, namely upper-class Whites (Barone, 2014; Handler, 1995). Early GLOs particularly remained closed to the small numbers of Black students on predominantly White campuses at the turn of the 20th century (Kimbrough, 2003; Washington & Nuñez, 2005), and research suggests that members of predominantly White Greek organizations have very different experiences on campus than their historically Black counterparts (Ray & Rosow, 2012).

Although most fraternities or sororities moved to rid themselves of overtly racially restrictive clauses around the middle of the past century, this was a complex and controversial process. It most often took the form of conflict between current members who were in favor of removing official clauses but without changing racially marked pledging practices, and national offices run by alumni resisted any policy change whatsoever, particularly when it was demanded by campus administrators (Hughey, 2007). This was the case for the University of Minnesota and the University of Michigan, and for the Theta Chi fraternity at Dartmouth during this time (Lee, 1955). It was in 1963 that all social organizations were mandated to remove any

remaining racially restrictive membership clauses (Whipple et al., 1991).

It is important to keep in mind that, under whatever circumstances, the removal of specific clauses was rarely associated with change in new member recruitment practices or the overall racially marked character of these organizations (Crain & Ford, 2013; Hughey, 2010; Lee, 1955). For example, Deborah Williams, an African American student at the University of Georgia, participated in sorority rush in 1968 at a time when organizations were completely White. Williams described the shock of the White members who greeted her at the various sorority houses. Although she was invited back to three sororities, she did not receive an invitation to join any of them (Baugh, 1968). Patton et al. (2016) assert that new members quickly become familiar with organizational assumptions and values, whether created formally through the organizational structure or informally through one-on-one communication between members. The values and belief system of an organization is grounded in the metaphors and integrating symbols of an organization, which members come to appreciate (Manning, 2018). Given the history of these organizations, overt changes in policy rarely fundamentally alter racialized organizational rituals, values, and practices.

Presently, while none of the national governing organizations collect official data on the racial composition of their chapters, single institution data from a range of studies confirm the racial homogeneity observed by students on campus (Hughey, 2010; Stains, 1994; Vendituoli & Grant, 2013). BGLOs were founded, starting at the turn of the 20th century, in part to offer a Greek option for Black students who were banned from joining those existing White organizations. However, they differ significantly from their historically White counterparts not only in their history of racial restrictions but also in mission. There are currently nine national Black Greek organizations under the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Black students on the campuses of both historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions

founded fraternal organizations to enhance their college experiences and to deal with political and social issues facing the Black community (Rodriguez, 1995). While the major breeding ground for BGLOs was Howard University, an HBCU where five of the nine organizations were founded, three of the nine were founded on predominantly White campuses. These are Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity (Cornell University in 1906), Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity (Indiana University in 1911), and Sigma Gamma Rho sorority (Butler University in 1922).

BGLOs have from the start been more focused on sociopolitical goals, including racial equality and community service. This activism can be seen clearly in many of the initial major service programs that were established as the organizations grew to be national and international in scope. These include Phi Beta Sigma's Bigger and Better Business Program, which was established in the 1920s and worked to empower Black business owners; the Guide Right program established by Kappa Alpha Psi in 1922, which works to encourage academic achievement among high school seniors; the Voting Rights Program developed by Alpha Phi Alpha, which worked to register African Americans to vote at a time of widespread disenfranchisement; the National Library Project created in 1937 by Delta Sigma Theta, which helped develop local libraries for African Americans; and the Zeta Phi Beta housing project of 1943, where the sorority worked with the National Housing Association to locate housing vacancies for WWII workers (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Ross, 2000). Moreover, it is important to note that there are many cases where White students who shared these goals have joined these groups (Hughey, 2007).

For many Black students on predominantly White campuses, even those who are not Greek members, BGLOs are a primary source of social activities, in a setting where few such resources are available (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). White students often respond to this information by suggesting that social clubs and events that are predominantly White are in fact open to students of all races and that

students of color are welcome at these events. Although this is nominally the case, research suggests that at many such events, particularly those where alcohol is involved, the risk of racist comments and behavior can be quite high, creating an unwelcoming, even hostile environment in a nominally race-neutral setting (Black et al., 2005). Research on the impact of campus racial climate, defined as a combination of the racial history of an institution, its racial demography, and the average attitudes and behaviors of current students, confirms the reports of one of the authors of this essay, Stephanie McClure (Hurtado et al., 2002). As a White student of hers wrote of his adjustment to the college party scene [and why he left it], “I used to hear so much racist language from other people at the parties. I remember being shocked.” The experience of social integration may be virtually impossible for a Black student who has multiple experiences with discrimination on campus. It is difficult to come to share the norms and values of a community when those seem to include a lack of value for someone from your racial background (see Mendoza–Denton et al., 2002). This kind of discrimination often takes organizational form in White GLOs, particularly in the form of racially insensitive party themes, including “ghetto” parties and “tacos and tequila” (Hughey, 2010; Stains, 1994; Whaley, 2009).

In addition, as discussed earlier, several studies found that participation in same-race organizations did not increase isolation for Black and other minority students, as commonly believed, but actually made them feel more a part of the campus community (McClure, 2006; Moran et al., 1994; Murguia et al., 1991; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Students use these enclaves to scale down a large campus and deal with it more effectively, particularly as that relates to issues of discrimination on campus. As these organizations often function as a kind of supportive enclave for minority students, they can actually facilitate increased cross-race interaction for their members. Because they generate a sense of meaningful membership in the larger campus community, members are encouraged to participate in other, non-Black student organizations

that promote equal-status contact (McClure, 2006; Murguia et al., 1991). Equal-status contact is one of the most effective prejudice-reduction mechanisms and requires long-term contact among individuals of equal social status who voluntarily work toward a cooperative goal under the supervision of a legitimate authority (Wittig & Grant-Thompson, 1998).

Institutions that refuse to acknowledge the social and historical impact of racism and White privilege help to perpetuate racial inequity by further marginalizing racial minorities. Institutions and students that take these issues seriously may consider explicit engagement with these issues through the use of affinity groups. Though Whites and people of color can occupy the same spaces, there is a need for deeper equity work by affinity groups in which the diversity on any given campus can be used as a resource to help identify and rectify unconscious biases. According to Blitz and Kohl (2012), racial affinity groups consist of people of the same racial group who regularly meet to discuss the dynamics of institutional racism, oppression, and their own racial privilege. Racial affinity groups serve to promote anti-racist practices, advance institutional change, and support the personal and professional growth of all group members. Additionally, these groups help to encourage valid and accountable perceptions of institutional racism and racial biases within the organization. White affinity groups, specifically, help participants feel comfortable in addressing and processing their respective privileged statuses by further exposing group members to White ally role models and effective discussions.

In discussing institutional and organizational responses to racial equity, Carter (2000) proposes four primary perspectives necessary to maintain anti-racist values within racial affinity groups: universal, ubiquitous, traditional, and race-based. The universal perspective highlights human similarities while deemphasizing group differences. Appreciation of the contributions of different social groups within a dominant culture satisfies the ubiquitous perspective. A traditional perspective illuminates the importance of recognizing how one's

culture (i.e., country of origin, language, food, costumes, etc.) influences their worldview and cultural assumptions. Finally, the race-based perspective helps to push the group toward multicultural inclusiveness by emphasizing how racism and racial identity shape the institution or organization as a whole. In addition to productive discussions within affinity groups, Bargal et al. (2004) and Tawa et al. (2006) found that intergroup dialogues between different affinity groups can help to illuminate different approaches to improving relationships at individual and institutional levels. Similarly, after undergoing their own research on the impact of affinity groups in academic settings, Tauriac et al. (2013) found that “the affinity and intergroup dialogues seemed to have greatly enhanced participants’ understanding of cross- and within-group perspectives” (p. 15). Additionally, many students and administrators were inspired to improve the racial climate on campus through biweekly workshops on race-related issues. Thus, it is imperative that students and faculty fulfill active roles in maintaining anti-racist attitudes in order to foster a racially inclusive campus environment.

CONCLUSION

For White students who believe race does not play a role in campus life and who believe they are open to being friends with students of all races, several questions should be considered. First, although you may not say negative things about students of other races, do you ever hear them in all-White social settings, particularly where alcohol is involved? If yes, when you hear these things, are they immediately followed by negative social sanctions (glares, verbal recrimination, stony silence), which indicate they are not approved of by other White students? Or do you and your peers often do as the student quoted earlier admitted: “Most of the time I took the path of least resistance and ignored it”?

It is also worth reflecting on why the question of “self-segregation” repeatedly comes up in campus discussions of race. Often, the

question itself is a distancing mechanism. For those who were and are members of predominantly White Greek organizations (including the first author of this essay), arguing that people of color simply don't want to be integrated into these organizations justifies their racial homogeneity and lets us off the hook for taking action to change that reality. For non-Greek White students, the question may be related to a wider strategy of denial and resistance, which seeks to define a social problem as the result of someone (else's) individual choices, failing to acknowledge the wider institutional context. The issue then becomes unrelated to any action or inaction we may take in our own day-to-day college activities. This is in spite of the fact that on many campuses, students of color regularly spend time in environments where they are the minority, whereas this happens only rarely for White students.

Given the apparent openness of most campus events, it is possible for White students with a sincere interest in moving past highly segregated social spaces to take the initiative to attend alone, or with a few friends, events that are sponsored or organized by minority student groups on campus, including BGLOs. This decision is a powerful individual act that moves past verbal and written accusation into the realm of action. Instead of using the existence of minority-marked events as a justification and rationalization for our own racially homogeneous social networks, White people have the opportunity to put into action the very same integration that they indicate they desire in people of color.

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Education, Symbolic Interaction, and the Journal of African American Studies.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

On the History of Greek Organizations

Brown, T., Parks, G., & Phillips, C. (Eds.). (2005). *African American fraternities and sororities: The legacy and the vision*. University Press of Kentucky.

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On the Experiences of Students of Color on Predominantly White Campuses

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever thought about the concept of “self-segregation” as it relates to your campus? What information in the essay do you believe best challenges the assumption that minority student organizations self-segregate? What other information do you think might be useful?
2. If BGLOs do not exist (or do not exist in great numbers) on your campus, consider organizations like the Black Student Union or the Latinx Alliance. How are they different from the Greek organizations discussed here or from other student organizations on campus? How and why might this vary with campus racial composition?
3. What (if any) student organizations are you involved with? What is the overall racial composition of these groups? Does it reflect the racial composition or social dynamics described in this essay? How or why?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. For White students, following this discussion, locate and attend an on-campus event where you believe you will be one of the few White people in attendance. For students of color, if you are involved in a student organization like those described in this essay (where there may be relatively few White people in attendance), ask a White friend or classmate to attend an organizational event or meeting with you. For all students, take some time to reflect on how you felt about this experience and whether or not you would likely do the same thing again. Why or why not?

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ESSAY 18 “I HAD A FRIEND WHO HAD WORSE SCORES THAN ME AND THEY GOT INTO A BETTER COLLEGE” : THE LEGAL AND SYSTEMIC REALITIES OF SELECTIVE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESSES

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A college degree, especially from a selective postsecondary institution, is commonly valued as a means toward upward mobility. Selective institutions have their pick of an overabundance of highly qualified students each year, and engage in an evaluation and selection process that is inherently about the distribution of opportunities.

Many qualified applicants denied admission to their top choice college or university may question the fairness of the selection process. As research scholars, college educators, and leaders, we each often present to groups about college access issues. After one particular research presentation and workshop in February 2019 on how race-conscious holistic admissions works, the first author posted the following reflection on her Facebook wall:

I delivered a talk and interactive workshop on how race-conscious holistic review works post-Fisher II [*Fisher v. Texas*, 2016] at [selective university]. It was well received, and

students were very thoughtful and reflective. After the workshop, a Chinese American student from Boston came up to me and said he appreciated the workshop and that while he has a better logical understanding now of how race-conscious admissions works, he's still got years of social conditioning making him *feel* negatively about race-conscious admissions. He then confessed (paraphrase): I know this sounds bad, but I wonder sometimes if my friend—a low-income Asian American student—had been Black, if he wouldn't have been rejected by so many elite colleges. (Poon, 2019)

In other words, this Chinese American student wondered if race-conscious affirmative action admissions practices unfairly disadvantaged his low-income Asian American friend, in favor of Black students. Going deeper, the student's confession also revealed an assumption that Black students at highly selective colleges and universities did not possess talent warranting admission. This logic and presumption rely on an entrenched, and often unconscious, anti-Black racial ideology.

Underlying this student's wondering are two key myths about race-conscious admissions. First, there is a false assumption that race-conscious admissions—that is, allowing individual students' unique life experiences with racism to be seen—results in an “Asian penalty” (Chin et al., 2019). Second, there is a harmful belief that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students admitted to selective colleges and universities are undeserving and do not possess academic merit to warrant their presence on these campuses. In addition to representing racist ideology, this dangerous notion relies on a misinformed supposition that academic qualifications can only be accurately understood through test scores and high school GPA—two statistically limited metrics. As we argue in this essay, race-conscious admissions practices benefit Asian American and other students, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students admitted to

selective colleges and universities that practice race-conscious admissions are highly qualified.

Our main objective in this essay is to deconstruct the underlying misconceptions in the preceding narrative, which characterizes common arguments against race-conscious admissions.¹ We start by explaining the legal framework for race-conscious selective college admissions. Next, we share some of our research to describe how race-conscious holistic admissions works under current legal parameters. We then apply the legal framework and our research on how race-conscious admissions systems work to critique the misconceptions presented in the above narrative, which are incongruent with both legal and organizational realities in higher education.

LEGAL CONTEXT: DIVERSITY IS A COMPELLING INTEREST FOR RACE-CONSCIOUS ADMISSIONS

One of the earliest appearances of the term *affirmative action* in modern government and policy documents came in President Kennedy's 1961 Executive Order 10925 (Urofsky, 2020). This presidential directive required federally contracted businesses "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." Through the 1960s and 1970s, affirmative action policies evolved from "non-discrimination (the obligation of avoiding discrimination) . . . into an *affirmative* duty to rectify past discrimination (i.e., compensatory treatment)" (Garces & Poon, 2018, p. 7). Calling for more active anti-racist change, the federal government required states to develop and implement desegregation plans in hiring, contracting, and schools.

Around the same time, some postsecondary institutions adopted race-conscious policies with a goal of advancing racial equity, either voluntarily or in response to Black student activism on campus (Stulberg & Chen, 2014). In addition to addressing employment and contracting practices through affirmative action, they also added admissions practices. These admissions policies and practices included targeted outreach and recruitment of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian Americans. Almost as soon as affirmative action policies began, opponents worked to roll back these civil rights gains (Pierce, 2012; Yosso et al., 2004).

Since the 1970s, the legal framework for the consideration of race in college admissions has evolved, and it continues to be contested through legal and policy attacks (Garces & Poon, 2018). Today, the use of race in admissions must pass strict scrutiny, which consists of a two-prong legal test. First, courts must “determine if the underlying governmental ends, or objectives, are ‘compelling’” (Winkler, 2006, p. 800). If there is a compelling public interest to be achieved, then the court must decide if the use of race in admissions is “a narrowly tailored means of furthering those governmental interests. Narrow tailoring requires that the law captures within its reach no more activity (or less) than is necessary to advance those compelling ends” (Winkler, 2006, p. 800).

Applying the strict scrutiny framework, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled and affirmed that diversity is a compelling interest justifying the individualized consideration of race in limited ways. Colleges and universities serve missions of education, teaching, and learning. Decades of research and cognitive science has demonstrated that racial diversity is a key ingredient for producing important educational benefits. Racial diversity on campus can lead to positive educational outcomes for all students (Bowman, 2011; Gurin et al., 2002; Park, 2018), contribute to student growth and development in skills for democratic citizenship and participation (Chang et al., 2006; Gurin et al., 2004), and is generally linked to the educational and civic mission of higher education (Hurtado, 2007). To fulfill these

legitimate educational goals—a compelling interest—some selective institutions legally and justifiably consider race in limited ways alongside a number of other criteria, in their admissions processes. Several Supreme Court rulings since 1978 define what constitutes a narrowly tailored, and thus legal, consideration of race.

In *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Supreme Court established that diversity was a compelling interest but that the practice of racial quotas was not narrowly tailored and therefore unconstitutional. The Court set a new legal precedent, recognizing diversity as a compelling interest for the limited consideration of race in admissions processes. As a result, affirmative action changed from a policy intended to address the consequences of centuries of racial oppression “to a policy that allows [narrow consideration of] all aspects of an individual’s identity, including their racial or ethnic background, for the purpose of furthering the educational benefits of diversity” for all students (Garces & Poon, 2018, p. 7).

In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the Supreme Court reaffirmed diversity as a compelling interest justifying the narrow use of race in admissions. In a 5–4 vote, the Court ruled that race could be one among many factors in admissions. Simultaneously, the Court ruled in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) that the use of a rigid point system was unconstitutional. In other words, the racial identities of applicants could not result in a mechanical preference, because it was not an individualized practice in the evaluation process. Taken together, the *Grutter* and *Gratz* decisions reaffirmed the importance of advancing campus diversity for educational benefits but further limited how institutions could account for race as one of many factors in admissions.

Fisher v. University of Texas (Fisher II), (2016) decision, the Supreme Court again reaffirmed diversity as a compelling interest justifying the narrow use of race in admissions. Citing its rulings in the *Fisher v. University of Texas* (Fisher I), (2013) case, *Grutter v.*

Bollinger (2003), and *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Supreme Court reaffirmed that “the educational benefits that flow from student body diversity” validated the continued consideration of race in admissions. In the *Fisher v. University of Texas* (Fisher II), (2016) ruling, the Court framed diversity as a dynamic and fluid notion that focuses institutional attention “on the interactions among students within a particular context and under appropriate environmental conditions needed to realize the educational benefits of diversity . . . the term *dynamic diversity* cannot be reduced to a generalizable number” (p. 116). Accordingly, *Fisher II* reaffirmed that colleges and universities have some liberty to determine whether their admissions criteria and processes sufficiently advanced their missions to produce educational benefits that flow from diversity. Because diversity is a flexible concept, the Supreme Court also concluded that “regular evaluation of data and consideration of student experience” is necessary for “the University [to] tailor its [admissions] approach in light of changing circumstances, ensuring that race plays no greater role than is necessary to meet its compelling interest” of diversity as compulsory to educational goals (*Fisher v. University of Texas* [Fisher II], 2016, p. 11). In other words, diversity is not a fixed idea, nor does it suggest the need for a specific campus demographic profile. Instead, diversity is essential for educational institutions to advance educational goals, and what is required for a campus to be a diverse learning environment will be different at various institutions depending on context (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). The current (at the time of writing this essay in 2021) well-established legal precedent recognizes that admissions processes and criteria must be flexible and adaptive to meet ever-changing social contexts informing the educational missions and organizational interests of colleges and universities. Moreover, the *Fisher II* ruling reinforced the legal precedent limiting the consideration of race to a practice of individualized holistic review of applicants.

Despite this established legal precedent and empirical evidence of the importance of diversity in education, anti-affirmative action forces

continue to attack race-conscious admissions in the courts and by filing federal complaints (Garces & Poon, 2018). In 2020, the Trump Department of Justice (DOJ), claiming to represent Asian American and White students, filed a lawsuit against Yale University's practice of race-conscious admissions. Interestingly, in asserting that the practice of race-conscious admissions produced "anti-Asian discrimination," the Trump DOJ removed Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese American students from its definition of "Asian American" (SEARAC, 2020). This manipulative redefining of who constitutes the Asian American population and interests aligns with a long history of White conservatives' use of Asian Americans as a convenient racial tool to defend themselves against claims of racism as they seek to dismantle affirmative action (Park & Liu, 2014). Within the first month of its administration in 2021, President Biden dropped the federal lawsuit against Yale. Two weeks later, Ed Blum²—the strategist behind the *Fisher* cases and other anti-civil rights lawsuits and founder of Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA)—filed *SFFA v. Yale* in federal district court. The legal complaint in the Yale case mirrors language from the Trump DOJ filing, representing an alignment between SFFA and Trump political strategy.

Prior to *SFFA v. Yale*, SFFA also filed federal complaints in *SFFA v. Harvard*, *SFFA v. University of North Carolina*, and *SFFA v. UT Austin*. In these legal complaints, the Plaintiff seeks "a declaratory judgement . . . from the Court that any use of race or ethnicity in the educational setting violates the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" (*Students for Fair Admissions [SFFA] v. Harvard*, 2014, p. 119). SFFA's aim would presumably jeopardize long-standing federal laws in designating and supporting minority serving institutions in higher education (e.g., Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities), the futures of race and ethnic studies (e.g., Asian American Studies, African American Studies, etc.), campus cultural centers, and perhaps even student organizations that center ethnic

and racial identities (e.g., Asian American Student Union, Black Student Union, etc.)—as these are all educational settings that use race or ethnicity.

Yet, in *SFFA v. Harvard*, SFFA and Ed Blum claim they are defending the rights of Asian Americans. Notably, there are no named Asian American plaintiffs in the case, nor has any Asian American testified in court that race-conscious admissions has unduly harmed them. Interestingly, research has found that Asian Americans who are denied admission to their first-choice colleges, which are often selective institutions, are not harmed (Nguyen et al., 2020). Many are still admitted to and enroll in highly resourced colleges and universities. In the Harvard case, several Asian Americans, alongside other students of color, testified that they benefit from Harvard's race-conscious admissions policies and that diversity remains necessary for educational benefits (Augustin, 2018). While dozens of long-standing Asian American civil rights organizations, students, and hundreds of social scientists have filed *amicus* (i.e., friend of the court) briefs to defend diversity and race-conscious holistic admissions, newer Asian American interest groups have filed briefs opposing these practices (Poon & Segoshi, 2018). Although the latter receives significant public attention, the former is more likely to represent the overall opinion of Asian Americans, as political scientists have consistently found them to be supportive of affirmative action (Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2018).

Both the federal district court in Massachusetts and the First Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Harvard in *SFFA v. Harvard*, finding that the university's race-conscious holistic admissions processes passed strict scrutiny. The panel of federal judges in the Appellate Court also found no evidence of intentional anti-Asian discrimination. As expected, SFFA has filed an appeal to the Supreme Court. At the time of writing this essay, we await a decision from the Supreme Court on whether it will hear this case.

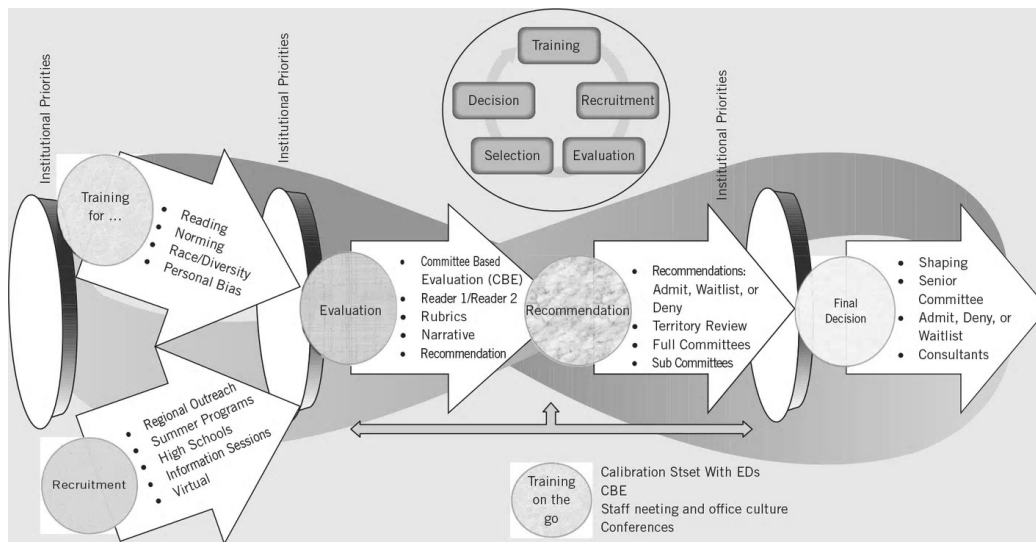
At least one of the SFFA lawsuits will likely be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. The question before the Court will again be whether diversity and the educational benefits it allows can remain a compelling interest to justify the limited consideration of race in college admissions. Although significant empirical research evidence demonstrates the importance of diversity in education, it will be left to the Court to decide on the matter. In the meantime, college and university admissions offices can continue to consider race within the legal parameters and precedents set by the Supreme Court.

HOW ADMISSIONS WORKS WITHIN LEGAL PARAMETERS

As we have explained, the consideration of race in these practices of evaluating and selecting students is subject to significant public scrutiny and established legal parameters for individualized and holistic processes. Still, selective admissions systems remain largely opaque to the public. Many outside of the selective admissions process assume that this is a linear input-output process. However, race-conscious holistic admissions systems are complex and multi-layered organizational decision-making processes. In this section we explain how race-conscious admissions works within the legal parameters discussed in the preceding section, drawing from our recent research to reveal what happens inside the organizational black box of selective admissions.

In our study, we analyzed data from interviews of 51 seasoned admissions professionals with experiences working at highly selective (i.e., lower than 35% admission rate) colleges and universities.³ We found that the selective admissions process is a fluid, complex, and circuitous process through which applicant files are reviewed multiple times through a lens of institutional priorities, as illustrated in [Figure 18.1](#). The continuous workflow of the admissions decision-making process is laid on a mobius strip to underscore that admissions work happens in an ongoing manner,

and parts of the cycle can overlap and fold upon itself. Institutional priorities are used to identify and recruit prospective students to apply for admission, then to evaluate applicants to see how they might meet various organizational interests and needs. As depicted, institutional priorities act as filters throughout the decision-making process. Admissions decisions pass through these filters, which determine how the applicant file, or student input factors, churns through the decision-making steps of the process. Decisions about individual students work through the multi-layered process and decision points, rather than being pushed on a linear track, as admissions staff determine alignments between applicants and institutional priorities. By the time decisions are made public, the college or university has made several determinations about each applicant's file inside of the black box of admissions systems.



Description

Figure 18.1 Mobius Strip Metaphor of Admission Practices in Decision Making to Center Institutional Priorities

Nonetheless, some outside of the admissions structure (e.g., educational consultants, political pundits, parents with children who have navigated the process, etc.) presume that individual applications serve as the primary driver in the process. There are assumptions that admissions decisions can be predicted from a universally applied evaluation of any given applicant's file. However, results are often unpredictable. At selective institutions, an admissions decision is the result of a student's application after it has been reviewed by many in a process of filtering applicants through institutional priorities, some of which are generally clear (e.g., academic qualifiers) whereas others are not (e.g., institutional financial aid budget, varied departmental interests). Trying to predict whether any given applicant is well suited for admissions at a particular college or university is generally an exercise in futility because external constituents are not privy to the interplay of institutional priorities that meet in the admissions office.

In the end, decisions to deny or offer invitations to enroll reflect how well individual applicants have demonstrated their alignment with publicly unknown institutional priorities through complex admissions recruitment, review, and selection processes. A wide range of selection criteria are used in the admissions process to evaluate whether a student will help an institution fulfill its specific interests and goals. In addition to the basic interest in bringing in a class of highly academically qualified students as understood through transcripts, test scores, and academic achievements, within their individual educational contexts, other institutional priorities may include but are not limited to the following:

- Meeting institutional budget goals within financial constraints
- Increasing or maintaining the representation of first-generation college students

- Increasing or maintaining socioeconomic diversity and the representation of low-income or Pell eligible students
- Increasing or maintaining geographic diversity to ideally have students from all 50 U.S. states, its territories, and dozens of international destinations
- Increasing or maintaining gender representation—erroneously framed within a gender binary—often resulting in an interest to seek and admit more cisgender men over cisgender women
- Increasing or maintaining racial diversity
- Filling academic majors and programs with students
- Meeting the needs of athletic teams and performing arts departments
- Meeting the interests of alumni relations, employee relations, and advancement (i.e., donor relations)
- Establishing and maintaining relationships with high schools and community-based organizations, which have been identified as reliable sources for students who can meet multiple institutional priorities.

These priorities and how they are weighted are subject to change from year to year, and case to case, depending on specific institutional contexts and social realities. Sometimes in the middle of an admissions cycle, priorities and their weighting can shift due to unforeseen circumstances like natural disasters, a global pandemic, and economic crises.

Adding more complexity to understanding how selective admissions works, various institutional priorities may compete directly with one another. For instance, an institution may determine a priority to

increase their socioeconomic diversity and enroll more academically qualified Pell grant–eligible students. However, the institution may also have budgetary constraints that limit the school’s ability to meet the full financial needs through aid to such deserving students. These financial restrictions may motivate an institution to consider admitting additional wealthy students who can contribute additional tuition revenue, which can in turn be allocated for financial aid to lower income students.

Admissions offices are tasked with making organizational decisions through a process of cohort shaping, which always centers institutional priorities. Without compromising the academic quality of a class, they must balance a range of competing institutional priorities. The process centers specific and fluid institutional priorities in the review and selection of students from an overabundance of academically qualified students from a diversity of backgrounds.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Within a generally opaque process of selective admissions, there is a proliferation of myths surrounding race-conscious admissions policies and questions of fairness. Anxiety over the mysterious admissions process is understandable given the often intense public discourse on competition in selective college admissions. In this section, we deconstruct two common misconceptions about admissions—the myth of the “Asian penalty” and the myth that race-conscious admissions leads to the admission of underqualified students of color. These misconceptions prevent public debate from operating with a clarity of facts and evidence on how race-conscious admissions works.

Misconception 1: The Myth of the “Asian Penalty”

In the college admissions process, rejection comes without explanation. Rejection can be harsh, and students and families are

tempted to create their own narratives to make sense of disappointing news. However, the assumption that race-conscious admissions guarantees admission into highly selective institutions for underrepresented students of color (i.e., Black, Latinx, or American Indian/Indigenous students) relies on an oversimplification of the process and refusal to acknowledge the realities of systemic racism. The presumption is that one factor—race—plays a determining factor in admissions, when admissions reviews and decisions represent the culmination of a multitude of factors, passing through many processes in alignment with institutional priorities to reach any particular decision.

In the story presented at the start of this essay, the Chinese American student believed that selective colleges prefer non-Asian American students of color over Asian Americans in selective admissions. Specifically, they believed that Black students across income levels, with or without academic qualifications, have a better chance of getting into elite institutions than do Asian American students, and especially those with limited financial means. Additionally, this student assumed that Black and Asian American students experience socioeconomic and educational systems in the same ways. In reality, had this student's friend been Black, they probably would have faced a different set of systemic barriers to navigating schools and other social institutions and structures—shaped by deeply entrenched anti-Black racism—that would likely have lowered their odds of being positioned to consider applying to selective institutions in the first place.

While a low-income Asian American student faces structural barriers of class inequalities and anti-Asian racism, which has been on the rise in the COVID-19 pandemic era (see <https://stopaapihate.org/reports/>), Black students face a different type of racism—anti-Black racism. In both cases, race-conscious admissions practices allow admissions professionals to recognize and be conscious of these different social and economic contexts and barriers that shape individual student experiences and contexts

of achievements. However, these different systems of inequity also produce unequal conditions for college-going between Asian Americans, White, and other students of color, across economic status. Regardless of class background, messages from teachers, schools, and media offer more encouragement to Asian American and White students to apply to selective colleges and universities, and discourage other students of color from doing the same (An, 2010; Bastedo & Kim, 2020; Park, 2018). Complex systems of racism and inequalities structure educational opportunity by race through K–12 and in selective admission systems.

The U.S. educational system is one of the most unequal in the industrialized world, partly due to school funding structures. Wealthy, and Whiter, districts have multiple means and capabilities to provide higher school funding, furthering inequities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Generally, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Southeast Asian American students are more likely to attend schools with less funding, fewer resources, less experienced teachers, and less access to rigorous high school curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Consequently, they are less likely to experience schools as a supportive place for academic growth and thriving, to demonstrate their academic talents and potential.

Still, skeptics of race-conscious admissions often argue that such practices offer unnecessary and unfair advantages to middle-class and wealthy Black students—what Professor Park (2018) calls the Malia Obama fallacy. Park pointed out that using President Obama’s daughter Malia as *the* representative of Black students applying to college is problematic. Although there are middle-class and wealthy Black students who have access to educational resources and opportunities to be strong applicants in the college admissions process, they are still subjected to pervasive intersectional, anti-Black racism woven into the education systems and admissions processes, as we discuss next. Malia Obama is certainly not the norm.

In addition to the violent anti-Black racism made painfully clear by extrajudicial murders of Black people (see <https://sayevery.name/>), racism remains present in less blatant and systemic ways that are also harmful. Whether unconsciously or consciously, intersectional racism persists through daily school activities. For example, research has found negative biases against Black and Latinx students, and especially girls, in teacher assessments of mathematical ability (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). Others have found higher teacher expectations for Asian American students and more positive expectations for White students than for Black and Latinx students (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Still other research has found a general underestimation of Black, Latinx, and some Asian American students' academic talents by high school math and English teachers (Cherng, 2017). These systematic inequalities in K–12 can reproduce intersectional racial inequities in high school transcripts used in the admissions process. In other words, racial biases may be baked into academic transcripts, requiring admissions professionals to be cautious in how they use these data.

In undergraduate admissions, anti-Black racism specifically remains a persistent problem. Bastedo et al. (2017) found that when provided with more information about applicants' educational and social contexts, admissions professionals rated low-income applicants across racial demographics more positively with the unexplained exception of Black students. Thornhill (2019) found that “White admissions counselors were, on average, 26 percent less likely to respond to the inquiry e-mails of black high school students who evinced a concern about the continuing problem of white racism” (p. 468). These realities of (un)intended racial inequities make race-conscious admissions practices necessary, to allow admissions professionals to recognize and mitigate for such disparities if they show up in individual students' files.

To be sure, some race-conscious admissions opponents argue that instead of practicing affirmative action at the point of college

admissions, policy leaders should address these intersectional racial inequalities in preschool to high school (preK–12) systems. However, being conscious of, and addressing, intersectional racism as a problem in college access does not, and should not, prevent leaders from addressing preK–12 educational systems. It is important to address inequities throughout the education system, from preschool through graduate and professional schools.

In general, racism shows up in Asian American lives differently than how it confronts Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students' lives. Although the COVID pandemic has rapidly revealed how close to the surface anti-Asian racism remains in polite society (Jeung et al., 2020), Asian Americans are still stereotyped as high-achieving academic students in contrast to Black and Latinx students. Such stereotypes can lead teachers and other school staff to position Asian American students for more educational opportunities than their peers, while perpetuating a social pressure to achieve. They both dismiss calls for help when needed (Kiang et al., 2017) and perpetuate harmful educational disparities confronting Southeast Asian Americans (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Racial stereotypes are detrimental, even when they paint a rosy picture of minority mobility, especially when they are based on incomplete analyses. Nonetheless, these complex social realities, intertwined with immigration laws that have cherry-picked highly educated immigrants from East and South Asia (Lee & Zhou, 2015), have significantly contributed toward East and South Asian American achievement in U.S. schools. These structural and social realities are not the same for Black and other students of color, including Southeast Asian Americans, who experience different systems of education and social opportunities that reproduce inequalities. Race-conscious individualized holistic admissions review allows for the recognition of these different social realities shaping individual students' educational opportunities and records of achievement.

Returning to the claim that a hypothetical low-income Asian American student would have been admitted to more selective

colleges had they been Black, such an assertion relies on a dismissal of anti-Black racism as materially different than anti-Asian racism. It falsely assumes that anti-Black racism is the same as anti-Asian racism. Moreover, the claim relies on a misinformed understanding of how race-conscious admissions works as a multi-layered approach to evaluate individual students' academic qualifications first, followed by an identification of how well each individual meets a range of institutional priorities. A legally limited acknowledgment of how racism might show up in Black students' lives does not make it impossible for admissions professionals to also recognize how racism shows up in the lives of Asian Americans and others. Still, even though race can be "one of many factors" considered in the process, without strong academic records, applicants—no matter the demographics—are not considered for admission.

Misconception 2: Affirmative Action Leads to the Admission of Unqualified Students

Affirmative action opponents often argue against race-conscious admissions policies through an overreliance on flawed test scores. The persistence of systemic and intersectional racism producing inequalities in schooling and test score averages should not lead one to conclude that there are few or no academically talented Black, Indigenous, or Latinx students. The assertion—suggesting that the only reason admissions professionals would admit Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students is these students' racial identities—is not only legally incorrect, it reveals a racist assumption that such students are not intelligent or academically qualified. It also relies on highly problematic metrics of academic talent—test scores—that have very limited reliability and validity for understanding students beyond their socioeconomic background (Nguyen et al., in press). Like high school grades and transcripts discussed in the previous section, test scores are not racially and socioeconomically neutral in their evaluative power. As we explain in this section, racial and ethnic

disparities are integrated into the design of tests like the SAT, which produce results that are highly correlated with students' race and class backgrounds.

When evaluating applicants, the practice of race-conscious admissions incorporates the use of a range of data beyond tests and high school transcripts. Admissions professionals recognize that test scores and high school transcripts are the products of systemic and intersectional racism. Informed by research, these professionals understand that results are correlated with socioeconomic backgrounds of test takers, undermining the reliability of such tests to fairly evaluate applicants' academic achievement and potential (Geiser, 2008; Santelices & Wilson, 2010). They also understand that the evaluative power of high school GPA, though more statistically reliable than test scores for predicting first-year college grades (Santelices & Wilson, 2010), can still be limited by implicit and explicit biases influencing how schools and teachers treat diverse students, creating barriers to high school academic achievement by race, as discussed in the previous section.

Standardized tests like the SAT alone are not strong indicators of how a student will do in college. Moreover, some research has revealed how the design of the SAT is set up to produce unequal outcomes by race and ethnicity. Kidder and Rosner (2020) compellingly documented how the development of the test is a "covert racial gerrymandering in favor of whites, thereby exacerbating disparate impact against students of color" (p. 51). When test designers found that students of color, especially Black students, outperformed White test takers on a particular question, they omitted the question from the official test, keeping the test items with higher performance by White students (Kidder & Rosner, 2020). With racial disparities and White supremacy baked into admissions evaluation tools like the SAT, these test scores are not reliable for assessing the intelligence and academic potential of diverse students. Race-conscious admissions practices are necessary to

limit how much problematic metrics, such as test scores, are weighted.

Because of the well-documented limitations of tests, some selective colleges—including Bates College, Colby College, New York University, and Pitzer College—have decided to deemphasize or not require test scores. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more selective institutions have followed suit and made the decision to amend their test score requirements for the next several years. For example, Caltech (California Institute of Technology) will not take the SAT or ACT into consideration for the Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 incoming classes. The University of California (UC) system will also be test-optional for Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 enrollment, meaning that students have the option of whether or not to submit their test scores; applicants will still receive full consideration even if they do not submit test scores. For Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 enrollment, the UC system will not use test scores in their admissions decisions. These decisions to forgo test requirements reveal how the admissions profession views these tests as flawed and of limited value.

Yet, affirmative action opponents continue to claim that racial differences in test score averages prove that underqualified Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students are being admitted in place of qualified Asian American and White students. Some refer to research by Espenshade and Radford (2010), which offered statistics showing that Asian Americans admitted to a few selective colleges possessed an average SAT score that was hundreds of points higher than the average scores of White, Black, and Latinx students admitted to the same institutions. As Espenshade has expressed, his research is not a “smoking gun” of anti-Asian discrimination in admissions processes that consider race, because there is insufficient “empirical evidence to support that claim” (Bernhard & Delwiche, 2015). In this commentary, Espenshade recognized that holistic admissions systems include a multitude of factors and application to practice that could not be accounted for in his research, limiting the implications of the findings. Additionally, these

studies were conducted using data from the 1990s, preceding the *Grutter*, *Gratz*, and *Fisher II* Supreme Court decisions, out of which individualized practices of race-conscious holistic admissions emerged. In other words, the data used in those studies are from an earlier and different era of admissions practice. Then and now, test scores are not reliable predictors of college academic performance. Some students across racial identities with lower test scores have done very well in college, and students with high test scores are not without their struggles in college. As such, robust social science research has repeatedly and empirically debunked the “mismatch” hypothesis, which is the assertion that colleges admitting students of color with lower test scores are doing a disservice to these students (Park, 2018).

Despite systemic racism, and counter to stereotypes, there are in fact intellectually talented Black, Indigenous, and other students of color capable of hard work. Relying on deeply flawed test score averages and GPA by race to argue that non-Asian students of color need not be academically qualified for selective college admissions and degree completion is a rhetorical strategy that depends on racist stereotypes and a choice to ignore realities of systemic racism in schools and test design. Race-conscious admissions policies allow admissions professionals to account for the potential impacts of intersectional racism in the lives of individual students across racial identities, as they evaluate applicants’ alignment with institutional priorities including academic qualifications.

CONCLUSION

In the end, it is not helpful to wonder if an Asian American (or White) student would have been admitted to an Ivy League institution if they had been Black. This hypothetical dismisses the different realities of systemic racial inequalities and does not acknowledge the systemic privileges many Asian American Ivy League prospective students (not all Asian Americans or even most Asian Americans, but many

Ivy/elite thinking Asian Americans) possess, positioning them to even consider the possibilities of applying to selective colleges and universities. The college admissions process is not based on one factor but rather a culmination of factors that arises from one's experiences in the education system up to that point. As we have pointed out, the education system is deeply unjust, especially to students of color, and Black students in particular.

The inclusion of race as one of many criteria in selective college admissions processes is legally justified in fulfilling institutional and public interests in racial diversity and equity. Without racial diversity, college campuses can be hindered from preparing and educating all students to become socially responsible leaders and engaged citizens with cultural competencies in an increasingly global society faced with significant challenges, including systemic racism. Simply put, the use of race as one factor in admissions is necessary and justified by a compelling interest in the educational benefits of racial diversity. It is important to note that the U.S. Supreme Court has narrowly defined how colleges and universities can account for race in their admissions decisions. The Court has declared the use of quotas and the explicit boosting of applicant scores based on race (i.e., directly adding points to an applicant's score based on race) unconstitutional but has maintained that diversity is important enough to the nation to justify continued, but very limited, consideration of race in admissions decisions. As U.S. District Court Judge Burroughs explained in her ruling in *SFFA v. Harvard* (2019),

Removing considerations of race and ethnicity from Harvard's admissions process entirely would deprive applicants, including Asian Americans, of their right to advocate the value of their unique background, heritage, and perspective and would likely also deprive Harvard of exceptional students who would be less likely to be admitted without a comprehensive understanding of their background. (p. 111)

Race-conscious admissions policies and practices open opportunities for students, including Asian Americans, to demonstrate and have their unique individual stories treated with dignity (Nguyen et al., in press).

Aspiring college students come from all walks of life. Their varied life experiences, which result from systemic inequalities and social differences, can endow them with an array of unique perspectives, talents, and skills representing the strengths of diversity in the United States. Many college applicants are proven community leaders, budding scientists, talented artists, gifted athletes, brilliant musicians, future teachers, compassionate health care providers, and caring and integral members of their families and communities. They have passions, talents, and vocational callings that span an immense range of fields. Test scores and GPAs cannot fairly represent the totality of any given student's qualities and strengths. With such divergent qualifications found among talented pools of applicants, selective colleges and universities have the difficult task of constructing methods to evaluate how each student might contribute toward specific institutional priorities.

Thus, "merit" becomes the demonstration of characteristics that fit an institution's priorities, values, interests, and educational goals. Selective colleges and universities determine their own mix of criteria for assessing applications. These criteria are chosen for their relevance and reliability in evaluating students for fit with institutional priorities. Although test scores and high school grades serve as limited tools in predicting college GPAs, colleges and universities that value racial diversity, equity, diverse student skills, talents, and potential above and beyond multiple-choice test-taking abilities must include other criteria.

Selective admissions processes represent complex methods of student evaluation involving multiple points of data and information. The inclusion of race as one among many factors in admissions has become a tepid policy to advance racial equity and diversity

foundational to the advancement of important educational goals, and yet affirmative action remains under attack. To prepare future college graduates for a racially diverse world, which includes pervasive and persistent problems of intersectional racial inequalities that need dismantling, selective institutions are justified in using race as one of many criteria to affirmatively and intentionally pursue racial diversity and equity for their educational missions.

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NOTES

1. Although we use the terms *race-conscious admissions* and *affirmative action* interchangeably, we tend to use the term *race-conscious admissions*. Race-conscious admissions is more accurate in describing the policy and practice according to current federal caselaw.

2. See more about Ed Blum: <https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/affirmative-action/meet-edward-blum-man-who-wants-kill-affirmative-action-higher>

3. In 2019, the first author completed collecting in-depth individual interviews with admissions professionals across the United States who have worked at highly selective (i.e., 35% or lower admission rates) colleges and universities. The coauthors are members of the research team analyzing the extensive interview data. We would like to also acknowledge our other team members—Eileen Galvez, Jessica Hurtado, Ali Raza, and Bri Serrano—for their contributions to the study forming the basis for this section of the essay.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AsianAmericanCivilRights.org

Bastedo, M., Bowman, N. A., Glasener, K. M., Kelly, J. L., & Bausch, E. (2017, November). *What is holistic review in college admissions?* [Policy Brief]. University of Michigan Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bastedo/policybriefs/Bastedo-holisticreview.pdf>

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REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

You are the president and director of admissions for You University. (It's a very, very small school.) YU is a selective institution that values the pursuit of knowledge, social justice, leadership in service to humanity, and advancing a diverse democracy. You report to a board of trustees that includes successful members of your community, wealthy donors, and alumni of the university. Guided by your mission and institutional priorities, review and create a class from the applicants listed below. If you need assistance with

determining institutional priorities, refer to the list of 10 sample priorities listed in the “How Admissions Works Within Legal Parameters” section.

For this activity, review the sample of five applicants and seek to enroll two students. Out of these five applicants, you must admit two students, waitlist one student, and deny the remaining two students. The applicants’ profiles and essays are below. Review the students’ profiles and address the questions for discussion that follow the student profiles.

Student 1

- Captain of tennis team; lettered in three sports (tennis, basketball, and cheerleading)
- 3.7 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 7 of 23 (30%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 740 (CR); 690 (Math); 780 (Writing)
- Attended Middlebury College summer school (costs \$8,000 for 8 weeks)
- Grandparents are alumni of Your University who have contacted the institution because they are considering giving the school a large donation
- White female; upper middle class

Essay: Ever since I was very young, I have had the privilege of traveling all over the world. By the time I was 15, I had been to over 25 countries. I’ve always been amazed by the diversity of cultures,

and had the opportunity to try all kinds of foods that I wouldn't normally have had the chance to. When I entered high school, I knew I wanted to better understand the world around me through an academic lens. I also wanted to serve people who are not as privileged as me. So during the summer after my junior year of high school, I was accepted to Middlebury College Summer School. It was a chance to practice being a college student. I took great classes on philosophy and biology. Most importantly, I was able to confront and overcome the adversity of having a roommate with multiple sclerosis. She was wheelchair bound and depended on people to help her in and out of bed. A lot of that responsibility fell on me. At first it was really burdensome for me because it took away from my time in the morning and at night to get my work done. After a while, I realized that I was lucky to not have a physical disability, and I learned to help my roommate when I had time. Even though I had a lot on my plate, I came to an epiphany that it is important to help people. It helped me learn to balance responsibilities, and most importantly it made me feel good.

Student 2

- Works 35 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant to save money for college
- 3.75 GPA (weighted)
- Has taken 3 of 3 (100%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 620 (CR); 750 (Math); 690 (Writing)
- Asian American (Pakistani) female; working class; first-generation college student

Essay: I haven't always been someone who thought college was possible. My parents were constantly struggling to make ends meet, and fighting over finances. They worked all the time to keep their store open. My earliest memories are of playing on the floor of their convenience store. The other memories after that are of being physically and verbally abused by my parents. They were always mad about not being able to make ends meet, about rude customers, and about how life in America wasn't a dream. When I was 12, the abuse I took at home became apparent at school, and I was taken away from my parents and placed in the foster care system. Over the last six years, I've lived in five different homes. Thankfully, they've all been in the same city, close to the high school I go to now. When I started high school, I met Mrs. Kane, who somehow saw something in me and took me under her wing. She told me about Upward Bound, and for the next few years I learned how college offered a pathway for a better life. To make ends meet, I started working 35 hours a week, so I could save money for college. I'm grateful that I had some great teachers who cared and a stable school community, where I started the South Asian Student Association. Last year, we raised money to support the earthquake victims in northern India. I know that I've benefited from support from people like Mrs. Kane and the staff at Upward Bound. Without people like them, I would not have been prepared to succeed in college. I probably wouldn't have even known the first thing about applying to college. In my future, I plan to "pay it forward." In college, I want to be a tutor and mentor underprivileged youth, and give back to the Upward Bound program. After college, I'm thinking about pursuing a career that would allow me to help young people in the foster care system. I hope to also find reconciliation with my parents and let them know that I forgive them.

Student 3

- 4.8 GPA (weighted)

- Has taken 15 of 15 (100%) AP courses offered by high school
- SAT: 770 (CR); 800 (Math); 760 (Writing)
- Elected leader in eight different activities—Key Club, Spanish Club, Chess Club, school newspaper, student government, speech and debate, Academic Decathlon, and band
- Asian American (Chinese) male; middle class

Essay: For as long as I can remember, my parents have been my heroes. They immigrated to the U.S. with almost nothing and have become very successful in providing everything that my siblings and I would need. They're even founders and leaders of our church, which keeps growing every year. My parents came to the U.S. as international graduate students. Shortly after they arrived, they found out my mother was pregnant with my older sister. Life as graduate students was very difficult, and raising a child on grad student salaries was going to be even harder. Several years later, when I was 3, my parents graduated from their doctoral programs, and we moved to northern California. Even with their limited English skills and cultural barriers, they knew they had to find a place to live that had good schools for their children. Last year, when we visited the ancestral villages in China on both sides of my family, I was struck by their humble beginnings. The villages were extremely poor, and only a few houses had modern plumbing. My parents' story, where they've come from and how they've made themselves into community leaders, inspires me to be the best that I can be. They've taught me that hard work in America is always rewarded.

Student 4

- 3.4 GPA (weighted)

- Has taken 5 of 15 (33%) AP courses offered by high school
- Member of a U.S. Olympic team; came in fifth place in event
- SAT: 580 (CR); 610 (Math); 550 (Writing)
- Mixed-race African American, American Indian, and White; middle class

Essay: It's 4 a.m., and my alarm has gone off. I feel like I just went to bed a couple hours ago, and well . . . I actually did. It's time for practice again. My schedule looks like this: 3 hours of practice every day before school; school; 4 hours of practice after school; dinner; homework until about 1 a.m.; and sleep. On Saturdays, I have 6 hours of practice. I have one rest day—Sunday. You could say I don't have a normal teenage schedule, but I have a dream. Ever since I first saw the Olympics on television, I knew that I wanted to be an Olympian. I have been competing nationally and internationally since I was 10 years old, and finally became an Olympian. I try to bring the same intensity to my academics, but with my schedule it's been a challenge. However, I know that the skills I've developed as an Olympian have cultivated strong leadership skills and a commitment to achieving all my goals in life. College will be the first time I will be able to control my schedule and explore non-athletic endeavors. I am excited about the possibilities of being involved in campus leadership programs, studying abroad, and even just meeting new people with diverse interests. I bring a unique perspective to my classes and to the campus community and am anxious to learn from my peers and accomplished faculty.

Student 5

- 3.5 GPA (weighted)

- Has taken 6 of 10 (60%) AP courses offered by high school
- Founder of Rainbow Alliance (LGBT organization) in metropolitan region
- SAT: 680 (CR); 790 (Math); 650 (Writing)
- Latinx transgender; Catholic; middle class

Essay: When I was younger, I thought being Mexican American meant feeling ashamed that members of my family, including my grandparents, had been undocumented immigrants who had a weird culture. So I tried to hide my heritage from classmates and teachers in my predominantly White community. In denial of who I was, I avoided talking about my culture, made jokes about Mexicans, and never invited friends to my house. Because of the way politicians and media talked about Mexicans, I internalized a prejudice against my own culture. This shame contributed toward the depression I experienced during my first and second years in high school, when I also started coming to terms with what it meant to be transgender and Catholic. At times, I considered taking my own life. I didn't want to disappoint my family and my church community, but I also didn't know how I could continue to deny who I was inside. These personal challenges led to the poor grades I had during my first years in high school. Thankfully, the youth minister in my church encouraged me to open up and talk with him about my struggles. He was accepting of who I am and helped me talk with my family, who also amazingly reminded me of their love and grace for me. During my junior year, I also took a community college class on social movements, to learn about LGBT activism. Thankfully, I also learned about the history and legacy of Latinx social justice movements and Latinx leaders, some of whom were queer. The class helped validate my intersectional identity as a queer Latinx leader dedicated to the betterment of society. Today, I'm not ashamed of any part of who I am. I am especially thankful to have been blessed by my family, which has

blessed me with a rich history, traditions, compassion, and love for community.

Questions for Discussion

1. Who did you choose to admit, waitlist, and deny? Why?
2. What were your top two or three priorities through which you made your final decisions? Why did you choose those priorities?
3. Did any of the decisions change or shift before they became final? If so, for which students did those decisions shift, and why?
4. A month before your final committee meetings, Student 1's grandparents followed through on the large donation they were considering giving to You University. The donors are directing these funds to increase the enrollment of first-generation students beginning with this class of incoming students. The board of trustees asked you to examine your current decisions very closely in light of this donation. Would you change any decisions you originally made? Why or why not?
5. Discuss any painful points you experienced during the decision-making process while upholding your institutional priorities and adhering to legal parameters. How did you reconcile this tension as the leader for You University?

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Descriptions of Images and Figures

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A cyclic diagram shows the steps in a selective admissions process, which are listed as follows:

- Training
- Recruitment
- Evaluation
- Selection
- Decision

A Mobius strip shows the workflow of the admissions decision-making process. The steps in the workflow are as follows.

- Institutional priorities used to identify prospective students
- Training for
 - Reading
 - Norming
 - Race and diversity
 - Personal bias
- Recruitment
 - Regional outreach

- Summer programs
 - High schools
 - Information sessions
 - Virtual
- Institutional priorities used to evaluate applicants
- Evaluation
 - Committee based evaluation, CBE
 - Reader 1 or Reader 2
 - Rubrics
 - Narrative
 - Recommendation
- Recommendation
 - Recommendations: admit, waitlist, or deny
 - Territory review
 - Full committees
 - Sub committees

A continuum is at the bottom of the Mobius strip. The center of the continuum points to Recommendation and the text reads as follows.

- Training on the go
 - Calibration stset with EDs
 - CBE
 - Staff meeting and office culture
 - Conferences
- Institutional priorities used to make determinations before final decision on admissions of applicants
- Final decision
 - Shaping
 - Senior committee
 - Admit, deny, or waitlist
 - Consultants

Institutional priorities act as filters throughout the decision-making process.

ESSAY 19 “IF THEY CARED ABOUT THEIR KIDS, THEY WOULDN’T HAVE BROKEN THE LAW” : HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SOCIAL POLICY AND THE STATE

Kara Cebulko *Providence College*

In the summer of 2018, images of children from Central America, separated from their families and sleeping under aluminum foil, flooded newspapers and television screens across the country. In one image from June 2018, a 2-year-old girl from Honduras in a bright red sweatshirt and red sneakers cries as she looks up toward U.S. authorities. For many in the United States and around the world, this crying little girl was a symbol of trauma caused by the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance policy,” a policy that sought to prosecute any adult crossing the border without permission, including parents traveling with children and/or asylum seekers. The administration argued this policy was necessary to “deter” future asylum seekers and migrants from Central America, despite evidence that such “deterrence” policies are ineffective (Wong 2018).

But while many in the United States were outraged, others defended the Trump administration, blaming the parents who “broke the law” by coming to the United States “illegally.” In other words, these Americans, like the Trump administration, emphasized the supposed “law-breaking” by parents as justification for the administration’s actions. But this claim of “breaking the law” to justify separating children from parents is problematic for a few reasons. First, the trauma children (and caregivers) experience from forced separation is well documented (Chiedi, 2019; Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019) and, from a human rights perspective, undermines any justification of

an official state-sponsored policy. Second and relatedly, seeking asylum (if one has a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion) is protected by international law and U.S. domestic law. In 1968, the United States joined 145 nations in ratifying the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which declares that refugees have the human right to request asylum and that countries are not allowed to punish refugees for entering without permission if their life (or freedom) is threatened in their home country. These international protocols were incorporated into domestic law by the U.S. Congress when they passed the Refugee Act of 1980. Third, this emphasis on “law-breaking” of potential asylees ignores the roots of migrants’ and asylees’ exodus from Central America—an exodus rooted in decades of U.S. political, economic, and military interference in the region, including financial support for right-wing dictators and armies responsible for vast human rights abuses in the region. (See the “Suggested Additional Resources” section of this essay for films and podcasts exploring the roots of migration in Central America.)

The Trump administration did not just defend their family-separation policy by framing potential asylees as “law-breakers.” They also defended their policies toward Central Americans as being no different than the Obama administration’s policies. But in fact, the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance policy was different (Cordero et al., 2020). While it is true that the Obama administration did separate some children from parents in cases when they deemed the parent a criminal threat, the Trump administration, with their zero-tolerance policy, made separating children from parents/legal guardians the *standard* policy practice, leading to more than 5,500 children being separated from their families, often in the middle of the night with no chance for goodbyes (Sieff, 2021). It was only in the face of an international outcry that Trump signed an executive order in June 2018 ending the blanket policy of separating *all* children from their parents/caretakers. And yet, the administration did so without

plans on how to reunite children with their family members (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019).

Importantly, while the Trump administration's deliberate policy of separating children from family members in order to deter migration was new in the contemporary era, the administration's cruelty toward children and immigrants are not. The United States has a long history of separating children from marginalized racial groups from their parents, including Black children during slavery and Native American children in the 1800s and 1900s when children were forcibly sent to boarding schools to "assimilate" into European American culture (Adams, 1995; Lajimodiere, 2019). And although Obama did not have a formal zero-tolerance policy at the border, his record-setting levels of deportation separated many children from their deported parents (Golash-Boza, 2015). Thus, it is important to understand that Trump's harsh immigration policies are in many ways a continuation of previous policies. His ability to take such harsh measures has only been made possible because of prior legal arguments and policies made by previous administrations, including but not limited to Obama-era detention and deportation practices, Clinton-era laws that expanded the grounds for which immigrants could be deported, and the Bush-era implementation of Operation Streamline in 2005, which sought to criminalize all undocumented border-crossers.

In other words, Trump's zero-tolerance policy and other anti-immigrant policies did not take place in a vacuum. They came on the heels of decades of ramped-up enforcement as politicians from both parties expanded the nation's immigration enforcement apparatus, especially in the wake of 9/11 and increased concern over "national security." These also came in the wake of decades of rhetoric that conflates terrorism with migration, rhetoric often targeting immigrants from south of the U.S.–Mexico border (Chavez, 2013).

Chavez (2013) argues that political leaders and the media have helped construct (and capitalize on) the "Latino Threat Narrative," a

narrative that posits that all immigrants (and their descendants) from Latin America are a demographic, cultural, and economic threat to U.S. citizens (Chavez, 2013).¹ Through political rhetoric and media images, Latinx immigrants and descendants are turned into spectacles and dehumanized, no longer seen as deserving of basic human rights (Chavez, 2013). The consequences of this threat narrative can be devastating, as was the case under the Trump administration when thousands of children were separated from their parents.

But to what extent is the Latino Threat Narrative, or any immigrant threat narrative, a new phenomenon? As previously articulated, forced family separations are nothing new in U.S. history. And as we will see, defining who is, who can be, and who should be an “American” has been a reoccurring theme throughout our history (Daniels, 1998; Hing, 2004; Ngai, 2004). Because members of a nation-state cannot possibly know everyone in their national community, the nation-state is an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983/1991). Importantly, this “imagined community”—the collective vision of who we are—shapes (and is shaped by) immigration policies that decide entry and removal, access to citizenship and rights, and ultimately, the composition of the American community (Zolberg, 2006). Throughout history, race, ethnicity, and religion have played a large role in this collective vision of who we are and our immigration policies.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS, PRESIDENTS, AND “REAL AMERICANS”

Posing for a photo op in 2007, then-leading Democratic candidate for president Hillary Rodham Clinton held up a T-shirt that read, “Legalize the Irish!” Four years later, Donald Trump, contemplating a 2012 presidential bid, told media outlets that he had sent private investigators to Hawaii, the place of President Obama’s birth, to investigate “the truth” of Obama’s birthplace. Despite the fact that

rumors claiming Obama was not a U.S.-born citizen had long since been discredited, the resulting uproar from Trump's announcement of an "investigation" led the White House to release the long form of President Barack Hussein Obama's birth certificate on April 27, 2011.

What do these two seemingly different events have in common? Together, they say a lot about the roles that race, ethnicity, and religion play in the collective vision of who we are as a nation. The contrast is striking. On the one hand, an influential politician, Hillary Clinton, poses for a photo op with undocumented immigrants—persons who exist at the outermost edge of American society—calling for their formal, legal inclusion in the national community. Notably, there was no media or political firestorm denouncing her photo op with the White, Irish undocumented immigrants.

On the other hand, the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, continued to face allegations that he was not, in fact, a "real American." The irony, of course, is that Obama's own biography seems to be the quintessential American immigrant success story: the son of an immigrant who worked hard, overcame obstacles, and became one of the most powerful men in the world. But of course, he is not the son of an Irish man. He is the son of a Kenyan man. Moreover, his middle name is *Hussein*. Thus, in the eyes of some, President Obama could not possibly be an American, even if he was the 44th president of the United States. It is hard to imagine these stories playing out in similar fashion had the undocumented immigrants been Mexican rather than Irish and had President Obama been White rather than Black with Hussein as a middle name. Together, these two examples remind us that despite the diversity in contemporary America and the racial progress we have made, the collective vision of who we are (and who we should be) remains one of a White, Christian nation.

The stories we tell about our nation's past and, specifically, stories of voluntary White European immigrants also reflect this collective

vision of ourselves (Chomsky, 2007). Largely excluded in the White European immigrant narrative are the experiences of people of color, experiences that often include forced migration, enslavement, or exclusion. The narrative also obscures the ways Whiteness has always provided advantages in access to entry, to citizenship, and to the full rights and privileges of citizenship. Moreover, it serves as a false and unattainable measuring stick against which today's immigrants, who largely hail from Latin America and Asia, are compared. Thus, it is important to debunk the White European immigrant narrative. When we do, we can see the ways becoming an American largely included "becoming White" and were aided by laws, public policy, government programs, unions, self-distancing by immigrants themselves, and by a time of economic expansion and decreased migration from Europe. But the question remains: Is Whiteness still key to becoming an American? Not only in regard to the law but in the eyes of the public?

THE STORIES WE TELL: THE GREAT (WHITE) IMMIGRANT NARRATIVE AND THE IMMIGRANT THREATS OF TODAY

Look, I'm the son of an Italian immigrant. I think immigration is one of the great things that has made this country the dynamic country that it continues to be. . . . And so we should not have a debate talking about how we don't want people to come to this country, but we want them to come like my grandfather and my father came here. They made sacrifices. They came in the 1920s. There were no promises. There were no government benefits.

—Former senator Rick Santorum (R-PA, September 2011, Republican primary presidential debate)

The story that many Americans tell—especially White Americans—resembles the story Senator Rick Santorum told during a 2011 debate. It is a story that contrasts a nostalgic, romanticized immigrant past with a threatening story of an immigrant present. Thus, on one hand, many Americans celebrate the stories of past European immigrants who, according to the narrative, came to the United States “legally,” pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, and were quick to culturally and structurally assimilate—learning English, quickly adopting norms, beliefs, and values of American society, and ultimately, achieving the American dream. But on the other hand, these same Americans fear that today’s immigrants, mostly immigrants of color, are poor “invaders/aliens” who migrate “illegally,” refuse to assimilate, take jobs and resources away from “real” Americans, and ultimately threaten our national identity as a (White) Anglo-Saxon Christian nation (Huntington, 2004, 2009). Yet as we will see, the United States has a history of viewing immigrants as threats and seeking restrictions on their migration and citizenship.

A History of Restriction and Exclusion of Racialized “Others”

While many Americans assume that the United States has always welcomed immigrants as long as they work hard and assimilate, the reality is that from the colonial era to the present day, some nativist groups have pushed for restrictive and exclusionary laws and policies to protect “real Americans” from “threatening Others.” At the heart of these historical and present-day fears lies the belief that the United States’ national identity as a White, Anglo-Saxon, and Christian (Protestant) nation is in peril. For example, political scientist Samuel Huntington (2009) argued that “the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages,” since Latino immigrants are “rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.” Momentarily setting aside the claim that Latino immigrants

are failing to assimilate, Huntington's fears are remarkable for their similarity to Benjamin Franklin's in 1751:

Why Should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglicizing them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion. (Quoted in Daniels, 1998, p. 38)

Germans then, Latinx people now. The message is clear in both examples. Germans and Latinx folks are too numerous, incapable of assimilating (i.e., "will never adopt our Language or Customs"; see Rudolph in this volume for further discussion on language acquisition), and threaten America's Anglo-Protestant culture. Today, of course, the idea of Germans posing a threat to America's national identity seems absurd. But in the eyes of many in 1751, the German threat was real, as was the Irish Catholic threat and the subsequent Italian threat. In all cases, these groups were seen as too numerous, incapable of assimilating, and as taking jobs from "real Americans." The hostility also led to restrictive immigration laws, such as the literacy law of 1917 and the National Origins Quota laws in the 1920s, which aimed to reduce the migration of southern and eastern Europeans (Hing, 2004).

The hostility and restrictions European groups faced were harsh, but paled in comparison with the exclusion, conquest, and extermination faced by Asians, Mexicans, other Latin Americans, Blacks, and Native Americans. Although the founding fathers wrote "All Men are Created Equal," the first Congress in 1790 limited citizenship through naturalization to "free White persons" of good moral character who had been in the United States for two years.² For persons who were of color and born in the United States, their access to citizenship depended on individual state laws (Daniels, 1998). Thus, although some White ethnic groups were subjected to xenophobic restriction

laws, most who did arrive were allowed to become citizens through a relatively easy naturalization process (Ngai, 2004).³

With citizenship, White ethnics gained access to other opportunities in achieving the American dream. In contrast, many (indeed, most) Blacks and Native Americans were enslaved, exterminated, pushed onto reservations, and later (once granted citizenship) subjected to years of formal segregation and institutional discrimination.

Meanwhile, xenophobia and racism led to laws that excluded Asian immigration altogether (on the grounds that they were “racially ineligible for citizenship”) and relegated Mexican Americans to second-class citizenship in the American Southwest, their original homeland.

Racial requirements for citizenship were not fully lifted until 1952. But if Whiteness was so important for citizenship, *who* exactly was White? Whiteness, like all racial categories, was constructed over time, including through laws and immigrants’ own efforts to distance themselves from stigmatized ethnoracial groups (Bashi Treitler, 2013; Brodtkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991, 2005). The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and the Supreme Court decisions of *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923) were particularly instrumental in setting the legal boundaries of Whiteness (Ngai, 2004). Following on the heels of previous restriction and exclusion laws, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 sought to restrict southern and eastern European migration (on the grounds that they were inferior to northern and western Europeans) and ban all Asian migration (on the grounds that Asians were racially ineligible for citizenship). Ironically, while the law was discriminatory and reduced southern and eastern European migration, it also helped these very groups over time, as the law placed boundaries around Whiteness, boundaries that included them (Ngai, 2004).

The Supreme Court also played a large role in setting the legal boundaries of Whiteness. In *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922), Takao Ozawa, a Japanese man, argued that the Japanese should be

eligible for citizenship under the Naturalization Act of 1906—which limited citizenship to Whites and Blacks—because the Japanese were highly assimilable and their “dominant strains are ‘White persons,’ speaking an Aryan tongue and having Caucasian root stock” (Ngai, 2004, p. 44). The Supreme Court ruled, however, that the Japanese were of the Mongolian race, not the “Caucasian” race. Thus, the Japanese were not White and were ineligible for citizenship. Just months later, however, the Supreme Court reversed its own logic of using science as the basis of deciding Whiteness. In *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), Thind, a U.S. Army veteran and Indian immigrant, used scientific evidence to claim that Indians were part of the Aryan race and thus should be eligible for citizenship. But then, according to the Supreme Court, “Whiteness” was not based in science but in what “the common man” said Whiteness was (Ngai, 2004).

Thus, the “law establishe[d] Whiteness as American identity” (Carbado, 2005, p. 637) and had very real effects on who became American and who had access to social and civil rights. Between 1907 and 1924, about 1.5 million immigrants became citizens, almost all of whom were European immigrants (Ngai, 2004). Meanwhile, no amount of assimilation through socialization—adopting American customs and values—was enough to make Asians real Americans. “Real Americans” were those who not only adopted American values but who could “become White” (Ngai, 2004). Without citizenship, Asians were denied other rights, including land ownership in most states (Hing, 2004; Ngai, 2004).

If Asians were deemed non-White, what about Mexicans? Per terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which ended the Mexican-American War, Mexico gave up the land that is now the American Southwest. Mexicans who remained on the land were allowed to become U.S. citizens. Since citizenship was restricted to “Whites,” Mexican Americans were technically considered “White.” But although they were legally White and legally citizens, Mexican Americans were “socially non-White” and the American public treated

them as second-class citizens in their schools and communities—treatment akin to what Blacks experienced under Jim Crow segregation (Donato & Hanson, 2012).

The Historical “Rules” of Migration and the Production of Illegality

Some in the United States state that they are not against immigration, just “illegal” immigration. This assertion is often accompanied by the claim that their ancestors came “legally” and, thus, new immigrants should “play by the rules like my ancestors did.” As Chomsky (2007) argues, this claim is “one of the most oft repeated—and most puzzling comments” in the immigration debate (p. 53). It is puzzling and problematic for a number of reasons. First, as previously detailed, historically, the “rules” for migration have generally favored Europeans over other groups. Furthermore, the rules have changed over time. Thus, many White ethnics’ ancestors would not be eligible to migrate under today’s restrictions, which generally require family or employer sponsorships for migration (American Immigration Council, 2008). During the Open Door Era of Immigration, from 1776 until the late 1800s, there was no “line” for Europeans “to get in” because there generally were no restrictions on any migration (Bernard, 1998). When restrictions did emerge, Europeans continued to fare better than other groups. In contrast, today’s restrictions on entry mean that there are few legal channels for entry; thus, there is no “line” for many immigrants around the world (American Immigration Council, 2008).

Second, this claim is problematic because it ignores the fact that some Europeans entered or stayed in the country “illegally” (and continue to do so). Restrictions on entry reduced but did not stop the flows of southern and eastern Europeans. Rather, the new laws made previously legal acts (i.e., migration) illegal or changed the route they took to come to America. But the sheer number of undocumented Europeans never grew as large as the number of

Mexicans. The question is, *Why?* Part of the answer lies in policies that allowed Europeans to circumvent restriction laws *and* the selective application of (a) legalization policies and (b) enforcement policies.

Following the quota laws of 1921 and 1924 that restricted southern and eastern Europeans' entry at sea ports, thousands started arriving without authorization into the United States through Canada and, especially, Mexico. It was their unauthorized entry (and the unauthorized entry of the Chinese), not the migration of Mexicans, that prompted the U.S. government to start heavily patrolling its land borders and increasing deportation efforts. By the late 1920s, the flow of "illegal" Europeans had already declined. While enforcement policies (including the threat of deportation) may have deterred some migration, many Europeans actually circumvented the national origins restrictions through a different legal route: They migrated to Canada, and after 5 years of living in Canada, they were legally allowed to migrate to the United States. Once in the United States, they could easily become U.S. citizens and then legally apply to bring relatives into the United States as nonquota immigrants (Ngai, 2004).

Furthermore, Europeans benefited disproportionately from discretionary policies, which allowed certain "illegal" immigrants to legalize their status. Between 1925 and 1965, through various administrative policies and discretions, about 200,000 undocumented Europeans successfully adjusted their legal status (Ngai, 2004). The discourse painted White Europeans as "deserving" and as "good persons" whose lives should not be ruined for *minor* mistakes. These administrative policies and discretions, however, rarely benefited Mexicans, who were seen as poor criminals and racialized as "other" lying outside the "real American" community. Under this racialized construction, Mexicans became the main targets of enforcement policies (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Hing, 2004; Ngai, 2004). Moreover, it was not just unauthorized Mexicans targeted for removal but also lawfully present Mexicans

and Mexican Americans. After the stock market crash of 1929, nativist alarm called for programs that encouraged Mexicans and Mexican Americans, often through scare tactics, to return to Mexico. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, over 15 months, more than 2 million persons of Mexican descent returned to Mexico (Hing, 2004). Although Mexicans were welcomed (by some) as laborers during economic booms, they were never welcomed as persons, as citizens, or as “real Americans.”

Today, it is not just Mexicans but all people racialized as Latinx who are lumped together as “the threat” to American national identity (Chavez, 2013) and are the main targets of enforcement. Although the Department of Homeland Security emphasizes national security in the wake of 9/11 (implying a focus on counterterrorism), very few persons from countries the government associates with terrorism are deported. Instead, Afro-Caribbean drug peddlers (who often are lawful permanent residents) and Latinx undocumented workers are disproportionately targeted (through racial profiling) for detention and deportation (Golash-Boza, 2012).

IMMIGRANTS, PAST AND PRESENT, AND ASSIMILATION

Many Americans also assert that unlike previous waves of immigrants, today’s immigrants do not want to assimilate. As Pat Buchanan (2002) says,

Unlike the immigrants of old, who bade farewell forever to their native lands when they boarded the ship, for Mexicans, the mother country is right next door. Millions have no desire to learn English or to become citizens. America is not their home: Mexico is; and they wish to remain proud Mexicans. They come here to work. Rather than assimilate, they create Little Tijuanas in U.S. cities. With their own radio and TV

stations, newspapers, films, and magazines, the Mexican Americans are creating an Hispanic culture separate and apart from America's larger culture. (pp. 125–126)

Thus, for Buchanan and many other Americans, the assertion that today's immigrants, unlike past immigrants, do not assimilate means that they refuse to learn English, do not adopt American culture, and have no desire to become American citizens. Instead, they retain their own culture, live among themselves, and only come "to work" or "to take advantage of us," as one White woman told sociologist Lillian Rubin (1994) during the course of her research.

There are a few problems, however, with this contrasting assimilation narrative. First, it is simply not the case that past immigrants who came to the United States "bade farewell forever" to their homelands. In fact, some Europeans could be characterized as "Birds of Passage" (Piore, 1979), never intending to settle in the United States. Rather, they hoped to make money and return to their homelands. An estimated 20% to 30% of Italian men who immigrated to the United States eventually returned permanently to Italy (Mintz & McNeil, 2012). Furthermore, the reality is that assimilation—becoming more culturally, linguistically, socially, and socioeconomically integrated into the host society—rarely took place within one generation for past waves of European immigrants (Alba & Nee, 2003). For example, the language shift to English usually occurred over the course of three generations rather than within one generation (Veltman, 1983).

Scholarship suggests, however, that descendants of European immigrants did assimilate (Alba & Nee, 2003). But what is the story of more recent immigrants and their children? Contrary to claims that they are not learning English, scholarship suggests that children of immigrants, including all Asian and Latinx ethnic groups, have shifted to English (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Tran, 2010). Importantly, however, learning English and speaking another language are not

mutually exclusive, and bilingualism may be advantageous in an increasingly globalized world (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Tran, 2010).

Some scholars argue that the question of assimilation is not *whether* children of immigrants will assimilate, but to *which segment of society* they will assimilate (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993). According to the segmented assimilation framework, factors in the contexts of exit and reception, including race, will shape specific integration patterns. While some immigrants may experience upward assimilation (and assimilate to the White mainstream), others might experience downward assimilation (as they assimilate to stigmatized groups of color and experience systematic disadvantages). Still other immigrants may experience mostly upward assimilation through *selective acculturation*, or by selectively combining norms and values of both the dominant society and the immigrant community.

Some research, however, finds little evidence of downward assimilation (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Smith, 2003; Waldinger & Feliciano, 2004). For example, drawing on a large study of second-generation immigrants in adulthood in New York City, Kasinitz et al. (2008) find that most immigrant children, when compared with their native-born peers of the same race (rather than Whites), are doing quite well, having higher levels of education and labor force participation. Furthermore, they have had success by joining the mainstream economy rather than immigrant economic niches. Some scholars critique the entire concept of “assimilation” pointing out that it assumes unidirectional change on the part of immigrants and valorizes Anglo-Saxon culture while other scholars point out that the segmented assimilation framework neglects to account for the class and cultural diversity of minoritized groups, including Blacks, the majority of whom do not live in poverty (Clergé, 2014; Neckerman et al., 1999). Thus, Black immigrants today do not just have the Black underclass or White middle class as options; they also might become part of the Black middle class, moving out to suburbia and creating a spectrum of Black identities (Clergé, 2014, 2019).

ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM: STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES AND THE BOOTSTRAP MYTH

Another repeated claim by many White Americans is that their ancestors, unlike today's immigrants, “never asked for government handouts” and instead achieved upward mobility through their hard work alone. Yet, importantly, Whiteness not only provided advantages in entry and access to citizenship, it was a privileged status that allowed European ethnics access to opportunities, including government programs denied to non-Whites. Historians have shown that upward mobility for European ethnics was rarely achieved by hard work alone, and often included actively working toward Whiteness by distancing themselves from Blackness (Bashi Treitler, 2013; Brodtkin, 1998; Du Bois, 2013; Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991, 2005). Whiteness provided access to all sorts of social citizenship benefits, including union membership (which helped achieve safer working conditions and better wages); Social Security benefits (which initially excluded agricultural and domestic service workers, sectors that were overwhelmingly Black and Mexican); GI bills that helped subsidize the cost of higher education; and federal loans for housing, which subsidized Whites in home ownership and accumulation of wealth. Furthermore, southern and eastern European immigrants often distanced themselves from stigmatized people of color as they pursued new opportunities—opportunities available only because they were classified as racially White (Du Bois, 2013; Roediger, 2005; see also Iwanicki's and Moore's essays in this volume).

CONCLUSION

Contemporary political rhetoric and anti-immigrant policies about protecting “real Americans” are nothing new. Both the rhetoric and the policies reflect—and hope to maintain—a vision of the United

States as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983/1991) of White Anglo-Saxon Americans. The rhetoric and policies are not always explicitly racist. For example, Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070, passed in 2010, requires police to check the papers of persons they have a “reasonable suspicion” of being present unlawfully. But what visible indicators exist of “illegality”? As critics point out, this law necessarily encourages racial profiling. Whites are rarely suspected of being foreigners, let alone “illegal aliens.”

What lies at the heart of support for anti-immigrant and “deterrence” policies? The claim that immigrants “break our laws” is an insufficient explanation, particularly when U.S. Americans break laws all the time (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007). Furthermore, when we examine the past and present laws that created high numbers of undocumented immigrants among some populations but not others, we can raise the question of whether these laws are or were just. Additionally, “illegality” does not explain why Latinx and (lawfully present) Black immigrants are disproportionately targeted in deportation and detention policies. According to Massey (1995), the “real nature of the anti-immigrant reaction among non-Hispanic Whites” is “a fear of cultural change and a deep seated worry that European Americans will be displaced from their dominant position in American life” (p. 632). Bonilla-Silva (2004) argues, however, that Whites are not being displaced. While he claims that the United States is moving from a biracial order to a triracial order, Whites—including some immigrants who can be considered “White”—will remain on top of the racial hierarchy. Thus, according to Bonilla-Silva, even if the United States is changing, Whiteness continues to be constructed and to be important in gaining the full benefits of citizenship and belonging.

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NOTES

1. Some anti-immigrant politicians and media forces will use the terms *illegal immigrant* and *illegal alien*. Both are dehumanizing terms as no human being is “illegal.” “Illegality” is not an inherent condition of a person; it is produced by immigration laws—laws that change in each historical time period, reflecting the sociopolitical context of the time (De Genova, 2002; Ngai, 2004). Furthermore, *illegality* suggests criminality. Being in the United States without documents, however, is a civil, not a criminal, offense.

2. Citizenship in the United States is granted in three ways: (1) through birth on U.S. soil; (2) through naturalization, the process by which foreign nationals become citizens after meeting certain requirements; or (3) through being born to U.S. parents abroad.

3. For most of the 19th century, 5 years of residence and no criminal record were required for citizenship (Ngai, 2004). It was not until 1906 that English language ability was required for naturalization.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Hing, B. O. (2004). *Defining America through immigration policy*. Temple University Press.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be an American? What do you think of when you imagine a *quintessential American*? What does it mean to be a citizen? In what ways are—or should—these concepts be related to one another?
2. How has race, historically, played a role in defining who is—and who can become—an American? Did any of these past events surprise you? Why?
3. How might the collective vision of “who we are” help explain our response to Central American children being separated from family members? What about our response to other tragedies, including the murder of six persons by a White supremacist at a Sikh temple in 2012, or to the countless murders of Black folks by police officers?
4. Donald Trump’s campaign slogan in 2016 was “Make America Great Again” and his 2020 slogan was “Keep America Great.” Keeping this essay in mind, what are the implications of these slogans?

5. What are some potential viable solutions for the issues discussed in this essay?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. This essay focuses on the reaction to family separation at the border by examining notions of “real Americans” and how those notions shape, and have been shaped by, immigration and citizenship policies. But another important dimension to understanding family separations at the border is to understand the roots of migration. Listen to the NPR *Latino USA* 2016 podcast “There and Back” and/or watch the documentary *Harvest of an Empire* (both included in “Suggested Additional Resources”) and think about how U.S. interventions have shaped the roots of migration. How might we see these interventions and treatment of migrants who fled those contexts as shaped by race and racism?
2. Read the essay “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant,” by Jose Antonio Vargas (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/magazine/my-life-as-an-undocumented-immigrant.html>). After reading this essay, reflect on the following: What does it mean to be an American? In what ways does Vargas’s story both challenge and reinforce our ideas of what a real American is?
3. We are often surprised when we examine the ways Irish, Italians, and others were depicted in popular media throughout history. Do your own research. Go to the Internet and find old political cartoons and media depictions of the Irish and Italians throughout history. Analyze them. What do these images and cartoons convey about conceptions of race, citizenship, and the possibilities to become American?
4. After collecting political cartoons depicting Italian and Irish immigrants, collect some contemporary images and cartoons of Latinx and undocumented immigrants. What do these images and cartoons convey about conceptions of race, citizenship, and

the possibilities for these groups to become American?
Compare and contrast the depictions and messages they convey.

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ESSAY 20 “IF BLACK PEOPLE AREN’T CRIMINALS, THEN WHY ARE SO MANY OF THEM IN PRISON?” : CONFRONTING RACIAL BIASES IN PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME AND CRIMINALS

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Each semester, when teaching criminology students, we do an assignment in which students anonymously describe their image of the “typical criminal.” Responses vary. Students often write about recent events such as mass shootings (e.g., Las Vegas, NV), school shootings (e.g., the Parkland High School shooting), protest and riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin, or other highly publicized stories about racially based gangs such as MS13. However, the general “criminal” according to the overwhelmingly middle-class, White women students is a young Black male who, in the process of drug dealing or gang involvement commits murder without remorse. Recent examples from this assignment reveal that students’ perceptions are pervaded with stereotypes associated with Black men. For example, students have written “hooded male with baggy clothes,” “Black male, sweatpants, and hoodie,” and simply “thugs.” (For further discussion on race and perception, see Ray and Bailey in this volume.) Although this is anecdotal evidence, these types of responses have been consistent over the course of more than 15 years of teaching criminology.

Generally, students do not recognize racial disparities in those arrested and convicted of crimes until they are verbally discussed. They may recognize their perception of crime and Black men subconsciously, but do not acknowledge it until they have to write or verbalize their image of the typical “criminal.” When and if they do

recognize such disparities, they often argue that this isn't due to racism, because they believe that the justice system is color-blind and racism isn't as bad today as it was in the past. As Brewer and Heitzeg (2012b) argue, for many people "the issue then is crime, not race, and certainly not racism" (p. 383). Students instead look at the "personal responsibility" of those who commit crime, rather than considering a racially biased justice system. Public opinion polls have historically shown White respondents have a higher level of support for the rational choice theory of crime, and those perceptions have been linked to support of a very punitive justice system often associated with the phrase "law and order." Further, White people have been shown to overestimate BIPOC involvement in specific crimes such as burglaries, illegal drug sales, and juvenile crimes (Ghandnoosh, 2014).

Culturally based arguments about a "culture of the crime" or "culture of poverty" have focused on a lack of moral values, single-parent homes, and a failing educational system and rarely focus on the systemic racism prevalent in the criminal justice system. White Americans often argue that certain groups of people (specifically, Black men) are crime-prone, have bad values, and choose to commit crimes; the possibility that racism is institutionalized in the justice system is met with deep hostility. If students consider such a fact, they propose that there may be racist individuals among those enforcing laws, but the legal system itself is not a racist entity. However, Department of Justice (DOJ) analyses show systemically racist policies that overwhelmingly impact BIPOC people in their investigations of policing in Ferguson, Missouri (after the death of Michael Brown) and Baltimore, Maryland (after the death of Freddie Gray).

Incarceration data seem to support the perception of "the Black criminal" that many students and others in the United States hold. State prisons house disproportionately poor, uneducated Black men (Loury, 2008; Western, 2006). This perception is reflected in statistics from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR). In 2018, 87.8% of all

persons arrested for violent crime were White, and 82% were Black (Beck, 2018). In nearly all categories of crime recorded by the UCR, with the exception of gambling, Blacks are overrepresented as per their population (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2014). These statistics are indicative of the pervasiveness of the stereotype, which carries real-life consequences (up to and including loss of life) for Black Americans.

Since 1991, the rate of violent crime in the United States has fallen by approximately 20%, while the number of people in prison or jail has risen by 50%. Those increases in incarceration are primarily due to the war on drugs and the impact of the crack epidemic on Black drug users. If Blacks were incarcerated at the same rates as Whites, prison and jail populations would decline by almost 40% (NAACP, 2020). Further, when analyzing the ratios of incarceration, the NAACP (2020) notes that Black men are imprisoned at more than five times the rate of White men and that Black women are imprisoned at rates two times that of White women. Thus, although violent crime has decreased over the past few decades, the imprisonment rates for Black men and women remain racially disparate largely due to stereotypes of criminality—stereotypes largely perpetuated by the mass media.

Media Depictions of Criminals

Coverage of race and crime in media has been extensively studied (e.g., Douai & Perry, 2018; Feagin, 2000; Loury, 2008; Rome, 2006; Tonry, 1995; Western, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2010). Analyses of crime coverage in the media have shown that the word “crime” is almost always a racial reference to “Blacks and crime” (Armour, 2018; Russell, 1996). Research suggests that not only are Black men more likely to be shown as criminal suspects than actual crime statistics suggest, but the ways in which Black criminal suspects are depicted imply that they are likely to be particularly violent or threatening (Oliver, 2003). Britto and Dabney’s (2010) analysis of

three political talk shows on cable television reveals that people of color were presented as offenders nearly 10 times more frequently than they were presented as victims and were 7.5 times more likely to be shown as “evil” as compared to Whites.

The presentation of more Black than White law-breakers on television news would certainly lead viewers to believe that their social world is populated by Black Americans who are dangerous and prone to commit crime (Dixon et al., 2003). However, when White violent offenders—such as mass shooters, particularly school shooters—are discussed, they are presented as mentally ill and coming from good families and neighborhoods. We can see this in media coverage on mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Parkland, Florida (see also Mingus & Zopf, 2010).

Criminal profilers suggest that all aspects of a potential offender must be considered when evaluating whether a threat is likely to be carried out when assessing school shooters or mass shooters. The assessment is based on the “totality of circumstances” known about the individual in four major areas: one’s personality, family, school, and social dynamics related to one’s behavior (O’Toole, 2018). Further, O’Toole lists some characteristics under each category that include poor coping skills, turbulent parent–child relationship, tolerance for disrespectful behavior, and the copycat effect. However, this same careful assessment is rarely applied to Black perpetrators, who instead are often presented as having bad values and no role models, as coming from bad families, and as living in bad neighborhoods (read: urban inner city). These portrayals heighten fear of crime in neighborhoods with higher proportions of BIPOC people or those neighborhoods perceived as having them living nearby (Chiricos et al., 2001; Langella & Manning, 2019). These messages are absorbed by the public through the media’s long history of portraying the typical criminal as a person of color (more specifically, a Black man) with White female victims—a stereotypical portrayal that is inconsistent with actual offending and victimization

data (Britto & Dabney, 2010; Ghandnoosh, 2014). Nevertheless, the stereotypes persist and are actually part of a much longer history.

History of Criminal Stereotypes

Throughout U.S. history, the behavior of Black men has been strictly policed through both formal (e.g., the criminal justice system) and informal (e.g., vigilantism) social control and for the purposes of maintaining a White patriarchal society. We can see this specifically when examining the crime of rape. As Brownmiller (1975) states, “The White man has used the rape of ‘his’ women as an excuse to act against Black men” (p. 255). Prior to the mid-1900s, in cases of rape when the offender was Black and the victim was White, White male juries and judges assumed that a White woman would not consent to sexual relations with a Black man (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Estrich, 1987). Ample historical evidence has shown, however, that rapes of White women committed by Black men were rare and often fabricated by Whites as an excuse to lynch a Black man. This “explanation” was frequently applied after the alleged assailant had already faced a horrific death at the hands of White mobs (Chasteen, 1998). Lynchable offenses related to rape included “whistling at a White woman, entering a White woman’s home or talking ‘inappropriately’ around White women” (p. 30).

Historically, Black men were more likely to serve a heavier sentence for rape. Black men were also more likely than White men to be executed by the state or lynched if they raped a White woman or were merely suspected of doing so. Punishment during the colonial South was especially harsh. In Virginia, the punishment for an enslaved person who raped a White woman was dismemberment. Indeed, a Black man raping a White woman was perceived as the “ultimate purpose of the slaves’ revenge” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 237). Black men were perceived to be getting back at White men for a variety of injustices by raping “their” White women (see also Chasteen, 1998). After enslavement, the lynching of Black men

increased as Whites sought new ways to police the behavior of Black men in the absence of institutionalized slavery. This trend remains today with the median sentence of 19 years for a Black man who rapes a White woman, whereas a White man who rapes a Black woman receives an average 10-year sentence (Hale & Matt, 2020).

Black men have felt the brunt of the vigilante justice system as well as the criminal justice system throughout the history of the United States; at many points in history, these two systems were one and the same. The perception of the criminality of the Black male still prevails with the stereotype of the Black rapist and has subsequently transformed into the Black criminal or drug dealer. This perception has been accepted by governmental agencies and the White public. The Black male criminal stereotype is weaponized in the case of implicit biases among people in the United States and is very likely to be a factor in police shootings (see also Ray and Bailey in this volume). Consequences of racialized suspicion impact detection of crime, arrest, charging, plea bargaining or trial, and sentencing.

How should we interpret the overrepresentation of Blacks in crime statistics? As Loury (2008) argues, “the nation’s social policy—intimately connected with public rhetoric about responsibility, dependency, social hygiene, and the reclamation of public order—can be fully grasped only when viewed against the backdrop of America’s often ugly and violent racial history” (p. 11). The detection and presumption of crime are indicative of a society that is suspicious and retributive to Black Americans in their everyday life, as we have seen with recent stories of “Karens” and “Pattys.”

“Karens” and “Pattys”: How White Women Exploit the Black Criminality Stereotype

The fear of Black men is highlighted with the stereotype of the “Karen.” As of late, a new schema or stereotype has developed—the “Karen” or “Patty” (and sometimes a male version, “Ken”)—who is

essentially a middle-aged White woman who calls authorities (e.g., work supervisors, neighborhood watches, and law enforcement) about a Black man, Black children, or even Black families doing mundane activities such as walking, bird watching, or having a barbeque in a public park (Nagesh, 2020). The term “Permit Patty” was coined in 2018 when a woman accosted an 8-year-old black girl as she sold water on the sidewalk without a permit (Chokshi, 2018). This fear is traced to White women creating a subconscious or conscious false narrative about Black families, men, women and children. Some White women feel unsafe simply because they happen to be in the same neighborhood as Black people, believing that they are committing some sort of crime due to their race (Bates, 2020). Whether this feeling is subconscious or not is irrelevant; the actions of these women create situations in which criminality is presumed and White women are to be trusted in their assessments of threat.

White women have also commonly exploited the Black criminality stereotype in their employment of *racial hoaxes* or the accusation that a person of color committed a crime (e.g., murder, rape, or assault) when in fact the crime was committed by the [White] individual making the accusation (Russell, 1996, 2009). The stereotype is thus used as a method to conceal the crime (Russell, 2009). A rather notorious example would be Susan Smith’s 1994 claim that a Black man carjacked her van and fled with her two small children, when in fact she had drowned her children by submerging her car in a South Carolina lake. In a more recent example, a New York firefighter was charged with second-degree arson for burning down his own house. He claimed that the supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement set it aflame and graffitied, “Lie with pigs, fry like bacon,” supposedly in response to a Blue Lives Matter flag hanging in his yard (CBS News, 2016). These hoaxes become ultimately believable because our perceptions of crime are based on a criminal having a Black face.

The racial hoax involving Blue Lives Matter is also possible because some Americans believe the Black Lives Matter movement is an extremist group. This false narrative has focused on marches turning into “riots” and the mass commission of violent crimes (see also Patel and Bridgeforth in this volume). However, an examination of the intentions and mission statement of actual Black Lives Matter groups shows that they focus on raising awareness of racial inequalities, specifically within the criminal justice system. The Black Lives Matter movement, from Ferguson, MO, to the present, has created a feeling of pride and resistance against a generation of Black Americans that this country has tried to kill, imprison, or simply disappear (Taylor, 2016).

Emerging evidence also demonstrates that the perception and treatment of Black Lives Matter protests stands in stark contrast to the treatment by police of right-wing militia groups such as the 3%’rs (3 Percenters), the Proud Boys, and others when their protests and subsequent riots occur. This may be, in part, because many police officers and ex-military members allegedly participated in these events, as was the case in the 2021 Capitol insurrection (Gray, 2021). The difference in the policing of protests by right-wing groups and Black Lives Matter groups is also stunning (see also Patel and Bridgeforth in this volume). For example, full military forces were deployed to protect property in Kenosha, Wisconsin, during protests in summer 2020. Police and National Guard troops utilized tear gas, rubber bullets, and other non-lethal methods. In addition, militias participated as vigilante groups to aid the police in protecting property (Lavin, 2020). Increasingly, evidence suggests that the Capitol building protest against the outcome of the 2020 election was preplanned and many law enforcement agencies (e.g., NYPD, FBI, DHS, Capitol Police) were made fully aware of the protestors’ intentions. However, on the day of the protest and insurrection, law enforcement didn’t heed the threat (Temple-Raston, 2021). The National Guard was not called in until after a significant amount of time had gone by. One intelligence official stated:

The reason that they are invisible to us . . . gets to our biases. . . . I'm unfortunately quite sure we're going to find that it was very hard for these decision-makers and these analysts to realize that people who look just like them could want to commit this kind of unconstitutional violence and could literally try to and want to kill them. (Temple-Raston, 2021)

This example serves as a vivid reminder of the way Black protesters are criminalized and abused in a way that White protestors aren't, even when White protestors participate in an event designed to destroy the democratic process and directly endanger the lives of lawmakers and police officers.

Debunking the Myth of Black Criminality

In this section, we deconstruct the myth of Black criminality using two examples of racial profiling. *Racial profiling* is the use of race in conjunction with the profile of a criminal suspect. It encompasses many different activities, but we will focus on two in particular: (1) driving while Black, and (2) stop-and-frisk policies.

Driving While Black

One consequence of the Black male criminal stereotype is the pervasive use of racial profiling in policing, which often leads to an overpolicing of these men. The phenomenon known as “driving while Black” occurs when drivers are stopped because of their race and not because of illegal activity. In fact, the term *racial profiling* didn't become part of the lexicon until 1994, when BIPOC drivers were subject to a disproportionate number of stops, searches, and arrests along the New Jersey Turnpike (Withrow & Dailey, 2012). Stopping someone exclusively based on race is discrimination, yet it is often

difficult to ascertain if race is the determinant for a traffic stop. However, other clues as to an individual's race are available (e.g., neighborhood, type of car, type of music, bumper stickers, county on license plate). In order for a stop to be constitutional, race must be only one of several descriptors of an individual suspect. Race and other factors constitute "reasonable suspicion," which is cause for a lawful stop (Walker et al., 2007; Withrow & Dailey, 2012). That is, if a tall young Black man committed robbery in a red T-shirt and drove away in a red car, stopping all Black men in the area not fitting that description would be illegal according to the U.S. Supreme Court (Withrow & Dailey, 2012). And yet, the data suggest such illegal stops happen frequently.

Racial profiling has primarily occurred in the context of the war on drugs, which has come to be interpreted as a war on Black Americans (Tomaskovic-Devey & Warren, 2009; Withrow & Dailey, 2012). Tomaskovic-Devey and Warren (2009) describe the Drug Enforcement Administration's Operation Pipeline, which began in 1984. Officers were trained to recognize profiles of drug couriers, which included drivers who didn't "fit" their cars (i.e., drivers in cars that appeared to be above their economic means), drivers with dark skin, drivers who wore gold jewelry, and drivers belonging to racial groups involved in the drug trade. Thus, racial profiling became a practice endorsed by the federal government. Further, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has insisted that racial profiling is a more effective strategy to control crime than random stops (Tomaskovic-Devey & Warren, 2009). Withrow and Dailey (2012) elaborate on this practice along the New Jersey Turnpike: "More than 250 troopers are assigned to patrol this stretch of highway. Most of them are heavily influenced by intelligence reports of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency indicating the increased probability that racial and ethnic minorities are drug couriers" (pp. 134–135). This profile is a contributor to the overrepresentation of Black men in state and federal prison systems for drug-related crimes. In 2014, Blacks were incarcerated at a dramatically higher rate than Whites (more than five times); 32% of the U.S. population is represented by African

Americans, compared to 56% of the U.S. incarcerated population being represented by African Americans (NAACP, 2020). Indeed, Tonry (1995) argues that “urban Black Americans have borne the brunt of the War on Drugs” and “the recent Blackening of America’s prison population is the product of malign neglect of the war’s effects on Black Americans” (p. 105). Allegations of racial profiling have led to lawsuits involving traffic stops in the states of New Jersey and Maryland (Walker et al., 2007; Withrow & Dailey, 2012).

Stop-and-Frisk

Research on Philadelphia and New York City law enforcement agencies found that people of color are stopped and frisked at far higher rates than Whites (Buettner & Glaberson, 2012). Stop-and-frisks (also known as Terry stops) occur when police officers stop and detain individuals for a short period of time. Stops are to be based on reasonable suspicion, and officers are required to articulate the suspicion for said search, that is, the suspicion that someone is breaking the law, has likely committed a crime, or is in the process of committing a crime (Withrow & Dailey, 2012). Police are required to have reasonable suspicion that a person is about to or has just committed a penal code violation before stopping that person (Goldstein, 2012). However, what constitutes reasonable suspicion is highly subjective, which causes much disagreement in the courts.

In an era of declining crime rates, policy debates on policing strategies often pivot on the evaluation of New York City’s policing strategy during the 1990s, a strategy involving aggressive stops and searches of pedestrians for a wide range of crimes (Gelman et al., n.d.). A 2014 report by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) documents the racial imbalance that has made the policy so divisive in New York and other cities that the practice has contributed to animosity between BIPOC communities and law enforcement

(Badger, 2014). The NYPD's stop-and-frisk policy led to 13.459 stops in 2019, of which, people of color represented more than 50%, despite the fact that they represent only about half of the New York City population (NYCLU, 2020). Some were likely stopped more than once.

The NYCLU accounting also points to other data that undermine the rationale for stop-and-frisk: It yielded few weapons when officials had justified the policy as a way to reduce shootings and recover guns; police recovered a gun less than 0.02% of the time (Badger, 2014). Whites were more likely to possess a weapon (Baker, 2012). Black people were more likely to be stopped and frisked, even though their White counterparts were twice as likely to be found with a gun (Southall & Gold, 2020). And as NYPD ramped up the number of stops, shootings and murders in the city did not appear to correspondingly decline (Badger, 2014). In the August 2013 ruling on the constitutionality of the policy, U.S. District Court judge Shira A. Scheindlin asserted that the policy was unconstitutional and in violation of protections provided by the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments. (The order also froze the stop-and-frisk cases until further appellate rulings. However, New York City challenged the ruling under former mayor Michael Bloomberg. Current mayor Bill de Blasio hasn't yet dropped the city's challenge to Scheindlin's ruling.) Coining the term *indirect racial profiling*, Judge Scheindlin explained how the department's reliance on data indicating that Black men committed a disproportionate amount of crime amounted to a constitutional violation (Goldstein, 2013). Her decision was partially based on a commander's testimony on the "right people" to stop, in which he was specifically referring to BIPOC individuals. The NYPD defended this policy by asserting that specific people (read: BIPOC people) were committing violent crimes in specific neighborhoods and thus required additional police scrutiny. The police commissioner allegedly stated that young Black and Latinx men were the focus of the stops because the commissioner "wanted to instill fear in them, [that] every time they leave their home, they could be stopped by the police" (Goldstein, 2013). Despite the nation's falling crime rates over

the past decade, this increasingly punitive response is clearly at least partially based on the stereotype of Black criminality.

Street Crime Versus White-Collar Crime

Another factor, which both demonstrates the existence of the stereotype and contributes to its perpetuation, is that we continue to associate street crime with Black people and white-collar crime with White people, while we are simultaneously less likely to think of white-collar crime as actual crime. This is indicative of the inaccuracy of the criminal stereotype. “Street crime” can be defined in multiple ways. It can include acts that occur in both public and private spaces, as well as interpersonal violence and property crime (e.g., homicide, rape, assault, robbery, and arson) (Sanchez, n.d.). Fear of street crime is real, but it may not be as rampant as we think. Street crime is important to take seriously, but it has experienced declines as of late. FBI data show the violent crime rate fell 49% between 1993 and 2019, with large decreases in the rates of robbery (-68%), murder/non-negligent manslaughter (-47%), and aggravated assault (-43%). Meanwhile, the property crime rate fell 55%, with big declines in the rates of burglary (-69%), motor vehicle theft (-64%), and larceny/theft (-49%) (Gramlich, 2020).

Researchers have estimated varying annual costs of white-collar crime in the United States that range from \$600 billion to \$3.41 trillion. One reason that developing an accurate estimate is challenging is the difficulty of determining the intangible costs of crime (WatchBlog, 2017). White-collar criminals are perceived as “kinder, gentler” and thought to be less harmful than street criminals. However, scholars (Friedrichs, 2007) assert the financial cost of white-collar crime is much larger than street crime. In addition, an individual is more likely to be victim to a white-collar crime than being a victim of street crime (as cited in Perri, 2011). Thus, the differences in attitudes and treatment toward street crime and white-collar crime

means that street crimes loom larger in the public imagination than do white-collar crimes, even though white-collar crimes cost the United States billions and maybe even trillions of dollars each year (Baxter, n.d.). It is perhaps due to the hyper focus on street crime that so many BIPOC individuals are incarcerated every year.

Race and Incarceration

Given the biases at every level of the criminal justice system, Black men, in particular, are substantially overrepresented in jail and prison populations. This is often the result of compounding racial biases throughout the whole criminal justice process—arrest, courts, adjudication, and corrections (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2012a, 2012b; Walker et al., 2007). It is also the result of the idea of the neutral application of law, which presumes White innocence and ignores the cultural context in which people of color live, a context shaped by the racist past of the United States (Alexander, 2010; Loury, 2008; Ross, 1996).

Essentially, Black Americans now experience “the new plantation—in the prison industrial complex” (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2012b, p. 380; see also Alexander, 2010), where they are victimized by the unequal protection of law, greater police surveillance, and ultimately, greater rates of incarceration. During incarceration, they often become inmate labor (which closely aligns with enslaved labor) within the confines of the penitentiary and are thoroughly under the control of the state (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003). Inmate labor has been used through the inmate lease system (Blackmon, 2008).

Throughout the early 20th century, the inmate lease system (which was primarily composed of Blacks) was used to build mines in Birmingham, Alabama, and pave the streets in Atlanta, Georgia (Blackmon, 2008). These inmates had often been charged with crimes specifically created to target Blacks, such as “carrying a weapon, riding on empty freight train cars, or violation of racial etiquette such as speaking loudly in the presence of white women”

(p. 67). Blackmon (2008) asserts that throughout the late 1860s and 1870s, “every southern state enacted an array of interlocking law essentially intended to criminalize Black life” (p. 53), which created the inmate leasing system, as well as Southern plantation-style prisons (e.g., Angola–Louisiana State Penitentiary, Parchman–Mississippi State Penitentiary).

The inmate lease system/prison labor still exists and is currently used by several companies, including Walmart, Hewlett-Packard, McDonald’s, BP Oil, Chevron, Bank of America, AT&T, and IBM (Fraser & Freeman, 2012; Thompson, 2012). In a most recent example, inmates were offered volunteer work as firefighters in California to put out wildfires. These inmates were distinguishable by their bright orange firefighting suits and making only \$1.90 per day (Romo, 2020). This labor is cheap; federal inmates are paid \$0.12 to \$1.15 per hour, while state inmates are paid \$0.13 to \$0.32. Some states compensate inmates by decreasing the length of their sentences (Thompson, 2012). In addition, child support and victim compensation are frequently deducted from federal inmates’ wages. According to Fraser and Freeman (2012), “the caste nature of the South’s convict lease system should remind us of the unbalanced racial profile of America’s bloated prison population today” (p. 96).

While “national security” and “crime control” are often given as reasons for the mass imprisonment of Blacks (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2012a, 2012b), incarceration actually functions as a way to segregate Blacks from the rest of American society. Brewer and Heitzeg (2012a, 2012b) and Western (2006) argue that a variety of factors contribute to the overrepresentation of people of color in corrections. Specifically, the political economy of the correctional industry, which includes the prison construction boom and development of private prisons, as well as economic decline and fewer low-skilled jobs, have contributed to harsher sentences. Policies such as “three strikes” laws; “truth in sentencing” laws, which mandate a full sentence to be served (as opposed to indeterminate sentencing, which mandates a variable sentence be served); the end

of rehabilitation as a correctional philosophy; incarceration for nonviolent crimes as a result of the war on drugs; and a general increase in the use of incarceration in response to criminal behavior are all contributing factors to the number of BIPOC individuals under correctional supervision. A more recent innovation is the use of “risk assessment software.” Despite efforts to appear objective, this software has been shown to be more biased toward Blacks than Whites (Angwin et al., 2016). This tool has been utilized in U.S. courts to determine bail risk and sentencing decisions. The risk score is unreliable when examining violent crimes, predicting the reoffending of only 20% of offenders. When considering misdemeanors like traffic offenses, the tool predicts a 61% reoffending rate within two years. The assessment tool has been shown to be biased in two ways: (1) Black defendants were more likely to be falsely labeled high risk at twice the rate of White defendants, and (2) White defendants were more likely to be wrongly labeled low risk for reoffending (Angwin et al., 2016). These factors have led to an attitude of resignation on behalf of many young BIPOC men toward the criminal justice system, given the oppressive realities listed earlier: “For many young males, especially African Americans and Hispanics, the threat of going to prison or jail is not a threat at all but rather an expected or accepted part of life” (Irwin & Austin, 1997, quoted in Western, 2006, p. 23).

Police Use of Force

The final and most tragic consequence of this stereotype is the disproportionate impact of police use of force. Data on police use of force and race are inconsistent, which makes generalizations difficult. That consistency manifests in the wording of incidents, such as “killing” versus “shooting”; the range of perspectives (i.e., officer vs. suspect); and the use of citizen complaints. An analysis of the NYPD stop-and-frisk data from 2003 to 2013, for example, indicates that police are 24% more likely to point a weapon at a Black person

compared with a White person in a similar situation and that Blacks stopped by police are 17% more likely to experience police use of force. The same study used two other data sets from a Houston, Texas, police department and found no racial differences in officer-related shootings (Bui & Cox, 2016; Fryer, 2016).

The Black male criminal stereotype was likely a contributing factor in the 2012 shooting death of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin and many others since then (e.g., Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Eric Garner). Since 2012, police use of force and shootings of unarmed Black men have regularly made headlines. A prime example of this is the 2020 case of George Floyd. A bystander recorded the incident of an officer placing his knee on George Floyd's head and neck while he was lying prone on the pavement. The bystander streamed this to Facebook where in the video, Floyd can be heard telling the officer he couldn't breathe and onlookers could be heard imploring the officer to stop (Graves, 2020). In many recent police-involved incidents, cell-phone videos or police bodycam/squad car videos have captured officers shooting Black men in the back (e.g., Laquan McDonald) or shooting as they reached for their wallets while sitting in their cars (e.g., Philando Castile). According to Mapping Police Violence (2020), police killed 1,066 people in 2020. Black people were 28% of those killed by police. Clearly, Black people are overrepresented given their smaller population in comparison with Whites (*The Guardian*, 2016). This has created a national conversation on race and the criminal justice system, which acknowledges that the system is experienced in a very different way depending on one's race; this was particularly the case after the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his shooter. The existence of structural racism and subconscious bias in the criminal justice system began to be seen as a possible contributor to the overcriminalization of Black men prior to and during arrest (where use of force is a distinct possibility) as well as during the sentencing process.

These questions were raised again recently in the George Floyd case. He was not aggressive; his alleged crime was not serious. Evidence suggests that a White person suspected of such a minor offense would never be in the life or death scenario that Floyd faced (Woolley, 2020). Other recent cases have proven just how deadly Black men's interactions with the police can be. For example, the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, triggered a Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation into the Ferguson Police Department. The police officer who shot Brown, Darren Wilson, was not indicted by the grand jury in the criminal case. The DOJ's investigation revealed a pattern of abuses of Black citizens that permeated the city's culture and illustrate the power of police subculture and systemic racism. For instance, they found that the Ferguson Police Department (1) regularly conducted stops without reasonable suspicion; (2) made arrests without probable cause, in violation of the Fourth Amendment; (3) interfered with the right to free expression, in violation of the First Amendment; and (4) frequently used unreasonable force, in violation of the Fourth Amendment. The DOJ also found that the Ferguson Municipal Court had a pattern of focusing on revenue over public safety, thus leading to court practices that violated the Fourteenth Amendment's due process and equal protection requirements. Moreover, the court exhibited practices that exacerbated the harm of Ferguson's unconstitutional police practices and imposed particular hardship on Ferguson's most vulnerable residents, especially those living in or near poverty. Minor offenses often generated massive debt, resulted in jail time because of inability to pay, and led to the loss of driver's licenses, employment, and/or housing. Finally, the department found that the harms of Ferguson's police and court practices were borne disproportionately by Blacks and that this disproportionate impact was avoidable, in part because Ferguson's harmful court and police practices were partially due to intentional discrimination, as demonstrated by direct evidence of racial bias and stereotyping of Blacks by certain Ferguson police and municipal court officials (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

The 2015 death of Freddie Gray also spurred a DOJ investigation into the Baltimore, Maryland, police department. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Carlos Gray Jr. was approached by Baltimore police officers and proceeded to flee. After he was detained, Gray was arrested for allegedly having an illegal switchblade, which was later found to be a legal knife. Gray was handcuffed and, despite pleas for his inhaler, was placed in the police van without receiving medical attention. During the ride to the police station, the officers claimed that Gray became “irate,” which led them to place him in ankle cuffs. He was then loaded “on his stomach head first into the wagon” (*State of Maryland v. Grey*, 2016). During the ride to the station, the officers picked up a suspect from a different case. The van made a total of four stops between the arrest of Freddie Gray and arrival at the police station.

After the police arrived at the station, they requested paramedics to take Gray to the hospital. When Gray arrived at the hospital, he was in critical condition. His spine was 80% severed at the neck. Gray’s family stated that the hospital performed surgeries on Gray to treat three broken vertebrae and an injured voice box. Mr. Rodriguez, the other suspect in the van, stated, “I know that when Mr. Gray was placed inside that van, he was able to talk, he was upset, and when Mr. Gray was taken out of that van he could not talk and he could not breathe.” On May 1, 2015, the state prosecutor brought criminal charges against the six police officers involved in the case. State Attorney Marilyn Mosby charged the six Baltimore officers days later with offenses ranging from second-degree depraved-heart murder to manslaughter, reckless endangerment, and misconduct in office. All six officers were acquitted (Rector, 2016). Mosby has subsequently faced significant negative backlash, including a malicious prosecution suit from several of the officers (Fenton, 2017).

The Baltimore report revealed similar findings to those in Ferguson: regular violations of Black citizens’ First and Fourth Amendment rights. Essentially, the department found reasonable cause to believe

that the Baltimore Police Department engaged in a pattern or practice of

- conducting stops, searches, and arrests without meeting the requirements of the Fourth Amendment;
- focusing enforcement strategies on Blacks, leading to severe and unjustified racial disparities in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the Safe Streets Act;
- using unreasonable force in violation of the Fourth Amendment;
- interacting with individuals with mental health disabilities in a manner that violates the Americans with Disabilities Act; and
- interfering with the right to free expression in violation of the First Amendment. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016)

Another significant concern identified by the department was transport practices that place detainees at significant risk of harm. In the Gray case, the officers were accused of giving him a “rough ride,” which is a long-standing police tactic in which the arrestee is injured without having direct physical contact with the officer. A rough ride is accomplished by not securely placing arrestees in the vehicle and then driving recklessly so they injure themselves. For Gray, this included being handcuffed, shackled at the ankles, and placed in the transport van on his stomach, with no safety belt restraint, in violation of police policy. This DOJ report further supports the notion of systemic racism ingrained in policing subculture, which is highly protective of its members. It also points to the dehumanization of Blacks—Black men in particular—who often become victims of this stereotype in a way that leads to higher arrest rates, the overrepresentation of Black men in the correctional system, and too often, physical injury or loss of life. The DOJ investigations

recognized these courts and criminal justice systems as being systemically racist in policy and structure.

CONCLUSION

The repercussions of the Black criminality stereotype are often deadly, for Black men in particular. Its prevalence throughout U.S. history and popular culture leads to differential treatment at the basic level of detection of crime (e.g., white-collar crime vs. street crime, drug use among Blacks and Whites) and then throughout all levels of the criminal justice system (e.g., arrest, charging, sentencing, and incarceration). Our conceptualization of the rapist, drug dealer, and general criminal have more often than not involved people of color and, specifically, Black men (and boys). This conceptualization is representative of a long history of racial biases prevalent within U.S. society.

How do we rid ourselves of this harmful idea and consequences? In the end, Davis (2003) asks “why ‘criminals’ have been constituted as a class and, indeed, a class of human being underserving of the civil and human rights accorded to others” (p. 112). This question has come with significant costs, for targeted individuals, families, and communities. Davis (2003) asks,

If we are willing to take seriously the consequences of a racist and class-biased justice system, we will reach the conclusion that enormous numbers of people are in prison simply because they are, for example, black, Chicano, Vietnamese, Native American or poor, regardless of their ethnic background. (p. 113)

Given the overt and covert racism of the criminal justice system, what is the solution? Can society deal with not having a scapegoat

for White maladies? Less harmful punishments are available (e.g., restorative-based justice programs). Their implementations are thwarted by the efficiency of the prison industrial complex, among many other factors. Examinations of the purpose of the criminal justice system are badly needed due to its importance in a given society. Reform and abolition-based approaches are complicated and messy. These types of policies require a nuanced view of human behavior from many perspectives, including those judging and more importantly those being judged.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe that arrest and incarceration reflect true and actual amounts of crime? Why or why not? What do you believe official crime data tell us about the nature of crime in America? How would you explain the overrepresentation of people of color at all stages of the criminal justice system?
2. According to the essay, how has the history of the United States contributed to the development of the Black criminal stereotype? Is this criminal stereotype applied to other groups? How is the stereotype of the Black rapist still prevalent in current American society? Why were White women seen as entities to be protected? Are White women still portrayed this way in regard to crime?
3. Listen to the NPR clip titled “What’s in a Karen?” (<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/14/891177904/whats-in-a-karen>). Explain the stereotype of the “Karen.” What are the fears of

these women? Are they legitimized in society? What is the consequence of these fears?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Select a popular television crime show or procedural (e.g., *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*). Conduct a content analysis of four to six episodes. Is the Black criminal stereotype prevalent? If yes, what are the crimes portrayed? Who are the victims?
2. As a class, construct a survey instrument about perceptions of the police. Gather data from a representative sample of the student body at your college and compare the findings across racial and ethnic groups.

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ESSAY 21 “MY MOM SAYS WE ARE HALF CHEROKEE” : INDIGENOUS IDENTITY, BEING, AND BELONGING

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In her bid as a 2020 Democratic candidate for president, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren found herself on the defensive when President Donald J. Trump repeatedly called her “Pocahontas.” For years, Warren had claimed Indigenous ancestry. In an attempt to address the nagging controversy about her claim, Warren took a DNA ancestry test. The results showed a small but detectable amount of Native American DNA, possibly an Indigenous ancestor six to ten generations removed. Warren had long claimed that she was part Tsalagi (Cherokee) and Lenape (Delaware) based on family stories she heard growing up. However, in turning to DNA testing to silence her critics, she reinforced one of the most insidious ways Americans think about race as an innate and immutable biological fact.

In the past ten years, DNA ancestry test kits have become all the rage. Coinciding with the adoption of direct-to-consumer genetic testing is the budding popularization of family history and identity politics—a curious collision of interests, to be sure. The two phenomena—increasing technological advancements vis-à-vis genetic testing and the dynamics of determining identity—are indeed linked. By spitting into a plastic tube or swabbing the inside of a cheek, companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe promise their consumers insight into the deepest reaches of their ancestry. Simultaneously, the strongest appeal by these producers of consumer genetic testing is their promise to tell consumers *who* and *what* they are. The power to identify combined with various technologies of identification serve multiple, often self-serving

purposes. Unfortunately, the implications of their coincidence are often lost on consumers of such tests seeking answers to questions of identity.

By 2019, more than 26 million Americans had taken an at-home DNA ancestry test. Should interest in identity, family history, and genealogy continue, by 2021, the most prolific purveyors of such testing will have collected and stored the genetic data of more than 100 million people, according to DNA test kit vendors and market analysts.

From Gonzales, A. A., & Kertész J. (2020). Indigenous identity, being, and belonging. *Contexts*, 19(3), 28–33. Reprinted with permission from the publisher.

For many, ancestry is synonymous with identity, but there are important qualitative distinctions between *what* you are and *who* you are. To the extent that DNA ancestry tests might tell you *what* you are based on an algorithm of reference data sets, it cannot tell you *who* you are. While identity, or *who* you are matters, for many, so does *what* you are. Without an identifiable ancestry, one's very existence is cast into doubt. Nevertheless, identity and ancestry are not the same, nor should they be confused with one another.

Ancestry refers to infinite lines of descent as well as sociopolitical, religious, and cultural origins. Identity, however, connotes in total the beliefs, values, and expressions that encompass the memories, experiences, and relations that enable individuals as well as groups to construct themselves in the present. For those seeking to establish or confirm claims to a Native American identity, this latest technology makes tangible the necessary evidence to do so. By unlocking timeless sequences of DNA, genetic testing vendors purport to determine *what* you are. Scientists interpret clues within genetic sequences embedded in blood, saliva, bones, and other bodily traces that have been passed down through successive generations.

Genealogy companies such as Ancestry and 23andMe render the genetic material that they test into decipherable, easy-to-read pie charts that neatly divide percentages and probabilities derived from algorithms obtained through data accumulation. In so doing, for myriad consumers, the interpretive work of science translates hereditary genetic material into present-day constructs of identity, thereby determining not only *what* you are but also *who* you are. Moreover, while testing companies refrain from using the terms *race* or *ethnicity*, their interpretations of genetic material invariably translate into contemporary categories of race. The ramifications of marketing identity through genetic testing are significant. Consumers are encouraged to embrace or distance themselves from DNA test kit ascriptions of racialized identities while confirming their belief in racial difference. By examining the means by which DNA tests assess genetic material such as blood and bones, we seek to both interrogate their myth-making power, while subverting them with Indigenous constructs of belonging.

Prior to Elizabeth Warren's presidential bid, questions concerning her ancestry first surfaced during her run for the U.S. Senate in 2012. The *Boston Herald* reported that she registered as a minority in law school directories in the 1980s. Warren defended herself by claiming that she was told of her Native American ancestry in family stories passed down over generations and claims that she never furthered her career by using her heritage to gain an advantage.

In 2018, Warren joined the thousands of Americans turning to DNA ancestry testing to discover or recover the truth of their identity. She consulted Carlos D. Bustamante, a biomedical data science professor at Stanford University's School of Medicine whose lab focuses on population genomics and global health, clinical and medical genomics, and ancient DNA. Notably, Bustamante had already gained popularity—unusual for a “hard” scientist—on PBS's *Finding Your Roots*, with Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In turning to Bustamante's testing lab to silence her critics, Warren unwittingly reinforced two myths of the American imagination: first, the veracity

of biologically based notions of race and identity, and second, the long-held belief that many White Americans have Indigenous ancestry.

One source of evidence of this myth-making can be found in Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924. White fears of tainted "Negro" blood seeping into White lineages informed the act and similar race laws throughout the American South. To maintain White racial purity, Virginia's legislature made it unlawful for a White person to marry outside of their race. In so doing, the state racialized all non-Whites, whether "negro, Mongolian, American Indian, Asiatic Indian, Malay, or any mixture thereof, or any other non-Caucasic strains" as "colored," with one notable exception. Known as the "Pocahontas Exception," the act ensured that those members of Virginia's elite families who claimed descent from Mataoka, better known as "Pocahontas," were irrefutably and legally White.

Among citizens and descendants of contemporary tribal nations, Warren's situation underscores the abiding interest that many people have in confirming claims to Indigenous ancestry. When individuals who most consistently identify as White assume another racialized identity, the behavior advances the understanding that historically, politically, and culturally constructed identities can be assumed and consumed without consequence, without cost, and without understanding.

What makes Warren's experience of laying claim to Indigenous ancestry unusual, and indeed, laudably exceptional, is that in her apologia to contemporary Native Americans, and specifically, the Cherokee Nation, Warren owned her own actions, "having listened and learned." In light of the controversy, Warren removed a video of her family's ancestral history and released a 9,000-word plan on tribal rights that ran twice the length of her other campaign proposals. Nevertheless, for the Cherokee Nation, as well as a number of Indigenous scholars, Warren's planned policy and her

apology rang hollow, was dismissed, and failed to receive serious consideration.

Blood

The popularity and proliferation of genetic ancestry tests aimed at would-be Native American clients is only the latest iteration of an ideological legacy of race and racial superiority rooted in the body, and specifically, the blood. The use of “blood” to trace ancestry has multiple historical roots. In the English historical context, “blood” made material the mechanism whereby ancestry, lineage, and descent justified or delegitimized claims to property and status. Blood was infused with properties that confirmed or denied the tell-tale traces of authenticity. Authenticity, or its lack, was irretrievably embedded in either pure or suspect admixtures of illicit blood.

For post-Columbian Indigenous peoples throughout what is now the United States, “blood” initially operated as a metaphorical translation of forms of relatedness and lineage. Over time however, “blood” as metaphor devolved even as its literalness increased, gradually mirroring a European biologic of identity. In the 500 plus years since, technologies of establishing relatedness, identification, and evaluation began to require the measurement of “blood quantum.” The belief that “Indianness” can be measured by the amount of “Indian blood” that one possessed gave new meaning to Indigenous understandings of “descent,” “lineage” and “ancestry.” At the same time, this understanding usurped Indigenous beliefs about identity and belonging rooted in culture, kinship, and community.

As of February 2020, there were 574 tribal nations legally recognized by the U.S. federal government. Among these, over 70% require a minimum blood quantum for purposes of attaining tribal citizenship. Similar to the one-drop rule once used to define someone as “Negro,” or anyone with known or purported African ancestry, blood quantum rules exemplify the elbowing guidance of the federal

authority since the 19th century that defined as “Indian” persons with some minimum percentage of “Indian blood,” usually one-quarter or more. Rooted in a biologic of race, these directives were incorporated into tribal constitutions that determine both tribal belonging and citizenship status. To the extent that DNA ancestry tests may provide evidence of generic Indigenous ancestry, they fall far short of providing the proof needed for tribal citizenship. This is why, in response to the release of Elizabeth Warren’s DNA test result, the Cherokee Nation released a statement that said in part that DNA tests are inappropriate and useless in determining tribal citizenship.

Bones

Many who turn to DNA tests in search of Indigenous ancestry reinforce antiquated constructions of race and the abilities of science to determine identity (see also Buffington in this volume). Yet, contemporary DNA ancestry testing, and the marketing strategies that herald it as an unassailable scientific determinant of race, misinform people as to its ability to shed light on *who* or *what* they are. There are also significant legal, historical, and ethical implications upon which such claims rely as they naturalize biological notions of relatedness apart from Indigenous cultural moorings that are rooted in people and place. A striking example of the differing means by which many Americans determine racialized relatedness from the ways in which Indigenous peoples establish *being* and *belonging* is the two-decade saga of The Ancient One, better known as “Kennewick Man.”

In 2017, the 9,000-year-old remains of The Ancient One were returned to a coalition of tribal nations (the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation, and the Wanapum Band of Priest Rapids). Claiming him as their ancestor, for 21 years they sought to rebury

him. Shortly after his discovery and subsequent appropriation in the name of scientific inquiry into his origins, anthropologist James Chatters purposed the skull to mold a sculpture of what The Ancient One looked like. Naming him “Kennewick Man,” Chatters described him as “Caucasoid,” who lacked the “definitive characteristics of the classic Mongoloid stock.” Chatters further noted that he could easily “lose him in the streets of most major cities.”

To Chatters, The Ancient One did not “look” Native American. Herein began a tale of multiple claimants: First, The Ancient One himself, whose post-mortem existence as the ancestor of present-day Indigenous Columbian Basin peoples, was now under threat. Second, Nordic racial paganists now claimed that, as their ancestor, The Ancient One represented evidence of an even earlier European Indigeneity in the Americas. Lastly, a group of scholars—represented by the Army Corps of Engineers, which oversaw the land where The Ancient One was “discovered”—sued the federal government in order to prevent his remains from returning to the Columbian Basin peoples under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Later still, physical anthropologists at the Smithsonian Institution completed an exhaustive inventory of The Ancient One’s bones, from probing his cavity-free teeth, to disarticulating, exploring, measuring, and weighing every inch of what his skeleton might reveal. Twenty years after his “discovery” in 1997, cranial analysis combined with genetic comparisons concluded that The Ancient One evidenced continuity with Indigenous North Americans over the course of eight millennia.

Belonging

Marketers of genetic ancestry testing readily exploit the American interest in genealogy. What is at the heart of such an abiding interest? The preoccupation with *who* we are and *what* we are has plagued Americans since the inception of the nation. The need to

root oneself, to belong has always been a core American anxiety. This highlights the perniciously appropriative behavior all too common among non-Indigenous individuals. Indeed, persons in the present who otherwise identify as White need never be cognizant of or own any historical attempts of Native erasure by assigning to themselves a shared ancestry unencumbered by that history. More than happy to perpetuate a narrative of the “vanishing Indian,” these formerly reviled, historically subjugated peoples were blithely absorbed into the body politic of the nation, as well as the bodies of its citizens. Once made to vanish, Native Americans can now safely return in a strand of DNA. We as observers, academics, and participants in the varied dynamics of American identity politics should keep in mind the histories and narrative inventions that inform what it means to be Indigenous in the 21st century.

At a 2017 event honoring the service of Navajo Code Talkers during World War II, former President Trump acknowledged the historical presence of Indigenous peoples by stating, “You were here long before any of us were here.” Implicitly, this is the same rhetoric that Trump wielded against immigrants. This brand of American myth-making privileges some Americans to a kind of Indigeneity that requires the erasure of their own immigrant ancestry in order to legitimize their claims to *being* American and *belonging* to the nation-state.

Indeed, Trump made a career of policing Indigenous identities. In 1993, while still an entrepreneur, Trump campaigned to prevent New Jersey’s Ramapough Mountain Indians from entering into the gaming industry in Atlantic City. He invoked blood-based beliefs about Indigenous identity when he stated, “I might have more Indian blood than a lot of the so-called Indians that are trying to open up the reservations.” In a similar vein, Trump attempted to delegitimize the Mashantucket Pequot, who operate one of the largest, most lucrative gaming operations in the United States, saying, “They don’t look like Indians to me.” For Trump, as for many other Americans, beliefs about race, whether based on blood, ancestry, or phenotype, inform

an understanding of *who* can be Indigenous and *what* it means to be Native American.

In contrast to Trump's narrative of Indigenous illegitimacy and inauthenticity, the Cherokee Nation challenged Warren's claims to Cherokee heritage and racialized constructions of identity. In a statement issued by the Cherokee Nation, "being a Cherokee Nation tribal citizen is rooted in centuries of culture and laws, not through DNA tests." The Cherokee do not claim to base their response to Warren on a construction of who may or may not be Native American. Rather, their response is specific to the Cherokee construct of *belonging*, and thus, *being*. Here, the Cherokee logic of being and belonging disables a racialized construction of who is or is not Cherokee and leaves to other tribal nations to define for themselves *who* and *what* they are. It also negates race as a premise for the legitimization of both people and personhood.

And yet, the concept of "race," with its politicized pathology of purity and blood, continues to operate as a fundamental factor in the construction of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities. In the 500 plus years since Columbus made landfall, and well over a century since the abolition of slavery, biologically based concepts of race remain deeply embedded and infused throughout U.S. society and the American psyche. Advances in genetic technologies have only strengthened such thinking about notions of individual and collective identity and the fundamental basis of kinship and relatedness.

For many Americans, Native identity is understood as something that resides in bodily traces, from blood and bones to DNA. The idea of genetics as an objective science continues to uncritically inform consumers, courts of law, legislators, and policymakers. How extraordinary that the past can be reduced to the flawless minimalism of DNA. Yet, this approach operates in accordance with an increasingly fragmented, socially isolating approach to constructs of family, ancestry, and descent. All too vulnerable are meanings of

kinship across multiple historical and sociocultural perspectives, as well as how such meanings reflect, refract, and conflict with larger social forces.

The possibilities offered by genetics perpetuate and promote ideas of identity premised on a cultural logic rooted in biologically based notions of ancestry and descent. In turn, this cultural logic stimulated the development of technologies that rely on the collection and analysis of both bodily traces and resulting data upon which science relies. In lieu of a larger knowledge of history and individual family histories, contemporary non-Indigenous consumers have taken to purchasing DNA kits to better determine their ancestry, and thus, their identity. Moreover, Americans, in particular, seek confirmation of family histories that purport to include a distant, illusory Indigenous ancestor upon which they can firmly assert a Native American identity. The simplistic construction of Native American identity defined solely by DNA is not only naïve but also self-serving and ultimately, misinformed. In this sense, you are never entirely, and certainly never exclusively, your genes.

For many Americans, the idiom of “DNA,” like that of “blood,” conjures up powerful notions of ancestry and identity, being and belonging. For Elizabeth Warren and the thousands of Americans seeking proof of their “Indianness,” genetic ancestry testing provides a point of leverage upon which they can assert claims to Indigeneity based on a “percentage” of DNA shared with Indigenous peoples. In a *New York Times* article, Kim TallBear, an Indigenous scholar at the University of Alberta argued that such testing privileges Whiteness and relies on “settler-colonial definitions” of Indigenous identity. It is in this abstract world of ideas as well as a lived reality that colonialism creates and reinforces the identities of the colonized in opposition to the colonizer.

The view of race as social rather than biological has been an enduring feature of sociological studies of race. The orthodoxy in the social sciences is that race is socially constructed, not an innate and

immutable biological fact. In the United States, the social construction of race is underpinned by an ideology that has long-served the interests of certain groups in referential and strategic ways. In a nation consumed with enumeration, classification, and categorization, family stories of being “part Indian” or algorithms of DNA are bound up in long histories of colonialism and racism that once usurped Indigenous peoples of their lands, languages, and lifeways. Today, DNA ancestry testing continues this process and further undermines Indigenous defined ways of being and belonging.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bliss, C. (2013). The marketization of identity politics. *Sociology*, 47(5), 1011–1025.

Garrouette, E. (2003). *Real Indians: Identity and the survival of Native America*. University of California Press.

Roth, W. D., & Ivemark, B. (2018). Genetic options: The impact of genetic ancestry testing on consumers’ racial and ethnic identities. *American Journal of Sociology*, 124(1), 150–184.

TallBear, K. (2013). *Native American DNA: Tribal belonging and the false promise of genetic science*. University of Minnesota Press.

Wailoo, K., Nelson, A., & Lee, C. (2012). *Genetics and the unsettled past the collision of DNA, race, and history*. Rutgers University Press.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What is your own identity/family history related to Native identity? Do any of your family stories share similarities to those discussed here?
2. Have you or anyone in your family completed a DNA test to determine your ancestry? If yes, what were the results? What do the authors suggest is problematic about these tests?
3. What do the authors argue is the issue with these kinds of “blood-based” definitions of identity? How does it connect to questions of identity and inequality?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Consider the questions posed in this piece on [atlasobscura.com](https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/native-land-map-of-indigenous-territories.amp), and use the Native Land map to identify the information provided about where you live:
<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/native-land-map-of-indigenous-territories.amp>
2. How do the experiences shared by the respondents in this video connect to the questions and issues raised by the authors of this essay?
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000005352074/a-conversation-with-native-americans-on-race.html>

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TallBear, K. (2013). *Native American DNA: Tribal belonging and the false promise of genetic science*. University of Minnesota Press.

Wailoo, K., Nelson, A., & Lee, C. (2012). *Genetics and the unsettled past the collision of DNA, race, and history*. Rutgers University Press.

ESSAY 22 “IF ONLY THEY WOULD MAKE BETTER CHOICES . . . ” : CONFRONTING MYTHS ABOUT ETHNORACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

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Without exception, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in the United States face numerous health inequities. Non-Hispanic Black Americans (hereafter referred to as “Black Americans”) have the lowest life expectancy of all groups at 76.2 years, followed by American Indians at 76.7. Non-Hispanic White Americans (hereafter referred to as “White”) can expect to live between 2 to 3 years longer than these groups, until 79.0 years of age. Latinx life expectancy is 84.1 years and Asians have the longest life expectancy of all groups, at 85.5 years (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018).

The lower life expectancies and poorer health for some BIPOC groups relative to Whites lead many to believe that these outcomes are due to poor lifestyle choices. In the general discourse on obesity, for instance, Black Americans are characterized as overweight due to “cultural traditions” that devalue the importance of healthy eating or exercise. Similarly, American Indian/Alaska Native groups are often presumed to lack the control to avoid heavy alcohol use. These beliefs suggest that BIPOC groups, and low-income ones in particular, choose to lead lifestyles that are conducive to early death. As the conventional wisdom suggests, “If they would just make better food choices/stop smoking/go to the doctor more often, they would live as long as Whites.” However, a sociological examination of health and illness among BIPOC people reveals myriad structural, rather than individual, causes for these health inequities.

In the next section, we briefly review epidemiological patterns of illness for hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke/cardiovascular disease—patterns that indicate there is nothing random about who gets sick and who remains well in this country.

A BRIEF EPIDEMIOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE UNITED STATES

To gain a better understanding of some of the health problems that plague BIPOC people in the United States, we can explore epidemiological patterns for hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke based on race and Hispanic origin. [Figure 22.1](#) displays the age-adjusted prevalence of these conditions and [Figure 22.2](#) displays the years of potential life lost due to these conditions. *Prevalence* refers to the proportion of existing cases of illness in a population while *years of potential life lost* (YPLL) is a measure of premature death that assumes, based on life expectancy trends, that every American should live until the age of 75. YPLL is calculated by subtracting age at death from the current age standard of 75, such that a person who dies at age 43 would have 32 years of potential life lost. Before proceeding, it is important to note that differences in health conditions exist based not only on ethnoracial background but also on gender, differences we will highlight throughout this essay whenever possible. (Also, where possible, we present rates for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks as opposed to those of Hispanic origin in these groups.)

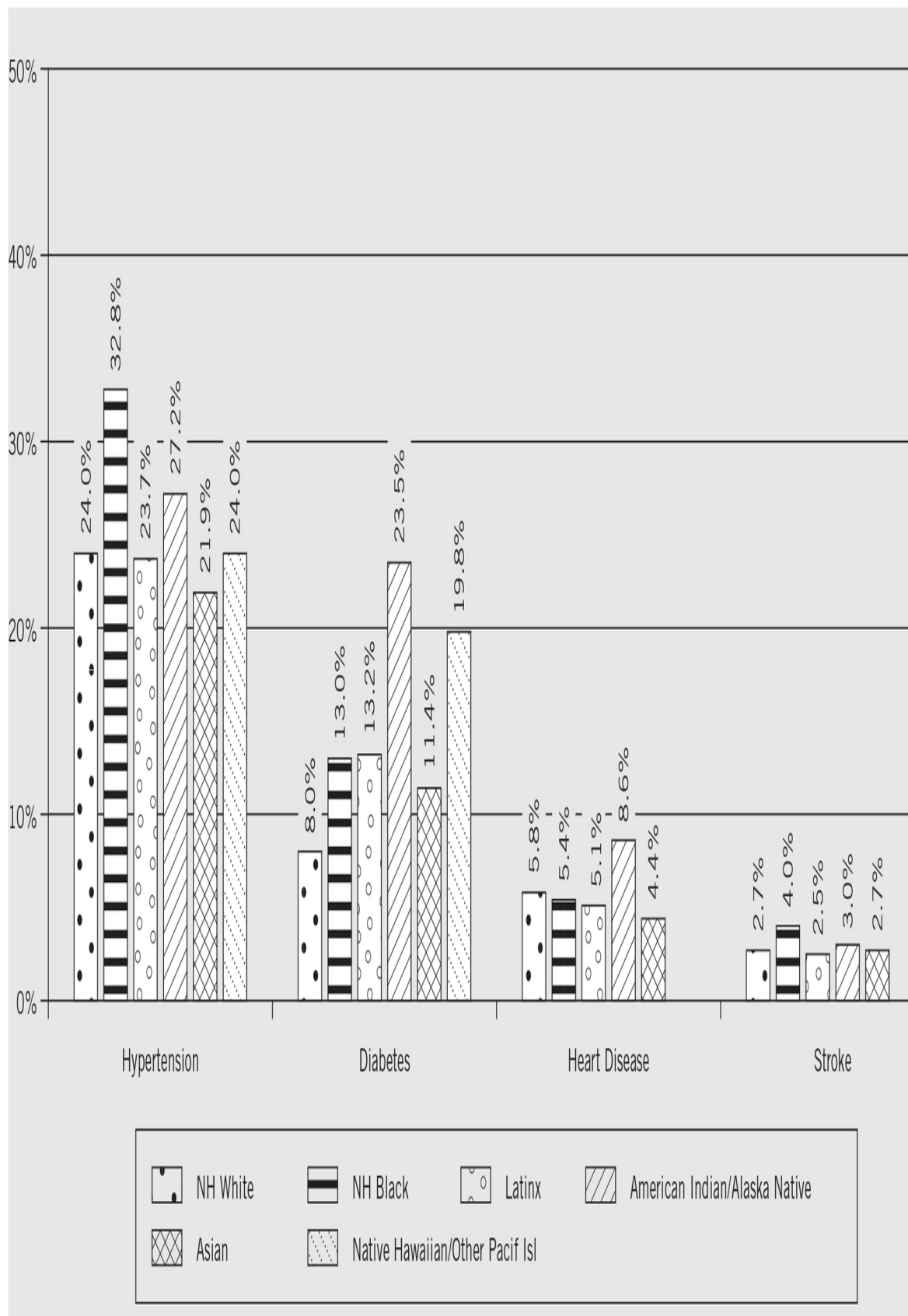
Hypertension. Hypertension (i.e., high blood pressure) can harden the arteries and lead to decreased blood and oxygen flow to the heart, potentially causing a heart attack. Ranked as the 14th leading cause of death (Heron, 2019), hypertension can also affect the brain (potentially causing a stroke) or the kidneys (potentially leading to chronic kidney disease) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Age-adjusted hypertension prevalence is highest among Black and American Indian/Alaska Native adults. (The Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander group has conventionally been combined with the Asian racial category, despite considerably higher socioeconomic status among Asians. In light of this awareness, the OMB Directive 15 [1997] called for the use of two separate categories for Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. Where possible, we will present separate data for these two groups.)

Essentially, almost 1 in 3 Black Americans (32.8%) and more than 1 in 4 (27.4%) American Indians/Alaska Natives meet the criteria for hypertension. Hypertension prevalence for other ethnoracial groups is lower, hovering between 22% and 24% (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019a; see [Figure 22.1](#)). Although YPLL data are not available for hypertension, other

epidemiological reports indicate that it ranks as the 10th leading cause of death for both Black men and Black women. Yet aside from Asian/Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander women (for whom it ranks as the 9th leading cause of death), hypertension does not rank as a leading cause of death for men and women in any other ethnoracial group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019b).

Diabetes. Diabetes is a disease in which the pancreas fails to release insulin after the body turns food into sugars (i.e., glucose). In a normally functioning system, insulin opens the body's cells so glucose can enter and be used for energy. With diabetes, that system fails and can lead to damage of the eyes, kidneys, nerves, and heart (Diabetes Research Institute, 2016). Diabetes ranks as the 7th leading cause of death for all adults living in the United States (Heron, 2019). American Indian/Alaska Native adults have the highest age-adjusted prevalence of diabetes (23.5%), followed by Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults (19.8%). Intermediate rates can be found for Black adults (13.0%), Latinx adults (13.2%), and Asian adults (11.4%) while diabetes prevalence is notably lower among White adults (8.0%) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019a; see [Figure 22.1](#)).

Race/Hispanic origin also strongly patterns age-adjusted mortality rates due to diabetes. Despite having the third highest prevalence of diabetes, Black adults exhibit the most numbers of years of potential life lost, more than twice that of Whites (347.9 vs. 156.6 person-years, respectively) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2018). Relative to Whites, American Indian/Alaska Native adults also experience more than twice the number of YPLL (347.9 person-years) while Asian adults have half the number of YPLL (79.9 person-years) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019b; see [Figure 22.2](#)).



Description

Figure 22.1 Age-Adjusted Prevalence of Selected Conditions, by Race/Hispanic Origin, United States, 2018

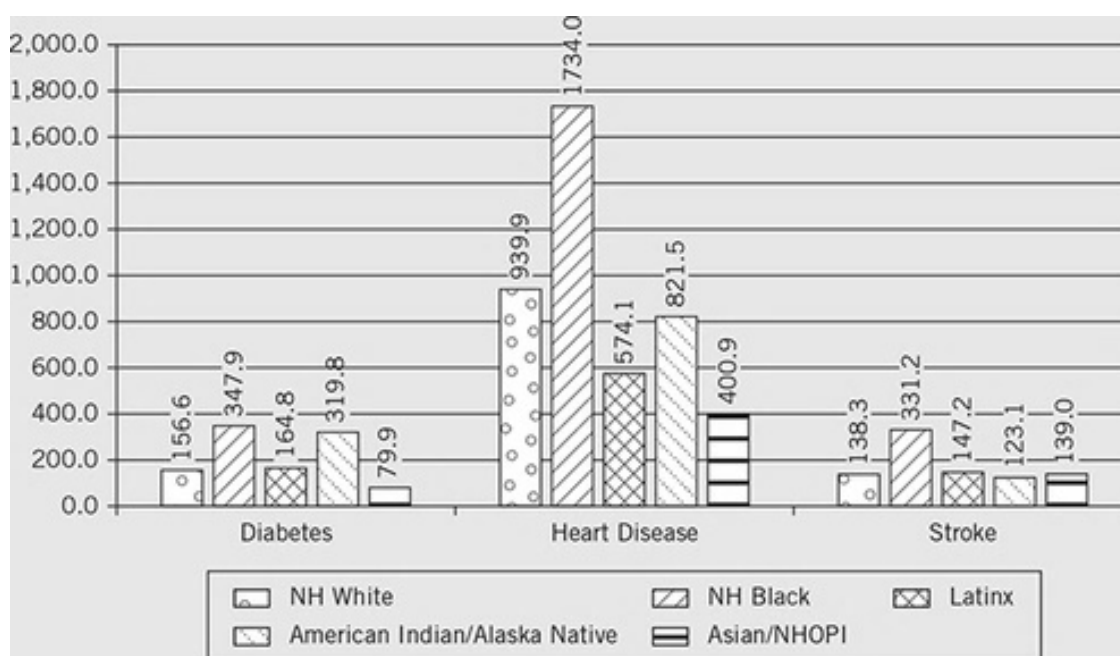
Sources: Age-adjusted prevalence for hypertension, heart disease, and stroke was derived from the National Center for Health Statistics (2019a, Table A-1a). Age-adjusted prevalence for diabetes was derived from the National Center for Health Statistics (2019a, Table A-4a).

Heart Disease. Heart disease (i.e., cardiovascular disease) is the leading cause of death for all adults living in the United States, regardless of race and Hispanic origin (Heron, 2019). The term is actually used to describe a number of conditions, including coronary artery disease and heart rhythm problems. Narrowed or blocked blood vessels can lead to heart attack, chest pain (angina), or stroke (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2014). Age-adjusted prevalence of heart disease is disproportionately higher among American Indian/Alaska Native adults (8.6%) but relatively similar among White adults (5.8%), Black adults (5.4%), Latinx adults (5.1%), and Asian adults (4.4%) (Heron, 2019; see [Figure 22.1](#)). Despite the relatively low prevalence of heart disease among Black Americans, they experience, by far, the most premature death due to heart disease (1,734 YPLL vs. 939.9 YPLL for Whites) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019b). Premature death due to heart disease is lower among all other groups relative to Whites (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019b; see [Figure 22.2](#)).

Stroke. Stroke is a type of cerebrovascular disease that affects blood supply to the brain. It occurs when a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain is blocked by a clot or bursts, which prevents blood and oxygen from getting to brain cells, thus causing those brain cells to die. A stroke can damage parts of the brain that control specific activities (e.g., speech, mobility), causing parts of the body not to work as they did before (American Stroke Association, 2017). Although the prevalence of stroke is relatively low in the adult U.S. population (ranging from 2.5% among Latinx adults to 4.0% among Black adults), cerebrovascular disease/stroke ranks as the 5th leading cause of death in the U.S. population (Heron, 2019). Black Americans face an overwhelmingly disproportionate burden of premature death due to stroke, however. They experience more than twice the number

of years of potential life lost (331.2 person-years) compared to every remaining ethnoracial group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019b; see [Figure 22.2](#)).

The above patterns reveal that health represents a form of systematic inequality that disproportionately burdens BIPOC groups, especially those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The question is: Why do these disparities exist? Next, we investigate—and weigh the evidence for—three common explanations of ethnoracial health disparities in the United States: socioeconomic status, health behaviors, and institutional racism.



Description

Figure 22.2 Years of Potential Life Lost for Selected Conditions (in Person-Years), by Race/Hispanic Origin, United States, 2016

Source: National Center for Health Statistics (2019b).

COMMON EXPLANATIONS FOR ETHNORACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

Argument 1: Health Disparities Are Due to Differences in Socioeconomic Status

The landmark Whitehall studies are a longitudinal data collection effort that seeks to investigate social determinants of health and mortality among British civil servants. The first cohort (Whitehall I) began in 1967 and was composed of more than 18,000 White men aged 20 to 64 who were followed over a 10-year period to identify risks for morbidity (illness) and mortality (death) due to heart disease and other causes. The second Whitehall cohort (Whitehall II) included more than 10,000 male *and* female British civil servants aged 35 to 55 and began in 1985. Follow-up data collection is ongoing.

The major contribution of the Whitehall studies was their discovery of a trend called the *social gradient in health*, or the empirical finding that as socioeconomic status (SES) rises, health status improves. The primary finding from Whitehall I was that men in the lowest occupational grade had the highest risk of 10-year mortality, with the lowest mortality rates among men in the highest occupational grade and intermediate mortality rates along the middle of the spectrum (Marmot et al., 1984). In other words, men with lower-status jobs (i.e., men in blue-collar or manual-labor jobs characterized by high levels of demand and low levels of control) had the highest risk of death within 10 years. Conversely, men with the highest-status jobs had the lowest risk of death and those men with middle-class jobs had an intermediate level of risk. The social gradient in mortality was later replicated for both physical and mental health morbidity in Whitehall II (Ferrie et al., 2002; Marmot et al., 1991) and in a multitude of U.S. studies using indicators of SES that are more standard in the U.S. context (e.g., income, educational attainment, and wealth) (Adler & Ostrove, 1999).

Based on the social gradient in health, the common reasoning is that BIPOC people experience higher rates of illness and mortality because they have lower SES than Whites. For example, more than 1 in 5 American Indian/Alaska Native adults (23.7%) and Black adults (22.5%) live below the federal poverty level, more than twice the rate of White (9.5%) and Asian adults (10.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). Latinx adults (18.8%) and Native Hawaiians/Other Pacific Islander adults (16.7%) have intermediate poverty rates between the two extremes. In general, Asians have similar or higher SES compared with Whites. Therefore, they are the only BIPOC

group that does not face socioeconomic disadvantage as a whole, although many face substantial racial discrimination—experiences that are also detrimental to health (Gee et al., 2009).

Unemployment rates are highest among American Indian/Alaska Native (6.6%) and Black adults (6.5%), followed by Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (5.3%) and Latinx adults (4.7%). The lowest rates of unemployment can be found among White (3.5%) and Asian Americans (3.0%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Educational attainment shows a very similar pattern, with the highest SES among White and Asian adults and the lowest SES among Black and American Indian/Alaska Native adults. For example, although more than half (55.0%) of Asians and 36.3% of Whites have earned at least a bachelor's degree, only 22.0% of Black adults, 18.5% of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults, 17.0% of Latinx adults, and 15.2% of American Indian/Alaska Native adults have at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). Finally, the racial wealth gap has reached unprecedented highs. In 2017, White households had a median net worth of \$171,700, followed by \$157,400 for Asian households, \$25,000 for Latinx households, and only \$9,567 for Black households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

What do these statistics on poverty status, unemployment, educational attainment, and wealth mean for one's health status? Among other things, higher SES typically affords the material resources to practice a healthy lifestyle. This may include having enough disposable income to purchase healthier but often costlier food options or the ability to afford a gym membership. In addition, higher SES status means one is better able to live in a "safe" neighborhood where one feels comfortable jogging or walking, or a neighborhood that has ready access to grocery stores where fresh fruits and vegetables can be purchased (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006; more on these factors later in the essay). When we consider access to these kinds of resources, health disparities look less like the result of "poor choices" and more like a systemic issue reflecting race and class inequities.

Although the focus of health disparities research has traditionally been on the goods and services that tangible resources such as money can buy, increasing attention has been directed toward the physiological burden imposed by the stress of having low SES. In a normal stress response, when encountering a perceived threat, the body activates itself through mechanisms such as increased blood flow and the release of hormones

such as cortisol and norepinephrine (adrenaline). In the short term, the stress response is adaptive, with its heightened physiological resources making either a “fight” response (face the threat) or a “flight” response (flee the threat) possible. But when one is constantly assailed by chronic stressors such as poverty and racial discrimination, the stress response remains activated, leading to wear and tear on the body, a phenomenon measured in part by biomarkers for accelerated aging, or *allostatic load* (McEwen & Stellar, 1993). Poverty is a common chronic stressor for BIPOC groups; important landmark studies find that although allostatic load levels are similar among Blacks and Whites at age 20, Black Americans accumulate allostatic load at a more rapid rate than Whites across the life course. This is evidence of cumulative disadvantage that results in the “weathering” (accelerated aging) of Black bodies (e.g., Geronimus et al., 2006). Similar weathering was found among low-income individuals relative to those with higher income. Although this study did not include other groups besides White and Black Americans, it is reasonable to believe that these biological processes also operate among BIPOC people.

Following the social gradient argument, we would expect that controlling for SES—that is, comparing apples to apples (high-status White people to high-status BIPOC people)—would eliminate the persistent ethnoracial disparities we have witnessed for decades. In other words, the argument is often made that *BIPOC folks experience worse health outcomes relative to Whites because they are more likely to be poor and have lower educational attainment; if that weren't the case, ethnoracial health inequities would disappear*. But is this true?

A simple and customary way to answer this question is by comparing the earnings of White and BIPOC people *at the same level of education*. All things being equal, if SES can explain the worse health profiles of BIPOC groups relative to Whites, then there should be no health differences between low-SES White and low-SES BIPOC people (and by extension, no health differences between high-SES White and high-SES BIPOC people).

Using the argument that lower SES accounts for health inequities facing BIPOC groups, we would expect that BIPOC adults with at least a bachelor's degree would have the same earnings as Whites with at least a bachelor's degree; in essence, (high) educational similarity would erase the negative health consequences associated with being part of a BIPOC group. But does this argument hold weight? Among those with the highest

education (at least a bachelor's degree), White men and Asian men earn \$1,550 and \$1,685 per week, respectively, compared with far lower earnings among the highest-educated Black men (\$1,139) and Latinx men (\$1,234). Similar but weaker patterns exist among women; the highest-educated White and Asian women outearn the highest-educated Black and Latinx women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In other words, achieving advanced education does not afford the same economic benefits for Black and Latinx adults as it does for White and Asian adults.

The “diminishing returns” pattern between SES and health has been detailed extensively by others (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005; Williams & Sternthal, 2010). After controlling for SES indicators such as educational attainment and income, Black adults (and to a less consistent degree, Latinx adults) still have more negative health profiles than White adults (Braveman et al., 2010; Kawachi et al., 2005; Williams, 2012). In other words, when comparing high-SES BIPOC adults with high-SES White adults, health disparities persist. Taken together, the body of evidence for this argument is weak at best. Existing data clearly debunk the notion that BIPOC adults exhibit poor health outcomes simply because they are more likely to rank low on indicators of SES. Ethnoracial disparities persist even after accounting for lower SES among BIPOC people.

Argument 2: Health Disparities Are Due to Unhealthy Behaviors Among BIPOC People

Another common trope to explain poor health outcomes among BIPOC people is that they are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors than Whites are. Many of these behaviors (e.g., smoking, unhealthy eating, drinking, and lack of exercise) are indeed major risk factors for many of the chronic illnesses discussed in the previous epidemiological overview. Next, we detail the evidence for the health behaviors argument, using both data from federal governmental agencies (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and empirical evidence from the longitudinal Whitehall studies.

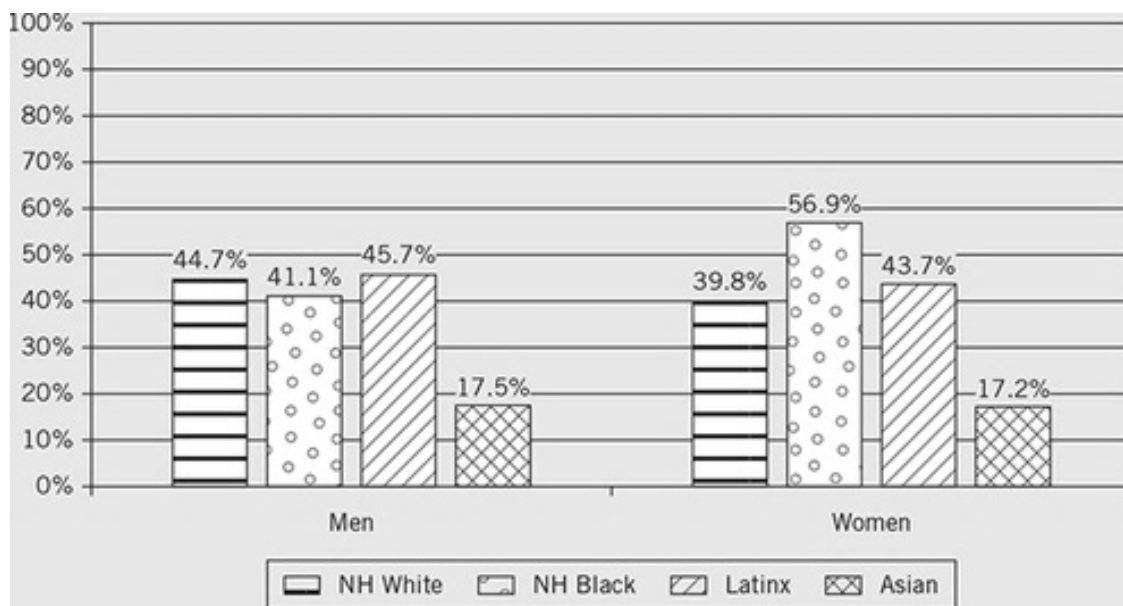
Healthy Eating. Diet is a well-known risk factor for virtually every single chronic illness. People who eat healthfully have markedly lower risk of mortality, heart disease, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, some cancers, and a host of other chronic conditions. Obesity is the most common measure of healthy eating and is an important independent risk factor in that

people who eat in an unhealthy fashion are more likely to both acquire and die from these chronic illnesses. (It is important to note that rates of overweight and obesity are only a rough proxy for healthy eating. Recent evidence shows that other factors are also implicated, though to a lesser degree than healthy eating (i.e., genes and family history, conditions such as hypothyroidism and Cushing's syndrome) (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2012).

Body weight categories are typically constructed based on body mass index, or BMI (weight in pounds/height in inches $\times 703$). *Overweight* is defined as having a BMI between 25 and 29.9, and *obesity* is defined as having a BMI of 30 or higher. More than 1 in 3 American adults (31.6%) are currently overweight and almost 4 in 10 (39.6%) are obese (Fryar et al., 2018).

Are there ethnoracial differences in the prevalence of overweight/obesity? If so, the logic goes, these differences could help explain the enduring ethnoracial health disparities in this country. Based on the age-adjusted prevalence data in [Figure 22.3](#), there are important differences in body mass index among men, though perhaps not as stark as expected (Hales et al., 2020). Among men, 45.7% of Latinx men are obese, but notably, White men have the second-highest prevalence of obesity (44.7%), followed by Black men (41.1%). Also notable is the fact that Asian men dramatically trail other men in terms of obesity (17.5%). Given the comparable levels of obesity among White versus Black and Latinx men, an argument cannot be made that these BIPOC men eat in an unhealthier fashion than White men. The obesity trends for women are admittedly starker, however.

Approximately 56.9% of Black women are obese, followed by 43.7% of Latinx women, 39.8% of White women, and only 17.2% of Asian women (Hales et al., 2020). This trend fits well with the health behaviors argument, but as we will demonstrate later in this essay, alternative explanations are also highly plausible. Taken together, there is little evidence that overweight/obesity (measured as a proxy for the health behavior of healthy eating) can account for ethnoracial health inequities among men, although the patterns for women suggest that it may represent important risk factors for Black and Latinx women.



Description

Figure 22.3 Prevalence of Age-Adjusted Obesity Among Adults, by Race/Hispanic Origin and Gender, United States, 2017–2018

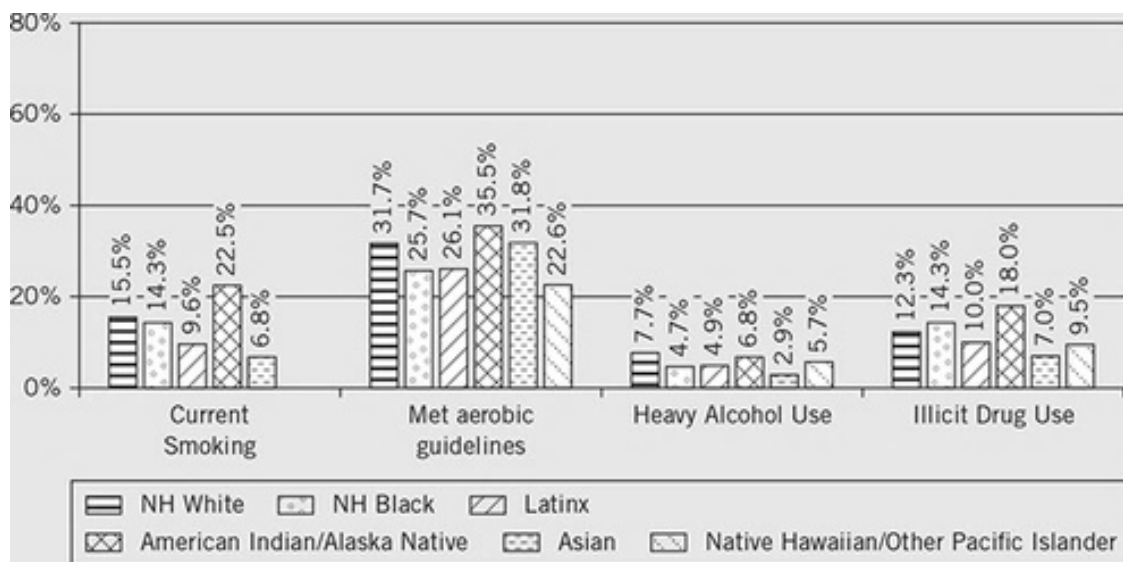
Source: Hales et al. (2020).

Smoking. Data on age-adjusted prevalence of current cigarette smoking by race/Hispanic origin can be found in [Figure 22.4](#) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019a). American Indian/Alaska Native adults exhibit the highest rate of current smoking (22.5%), followed by White (15.5%) and Black adults (14.3%). Smoking prevalence is considerably lower among Latinx (9.6%) and Asian adults (6.8%). As a whole, this means that although American Indian/Alaska Native adults often have the highest rate of current smoking (fitting squarely within the health behaviors argument), smoking prevalence among Whites is also quite high. Because Black and White adults have similar rates of current smoking while Latinx and Asian adults have lower rates of smoking than Whites, smoking does not appear to be an important driver of ethnoracial health inequities for most BIPOC groups.

Exercise. Similar to unhealthy eating, lack of exercise is a major risk factor for many chronic illnesses. Based on guidelines from the federal government, adults in the United States should engage in 150 minutes per week of moderate-intense activity (e.g., brisk walking, gardening) or 75

minutes per week of vigorous-intense activity. In 2018, 35.5% of American Indian/Alaska Native adults, 31.8% of Asian adults, and 31.7% of Whites adults (53.7%) met full guidelines for aerobic activity. Rates of exercise were somewhat lower for Latinx (26.1%), Black (25.7%), and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults (22.6%; National Center for Health Statistics, 2019a). With two important exceptions (American Indian/Alaska Native and Asians adults), these patterns suggest moderately lower rates of physical activity among BIPOC groups than among White people (see [Figure 22.4](#)). Although these patterns partially support the health behaviors argument, we will consider other explanations for these trends later in this essay.

Substance Use. Data on heavy alcohol use and illicit drug use can be found in [Figure 22.4](#). Heavy alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days. By definition, all heavy alcohol users are also binge alcohol users (drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days). In 2018, 7.7% of White adults met the criteria for heavy drinking in the past month, the highest prevalence of all groups, followed by 6.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native and 5.7% of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults. Heavy drinking is less common among Latinx adults (4.9%), Black adults (4.7%), and is especially rare among Asian adults (2.9%) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2019a). This means that Whites are actually *more likely* to be heavy drinkers than BIPOC people, a finding that contradicts the health behaviors argument.



Description

Figure 22.4 Age-Adjusted Prevalence of Select Health Behaviors by Race/Hispanic Origin, United States, 2018

Sources: Current smoking and aerobic guidelines were derived from the National Center for Health Statistics (2019a, Tables A-12a and A-14a). Heavy alcohol use and illicit drug use were derived from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019a, Tables 2.21B).

[Figure 22.4](#) also displays data on any illicit drug use within the past month (SAMHSA, 2019b). American Indian/Alaska Natives adults have the highest prevalence of any illicit drug use in the past year (18.0%), and rates of illicit drug use were relatively similar for Black and White adults (14.3% and 12.3%, respectively). Rates of illicit drug use were lower among the remaining groups (10.0% for Hispanic/Latinx adults, 9.5% for Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults, and 7.0% for Asian adults). It is also important to note that the recent opioid epidemic is heavily concentrated among Whites. A total of 76% of opioid overdose deaths in 2014 occurred among Whites, while only 13% of such deaths occurred among Blacks and only 9% occurred among those who were Latinx (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018). In fact, the unprecedented recent drop in life expectancy among those in the United States has almost wholly been attributed to the opioid epidemic, a phenomenon that occurs far more often among Whites than

BIPOC people. As a whole, the available data suggest that rates of substance use are neither consistently nor considerably higher among BIPOC groups than among Whites; as such, it is highly unlikely that substance use accounts for the intractable ethnoracial disparities in health in the United States.

Health Behaviors in the Whitehall Studies. In addition to documenting the social gradient in health, findings from the Whitehall studies have offered essential contributions to our understanding of the extent to which health behaviors can explain health inequities. A study using 25 years of Whitehall data found that health behaviors accounted for only one third of the socioeconomic difference in mortality. In other words, two thirds of mortality differences between those of low SES and those of higher SES were explained *by causes other than health behaviors* (Van Rossum et al., 2000). These patterns were subsequently replicated in the United States using nationally representative data from the Americans' Changing Lives survey. Even after controlling for cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking, BMI, and physical activity, those with high income had far lower risk of mortality over 7 years than those with the lowest and middle income (Lantz et al., 1998). Although these findings are based on socioeconomic disparities in health (rather than ethnoracial health disparities, specifically), the findings are instructive and suggest that, given the large overlap between race and SES, health behaviors contribute modestly, at best, to ethnoracial health disparities.

Overall, the epidemiological evidence for the health behaviors argument is mixed. Although BIPOC people sometimes exhibit poorer health behaviors than Whites (e.g., lower rates of exercise and higher rates of overweight/obesity among women), Whites are either equally likely or more likely to engage in certain unhealthy behaviors (e.g., cigarette smoking, heavy drinking, and illicit drug use) than most BIPOC groups, with the occasional exception of American Indian/Alaska Native adults. Another problem with the health behaviors argument is that it presumes a moral failing among BIPOC—that they could easily choose to engage in healthy behaviors but simply opt not to. Before falling into such simplistic thinking, however, it is imperative to consider the social context in which these health behaviors arise, by considering characteristics of the social and economic environment that often preclude BIPOC from making healthier “choices.” We undertake this argument in the following section.

Argument 3: Health Disparities Are Due to Unequal Neighborhoods That Constrain Healthy Choices for BIPOC People

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) defines *social determinants of health* as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age,” further stating that these conditions “are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels.” SES and health behavior—the focus of the two previous arguments for understanding ethnoracial health disparities—are social determinants of health that largely operate at the individual level. To be clear, it certainly matters whether or not people smoke, exercise, or eat a high-fat diet. Yet a singular focus on individual-level factors will do little to address health injustices facing BIPOC communities. This is because individual characteristics such as health behaviors and SES are largely shaped by broader, more wide-ranging social determinants of health that influence, for example, the opportunities to achieve high SES or engage in healthy behaviors. Unequal neighborhoods—and the historical forces that shaped their development (e.g., residential segregation)—better explain the ethnoracial health disparities than do individual-level factors such as health behaviors.

The legacy of residential segregation has relegated many BIPOC people to living in underresourced neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty. Although beyond the scope of this particular essay, it is important to know that residential segregation was not a natural event. Instead, it was created by federal housing policy established by President Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation in the 1930s and reinforced by subsequent state and local policies and practices that limited access to residential mortgages for BIPOC people, especially outside of poor neighborhoods (see Ioanide in this volume). Residential segregation is an example of institutionalized racism, or unfair treatment toward BIPOC people that is embedded in social systems such as the labor market, the criminal justice and educational systems, and public policy broadly speaking (as opposed to discriminatory acts that occur at the individual level, between people). Of all racial/ethnic groups, rates of Black–White residential segregation show the starkest patterns. For example, in 2010, 59% of Black people would have had to move to another neighborhood in order for White and Black populations to be evenly distributed across neighborhoods. Conversely, 49% of Latinx and

41% of Asian people would have had to move to achieve equal racial composition across neighborhoods (Logan, 2013).

Neighborhoods directly pattern life opportunities in a multitude of ways that influence health (LaVeist, Gaskin, & Trujillo, 2011). For one, the built environment of neighborhoods determines the availability of amenities and resources that can impact health. For example, the ability to exercise is strongly influenced by whether or not a neighborhood has safe parks, sidewalks, and recreational facilities. The ability to seek health care—preventive or otherwise—depends largely on a neighborhood’s availability of health care facilities and providers. The ability to eat healthy foods is strongly contingent on the presence of large-scale supermarkets in a neighborhood, stores that are far more likely to carry a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables than corner stores or bodegas. In addition to these healthy neighborhood resources, neighborhoods can also be characterized by the presence of negative resources that are harmful to health. Density of liquor stores and fast-food outlets is also known to negatively impact rates of alcohol use and unhealthy eating (LaVeist, Pollack, Thorpe, et al., 2011).

Although neighborhood parks, recreational facilities, health care facilities, and supermarkets can directly affect the opportunity to achieve good health, other neighborhood characteristics and institutions can indirectly affect health disparities. For example, the quality of public schools available in a community largely predicts college readiness and later economic success. Given the aforementioned links between SES and health, the inability to attain higher education has important implications for future health status. Likewise, employment opportunities or lack thereof (another indicator of SES) matter for health. Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1990) has studied the “spatial mismatch” at length, finding a direct link between the flight of jobs from urban communities and long periods of Black joblessness, especially among men.

Policing is another neighborhood social determinant of health that has recently gained traction both in the popular media and in the scientific literature. Police violence contributes to unnecessary and unfair loss of life among men and women in BIPOC communities. Notably, “legal intervention” (*deaths caused by police and other persons with legal authority to use deadly force, excluding legal executions*) is a leading cause of death for young Black and Latinx men age 15 to 19 and 20 to 24. Legal intervention is also a leading cause of death for American Indian men aged 10 to 14, 20 to

24, and 25 to 34 (Heron, 2019). Beyond police violence, overpolicing and aggressive policing tactics within disadvantaged communities can lead to hypervigilance and other negative mental health consequences for BIPOC people (Sewell et al., 2016). Mass incarceration—a trend largely targeting low-income and BIPOC communities—also has lifelong consequences for health (Schnittker et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, health-promoting features of neighborhoods (e.g., sidewalks and safe parks, recreational facilities, health care services, supermarkets, quality educational systems, access to employment opportunities) are far more prevalent in affluent White communities, while health-damaging characteristics (e.g., liquor stores, fast-food outlets, failing public schools, overpolicing, unemployment and underemployment) are far more prevalent in low-income BIPOC communities (LaVeist, Pollack, Thorpe, et al., 2011). Therefore, disadvantaged BIPOC people must often confront an insidious combination of lack of health-promoting resources and an abundance of health-depleting characteristics, which decreases the range of healthful options available to them.

A useful (ecological) theoretical model for understanding social determinants of health can be found in [Figure 22.5](#). SES, health behavior, and medical care (the innermost circles) are examples of social determinants of health at the individual level. These downstream factors are most proximal to health outcomes and, as such, are often targeted as the main causes of health disparities. Such an approach is extremely shortsighted, however. These factors are shaped by broader upstream forces, such as living and working conditions at the meso level (the intermediate set of circles) and economic and social opportunities and resources at the macro level (the largest overlapping concentric circles). The macro level shapes social conditions at the meso level, which also helps determine opportunities and constraints at the individual level. Put simply, individual-level characteristics (e.g., health behavior) do not occur in a vacuum.

Relatedly, although initially developed to explain health disparities based on gender, the *theory of constrained choices* can and should be applied to the study of ethnoracial health disparities. This theory takes as its starting point the notion that not all subgroups have the same range of opportunities to live a healthy lifestyle (Bird & Rieker, 2008). Essentially, health education approaches that seek to teach BIPOC people either the value of healthy

eating or how to eat in a healthy fashion will fail spectacularly in communities that lack supermarkets. Teaching the value of physical activity (more pointedly, assuming that people of color do not already value exercise) will do little to improve rates of physical inactivity when there are no sidewalks on which to walk, safe parks in which to walk or jog, or affordable recreation centers or gyms in which to exercise.



Description

Figure 22.5 Upstream and Downstream Social Determinants of Health

Source: Adapted from Braveman, P., Egerter, S., & Williams, D. R. (2010). The social determinants of health: Coming of age. *Annual Reviews of Public Health*, 32, 381–398.

What is the evidence supporting neighborhoods as the key driver of ethnoracial health inequities? Data from the Exploring Health Disparities in Integrated Communities (EHDIC) study provide a prime site to test this argument directly. EHDIC is a multisite cohort study of health disparities in racially integrated communities across the United States. Its first site in southwest Baltimore (EHDIC-SWB) features a community in which Blacks and Whites have similar household incomes, effectively isolating Black–White differences in health disparities by controlling for socioeconomic

status (SES). Therefore, studies from the EHDIC data collection effort allow for the comparison of Black and White adults with similar SES who live under identical neighborhood conditions.

One important EHDIC study found that Black–White disparities in hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and the use of health care services were either wholly eliminated or narrowed substantially among women in this neighborhood (LaVeist, Pollack, Thorpe, et al., 2011). Other EHDIC studies compared Black–White health disparities in southwest Baltimore (again, where Whites and Blacks live in equal residential contexts) to Black–White health disparities in national data sets (that are unable to make neighborhood adjustments). When considering health behaviors such as binge drinking and physical activity and health outcomes such as diabetes and hypertension, EHDIC studies show minimal or no health disadvantage among Black Americans relative to White Americans. Conversely, Black–White health disparities are sizable in national data sets that control for individual SES and health behaviors but do not consider neighborhood context (Fesahazion et al., 2012; LaVeist et al., 2009; Thorpe et al., 2008; Wilson-Frederick et al., 2014). Findings from the EHDIC studies strongly support the notion that ethnoracial health disparities are due neither to individual-level SES differences nor differences in individual human behaviors. Instead, they are strongly patterned by systematic differences in neighborhood context.

COVID-19: A CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR “BLAME GAME”

In March 2020, our nation was brought to a standstill as COVID-19 began spreading unchecked through the U.S. population. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 has struck BIPOC and low-income populations at a disproportionate and alarming rate. As the old adage goes, “When White America gets a cold, Black America gets pneumonia.” As the United States has witnessed during the pandemic, this sentiment extends to other disadvantaged BIPOC groups as well. According to the COVID Tracking Project (2020), mortality rates due to COVID-19 are 2.4 times higher among Black people, 1.55 times higher among American Indian/Alaska Native people, and 1.47 times higher among Latinx people as compared to White people. COVID-19 mortality rates are equal for Asian, White, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander adults.

On April 10, 2020, former president Donald Trump, along with members of the Coronavirus Task Force, held a press briefing to address concerns about the rapid spike in cases across the United States. During this briefing, Jerome Adams, MD, offered remarks in his role as Surgeon General of the United States. Dr. Adams, a Black man, began his remarks with a surprising and seemingly sociological analysis of the COVID-19 epidemiological trends, initially noting that key precautions that prevent the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, working from home, and handwashing) are options not readily available for BIPOC populations (see [Figure 22.6](#)).

With his acknowledgment of the constrained choices BIPOC people experience—and particularly his explicitly rejecting biological and genetic explanations for ethnoracial health inequities—one could almost mistake Dr. Adams for an undercover sociologist. Yet as he concluded his remarks just a few minutes later, he admonished these same communities, figuratively wagging his finger to say, “I need you to know: You are not helpless. And it’s even more important that, in communities of color, we adhere to the task force guidelines to slow the spread. . . . we need you to step up and help stop the spread so that we can protect those who are most vulnerable” (see [Figure 22.6](#)). In these concluding remarks, Dr. Adams suggests that even though upstream forces such as racial residential segregation and the concentration of BIPOC in low-wage service jobs that require contact with the public (and do not afford work-from-home opportunities) predispose these groups to COVID-19 exposure, their downstream *individual efforts* can somehow mitigate these larger structural factors. With his recommendation for these groups to “avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs” (none of which are established risk factors for COVID-19), Dr. Adams clearly reinforced two long-standing myths: (1) that BIPOC people have considerably higher rates of substance abuse and (2) that individual health behaviors are the driving force behind health inequities. In deviating from his initial train of thought, which highlighted structural risks related to COVID-19 transmission, the Surgeon General missed an important opportunity to spark national conversations surrounding labor market inequities for BIPOC groups, racial residential segregation for Black and Latinx families, and water injustice for Indigenous communities.

EARLY REMARKS

The chronic burden of medical ills is likely to make people of color especially less resilient to the ravages of COVID-19. And it's possibly—in fact, likely—that the burden of social ills is also contributing.

Social distancing and teleworking, we know, are critical, and you've heard Dr. Birx and Dr. Fauci talk about how they prevent the spread of coronavirus. Yet only one in five African Americans and one in six Hispanics has a job that lets them work from home.

People of color are more likely to live in densely packed areas and in multi-generational housing, which—situations which create higher risk for spread of a highly contagious disease like COVID-19. We tell people to wash their hands, but as studies showed, 30 percent of the homes on Navajo Nation don't have running water. So how are they going to do that?

In summary, people of color experience both more likely exposure to COVID-19 and increased complications from it. But let me be crystal clear: We do not think people of color are biologically or genetically predisposed to get COVID-19. There is nothing inherently wrong with you. But they are socially predisposed to coronavirus exposure and to have a higher incidence of the very diseases that puts you at risk for severe complications of coronavirus.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

And I want to close by saying that while your state and local health departments and those of us in public service are working day and night to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and to protect you regardless of your color, your creed, or your geography, I need you to know: You are not helpless. And it's even more important that, in communities of color, we adhere to the task force guidelines to slow the spread.

Stay at home, if possible. If you must go out, maintain six feet of distance between you and everyone else, and wear a mask if you're going to be within six feet of others. Wash your hands more often than you ever dreamed possible. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. And call your friends and family. Check in on your mother; she wants to hear from you right now.

And speaking of mothers, we need you to do this, if not for yourself, then for your *abuela*. Do it for your granddaddy. Do it for your Big Mama. Do it for your Pop-Pop. We need you to understand—especially in communities of color, we need you to step up and help stop the spread so that we can protect those who are most vulnerable.

Description

Figure 22.6 Remarks by Surgeon General Jerome Adams, MD, on COVID-19 Inequities Among BIPOC and Low-Income

Populations, April 10, 2020

Source: The White House (2020). [Remarks by Surgeon General Jerome Adams]. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-24/>

We always encourage students to think more critically when encountering or offering solutions that blame the disadvantaged for their circumstances. Inequality is not a natural event. It is not some benign outcome that just happens. As such, it is imperative to study both the historical events that created the inequality and the contemporary social and political circumstances that reproduce it over time. Ethnoracial health disparities are not due merely to differences in SES or health behavior. Therefore, they will not be fixed using simplistic approaches such as health awareness and education programs. Likewise, policy initiatives based on the faulty premise that poor health outcomes among BIPOC people are due to their poor choices will greatly exacerbate health inequities that already exist, further fueling these stereotypes. Unless and until this country musters the political will to address inequitable neighborhoods, BIPOC people will continue to unfairly live shorter and sicker lives than their White counterparts.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Laster Pirtle, W. N. (2020). Racial capitalism: A fundamental cause of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic inequities in the United States. *Health Education & Behavior*, 47(4), 504–508.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What, if any, of the health issues discussed here are problems for members of your own family? What are some of the reasons why, according to family discussions? How are those explanations similar to or different from those discussed by the author?
2. Why is it important to think about health outcomes at the individual and group levels? How do these differences connect to patterns discussed in other essays in this volume? How does this specifically manifest in the COVID-19 epidemic?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. With other members of your class, take some time to build a “health map” of your neighborhood or community. Identify the parks, playgrounds, places with sidewalks, gyms, and so forth. What patterns can you see?
2. In 2015, the average Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as “food stamps”) benefit per month was \$142 for a single person. Using information from the U.S. Department of

Agriculture on the five food groups, brainstorm with your classmates about how to use the monthly SNAP benefit allotment to eat (for the full month) according to USDA recommendations. What challenges do you face?

3. Living at, near, or below the poverty line can be stressful. Go to <http://playspent.org> and explore some of the daily stressors experienced by people living in poverty. How might those experiences affect health?
4. Find the COVID-19 data for your state, county, or city. Do you see race or class disparities in these numbers? Given the information in this essay, how would you explain any disparities that might exist? If you don't see disparities, speculate on why.

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Descriptions of Images and Figures

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Data from the graph are as follows.

Disease	Percentage of racial group with selected conditions					
	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latin x	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders
Hypertension	24.0	32.8	23.7	27.2	21.9	24.0
Diabetes	8.0	13.0	13.2	23.5	11.4	19.8
Heart disease	5.8	5.4	5.1	8.6	4.4	0
Stroke	2.7	4.0	2.5	3.0	2.7	0

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Data from the graph are as follows.

Disease	Number of deaths of racial group with selected conditions				
	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latin x	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian or Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders
Diabetes	156.6	347.9	164.8	319.8	79.9
Heart disease	939.9	1734.0	574.1	821.5	400.9
Stroke	138.3	331.2	147.2	123.1	139.0

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Data from the graph are as follows.

Gender	Obesity percentage of racial group			
	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latin x	Asian
Men	44.7	41.1	45.7	17.5
Women	39.8	56.9	43.7	17.2

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Data from the graph are as follows.

Health behavior	Percentage of racial group with select health behaviors					
	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latin x	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders
Current smoking	15.5	14.3	9.6	22.5	6.8	0
Met aerobic guidelines	31.7	25.7	26.1	35.5	31.8	22.6
Heavy alcohol use	7.7	4.7	4.9	6.8	2.9	5.7
Illicit drug use	12.3	14.3	10.0	18.0	7.0	9.5

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Three concentric semicircles are placed above a long rectangle.

Text in the rectangle reads, Health.

Text in the innermost semicircle read as follows.

- Medical care
- Personal behavior

Text in the middle semicircle reads, Living and working conditions in homes and communities.

Text in the outermost semicircle reads, Economic and social opportunities and resources.

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EARLY REMARKS

The chronic burden of medical ills is likely to make people of color especially less resilient to the ravages of COVID-19. And it's possibly—in fact, likely—that the burden of social ills is also contributing.

Social distancing and teleworking, we know, are critical, and you've heard Dr. Birx and Dr. Fauci talk about how they prevent the spread of coronavirus. Yet only one in five African Americans and one in six Hispanics has a job that lets them work from home.

People of color are more likely to live in densely packed areas and in multi-generational housing, which—situations which create higher risk for spread of a highly contagious disease like COVID-19. We tell people to wash their hands, but as studies showed, 30 percent of the homes on Navajo Nation don't have running water. So how are they going to do that?

In summary, people of color experience both more likely exposure to COVID-19 and increased complications from it. But let me be crystal clear: We do not think people of color are biologically or genetically predisposed to get COVID-19. There is nothing inherently wrong with you. But they are socially predisposed to coronavirus exposure and to have a higher incidence of the very diseases that puts you at risk for severe complications of coronavirus.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

And I want to close by saying that while your state and local health departments and those of us in public service are working day and night to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and to protect you regardless of your color, your creed, or your geography, I need you to know: You are not helpless. And it's even more important that, in communities of color, we adhere to the task force guidelines to slow the spread.

Stay at home, if possible. If you must go out, maintain six feet of distance between you and everyone else, and wear a mask if you're going to be within six feet of others. Wash your hands more often than you ever dreamed possible. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. And call your friends and family. Check in on your mother; she wants to hear from you right now.

And speaking of mothers, we need you to do this, if not for yourself, then for your abuela. Do it for your granddaddy. Do it for your Big Mama. Do it for your Pop-Pop. We need you to understand—especially in communities of color, we need you to step up and help stop the spread so that we can protect those who are most vulnerable.

ESSAY 23 “NOW ALL THE GOOD JOBS GO TO THEM!” : AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE LABOR MARKET

Wendy Leo Moore *Texas A&M University*

In September of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Executive Order (EO) 11246, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in federal public contracts. This executive order, in addition to prohibiting discrimination, called for federal contractors to “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to race, color, sex or national origin.” The innocuous command of EO 11246, to act affirmatively to ensure people are treated equally, contrasts sharply with contemporary rhetoric concerning affirmative action. These two words have come to signify conflicting meanings concerning U.S. democracy and racial inequality; the mere mention of the term *affirmative action* can lead to heated and emotional debates, including assertions of “unfair race-based privilege” or “reverse discrimination” (see Curry, 1996; Pierce, 2012).

By the 1990s, the discourse surrounding affirmative action had shifted from one about discrimination and equality to one about White innocence and injury resulting from the hiring of unqualified people of color. Pierce (2012) notes that throughout the 1990s, media stories slanted against affirmative action were much more common than stories in support of affirmative action—as many as 3:1 tilted against affirmative action (p. 35). In January of 1994, the topic of affirmative action made the cover story of *Business Week*, where the issue was titled “White, Male and Worried,” and the July 1995 *Newsweek* cover read “Race and Rage” (Pierce, 2012, p. 27). The discursive framing of affirmative action had shifted dramatically from the frame constructed by President Johnson (1965). The

sentiment is summed up by a 2011 blogger on world-inconversation.org who responded to a question about opinions of affirmative action by saying, “I don’t agree with hiring someone who may or may not be less qualified than someone else just because their race needs to be represented better” (What Is Your Opinion About Affirmative Action?; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Moore, 2008). To understand this debate and also the context of President Johnson’s command for affirmative action, it is necessary to journey into the history of race and government action.

WHERE THE STORY BEGINS: A LEGACY OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR WHITES

Most of the informed public is aware of the history of racialized slavery in the United States, the institution through which Blackness became a justification for the enslavement of people of African descent (see Harris, 1993). During the centuries of slavery in this country, race and class converged as people of color were prohibited from access to resources such as education, property, and political rights. As Cheryl Harris (1993) suggests, the economic interests of Whites were so integral to the law and politics of the United States that Whiteness itself was valued by the government like a form of property. Initially, this occurred through explicit legal and political policies concerning who had the right to own property (Whites), who did not (American Indians), and who became the object of property (Blacks). However, for at least 100 years after the end of slavery, U.S. law and social policy continued to overtly and explicitly privilege the economic interests of Whites, perpetuating the material value of Whiteness.

The end of racialized slavery did not mean the end of systematic racial oppression. After the Civil War, Southern states immediately enacted laws, such as those making vagrancy or joblessness a crime, which forced Blacks back into exploitative economic relations (Du Bois, 2001; Woodward, 2002). A new economic system, based

on tenant farming, sharecropping, and a convict-lease system, combined with legally mandated segregation, supported by the Supreme Court in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), resulted in a racial order that was not meaningfully different from slavery (Woodward, 2002). Within this social and historical context begins the real story of a legacy of affirmative action *for Whites*—that is, affirmative government action taken to protect and stabilize the economic conditions of White people during times of economic disruption.

At the end of the 1920s, the world experienced a severe economic depression. Millions of U.S. citizens were thrown into joblessness and poverty. The widespread suffering caused by the Great Depression led to support for massive government intervention. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed and signed into law a series of legislative initiatives designed to ease economic suffering. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation created federally funded unemployment insurance, public assistance for the poor, old age pensions, and work relief for the unemployed, and injected federal funds into severely depressed local economies (Takaki, 2008). These programs were the most extensive government economic aid interventions in the history of the United States, and they helped end the severe economic depression. Yet, to secure the Southern votes necessary to enact the New Deal legislation, Southern states required that terms be implemented to ensure that these policies would not disrupt the racial status quo of Jim Crow (Katznelson, 2005).

Three mechanisms allowed Whites to benefit from government economic assistance while Blacks were excluded (Katznelson, 2005, pp. 22–23). First, work-related policies such as unemployment and social security were constructed to leave out as many Blacks as possible through racially coded definitions of work. New Deal employment-related policies excluded individuals employed in farm-related or domestic-labor jobs. Nationwide, in the 1930s, 60% of Blacks were employed in these sectors; in the South, that figure was

75%. Thus, the vast majority of Black workers were excluded from all the federal employment assistance programs. The second mechanism that functioned to exclude Blacks from federal benefits was the placement of the administration of federal funds in the hands of local officials. In the South, this resulted in widespread racial discrimination in the implementation of these programs and the enactment of explicitly racist policies at the local level; the level of poverty required to qualify for financial aid was set much lower for Blacks than for Whites (see Katznelson, 2005, p. 37). And finally, Southern House and Senate members resoundingly rejected the attachment of antidiscrimination provisions to the legislation. The lack of antidiscrimination measures in the New Deal bills facilitated Southern states' segregation and racist policies with regard to the administration of federal aid programs, leaving no recourse for Blacks denied federal assistance by local administrators.

The New Deal “combined unprecedented [levels of government] assistantship with racist policies,” the result of which was a program of affirmative government action created to end economic suffering largely for Whites only (Katznelson, 2005, p. 29). But the New Deal policies were not the end of affirmative action for Whites. During and after World War II, economic shifts led to more government actions to stabilize the economy. When the United States entered World War II, there was an immediate need for military to fight in the war effort. Many White men left their jobs to join the military (or were drafted), which resulted in a shortage of workers in Northern industrial jobs. Blacks faced widespread discrimination in the military, either through complete exclusion from service or, when they were allowed to serve, exclusion from advanced military training programs necessary for skilled positions (Katznelson, 2005; Takaki, 2008). By contrast, employers with labor shortages engaged in a campaign to recruit Black workers to take positions from which Blacks had previously been excluded. These new job opportunities, on the one hand, and the desire to escape the racist violence of the South on the other, facilitated an unprecedented migration of Blacks from the rural South to the urban North (Massey & Denton, 1993). Unfortunately,

however, these jobs were not permanent. At the end of World War II, when White men returned from military service, many Blacks lost the jobs for which they had been recruited.

At the same time, a widespread housing shortage and desire to ensure postwar economic stability led the federal government, at the end of World War II, to enact the Selective Service Readjustment Act, widely known as the GI Bill. The GI Bill assisted veterans with buying homes, attending college, getting loans to start up small businesses, and finding skill-appropriate jobs. Many young veterans, most of them White, used these government services and as a result were able to move into the middle class (Katznelson, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993). As well, the GI Bill, in combination with the construction of the Federal Housing Authority, which provided government subsidies enabling many in the United States to secure loans to purchase homes without huge down payments, facilitated a boom in homeownership, the result of which was the largest swelling of the middle class in U.S. history (Massey & Denton, 1993). However, repeating a history of White economic advantage, the boom in the middle class occurred disproportionately for Whites. The majority of Blacks were shut out through explicit discrimination in the implementation of the GI Bill, which, like the New Deal programs, took place at the local level, as well as through policies of discriminatory lending and racial segregation.

Black veterans wishing to access the education assistance of the GI Bill found that there were not enough spaces for them in Black educational institutions, but they were excluded from White institutions in the South completely and Northern schools allowed only a small number of non-White applicants each year. In 1947, 20,000 Black veterans eligible for GI Bill education assistance could not find schools to attend because Black colleges and vocational schools were filled (Katznelson, 2005, p. 133). Blacks, veterans and nonveterans, wishing to purchase homes were excluded in two ways. First, many Blacks faced explicit discrimination from local administrators of the GI Bill, as well as from banks, so they were not

able to secure loans to purchase homes. Second, residential segregation and lending policies often meant that even those who could qualify for loans could not find neighborhoods where they could purchase homes. White neighborhoods were off limits to Blacks through legal instruments such as racially restrictive covenants and government policies that favored segregation, so they could not secure loans for houses in these White neighborhoods (Massey & Denton, 1993). Black neighborhoods were in a state of economic crisis—resulting mainly from the massive loss of employment that occurred as Blacks were displaced from jobs they had been recruited for when White men returned from military service. The result of the poverty and economic instability in these neighborhoods meant that banks could “redline” Black neighborhoods, which literally meant that these neighborhoods had red lines across them on maps, signifying they were ineligible for federally secured housing loans (Massey & Denton, 1993).

Katznelson (2005) notes, “There was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap than the G.I. Bill” (p. 121). The reason for the widening economic gap was not just racial discrimination against Blacks, which was nothing new, but instead was a result of the widespread *upward mobility* of huge numbers of Whites resulting from affirmative government actions to facilitate their economic security and growth. Thus, affirmative government actions resulted in the racially unjust enrichment of Whites and corresponding unjust impoverishment of Blacks (see Feagin, 2010, p. 10).

It was within this context on June 4, 1965, only months before President Johnson issued Executive Order 11246, that he called for affirmative government action to create equality in his speech “To Fulfill These Rights” at Howard University. Acknowledging the connection between racial inequality and government action, Johnson said,

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair . . . [E]qual opportunity is essential, but not enough, not enough. Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in—by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings.

The U.S. government, which had for centuries acted affirmatively to create economic stability and prosperity for Whites, would now have to act not merely passively by no longer permitting racial discrimination but affirmatively again to correct the structural racial inequalities resulting from centuries of racial discrimination.

AFFIRMATIVE INACTION: THE POLICY THAT WASN'T

Although President Johnson articulated a government obligation to take affirmative steps beyond just ending discrimination to create economic security for Blacks, Johnson's view of affirmative action never came to pass. There occurred a political backlash against affirmative action, one that has been virulent and pervasive throughout the decades since Johnson's speech. Rhetorical assertions of the supposed unfairness of unqualified minorities' gaining access to jobs that should go to Whites as a result of quotas, as illustrated in the introduction to this essay, have guided that backlash into a frenzied attack on the idea of affirmative action (Pierce, 2012). What is particularly confounding about this anti-affirmative action sentiment is that U.S. law does not permit quotas as part of affirmative action programs. In fact, the language of Title

VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibited racial discrimination in employment also explicitly prohibits quota-type systems. Section 703(j), titled “Preferential treatment not to be granted on account of existing number or percentage imbalance,” specifies that

nothing contained in [this subchapter on nondiscrimination in employment] shall be interpreted to require any employer . . . to grant preferential treatment to any individual or to any group because of the race, color, religion, sex, or national origin of such individual or group on account of an imbalance which may exist with respect to the total number or percentage . . . employed by any employer.

Moreover, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled definitively on the issue of quotas in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), outlawing quota systems, even as a remedy for historical discrimination, in higher education admissions (Greene, 1989; see also Poon et al. in this volume).

Rigid quotas were never legal, and there was never an intention to create a system of affirmative action employing such a method. What affirmative action was, then, was a system of laws and policies designed to allow educational institutions and businesses to take into consideration the social consequences of racial inequality when making decisions about *equally* qualified candidates in school admissions and employment. Affirmative action occurred in two ways in employment. First, private (nongovernment) employers were legally able to enact *voluntary* affirmative action programs as part of a program to increase their numbers of underrepresented groups, including racial minorities (see Greene, 1989; Pierce, 2012; Reskin, 1998). The types of voluntary affirmative action programs employers could enact ranged from advertising in news outlets catering to people of color to recruiting from schools that are predominantly of color to giving preference to an *equally qualified* candidate for hire or

promotion because the person was a member of a group underrepresented in the institution (Greene, 1989). Note, however, that when private businesses choose to implement voluntary affirmative action plans that include giving preference to underrepresented groups in hiring and promotion decisions, they must take on the heavy burden of documenting that their business does in fact have an underrepresentation (this must include statistical demonstration) and that their race-conscious employment decisions are based only on otherwise equally qualified candidates and will remain only until the underrepresentation is remedied (Greene, 1989). The burden of this requirement is one reason many businesses do not implement this form of affirmative action (as opposed to purely recruiting programs).

The second labor market arena in which affirmative action–based programs take place is in federal contract compliance. Federal agencies and employers who hold federal contracts in excess of \$50,000 must demonstrate that they are “affirmative action compliant,” which means that they are taking positive steps to increase racial equality in their organizations (Greene, 1989; Pierce, 2012). To be compliant with this regulation, businesses must illustrate that they are making a “good faith” effort to recruit underrepresented minorities (they need not actually recruit underrepresented minorities, only show a good faith effort). Although President Johnson conceived of an affirmative action program that would set aside a percentage of government contracts (10% to be exact) for qualified minority-owned businesses (businesses whose ownership was at least 50% racial minorities), the U.S. Supreme Court rejected that program as unconstitutional, first prohibiting state government set-asides in the *City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.* (1989) case, then federal contract set-asides in the *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* (1995) case. Thus, even this limited attempt at redistribution of government resources to remedy racial inequalities was declared unconstitutional.

There is one other area of government policy that has sometimes mistakenly been considered affirmative action; it is not actually affirmative action at all but antidiscrimination enforcement. The enactment of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race in U.S. institutions and organizations such as education and employment, was met with resistance, particularly in the South. For example, in 1972 the Alabama Department of Public Safety was held to have engaged in “egregious discrimination” by systematically excluding Blacks from employment and promotion among state troopers. After the initial finding of discrimination, the department failed to enact remedies to correct the discrimination, particularly in the promotion of Black employees. As a result, in 1981 the court ordered that the department promote one Black trooper for every White trooper promoted until the systematic discrimination was remedied (see *United States v. Paradise*, 1987). Court orders such as this one may be a source for the myth that affirmative action means quotas and “reverse discrimination”; yet these remedies were not affirmative action but punitive court-ordered sanctions for failing to comply with antidiscrimination laws.

Racial inequality continues to organize U.S. society today, as it did before the civil rights movement. The inequalities in wealth resulting from the housing boom experienced by Whites post–World War II, which largely excluded people of color, has left us with extreme and pervasive racial inequalities in wealth (Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). In 2019, the Federal Reserve reported that the median net worth (total assets minus total debt) of White, non-Hispanic families was \$188,200, whereas the median wealth of Black families was \$24,100. Black families’ median wealth is less than 15% of White families (Bhutta et al., 2020). This difference in wealth, as Oliver and Shapiro (2006) explain, means differential access to equity, which may be used for such things as collateral for education or small-business loans and a cushion during times of economic recession. Blacks and other people of color do not have the same

access to these resources as Whites, and this is largely the structural result of wealth disparities solidified post–World War II.

Wealth inequality is distinct from inequality in income and employment. In 2019 the U.S. Census reported that the median income for White family households was \$72,204, whereas the median income for Black family households was only \$45, 438. Moreover, the poverty rate for Black families was over double that for White families; whereas 9.1% of White families were in poverty in 2019, the figure for Black families was 18.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

These inequalities can be partially explained by the fact that Blacks remain overrepresented in unskilled labor. As Bonilla-Silva (2013) noted, in managerial and professional occupations, we find “35.43 percent of white males and 40.64 percent of white females, compared to 21.65 percent of black males and 31 percent of black females” (p. 55), whereas in service-related occupations, we find “20.23 percent of black males and 26.39 percent of black females compared to 10.85 percent of white males and 17.03 percent of white females” (pp. 55–56). Although much of this inequality can be linked to inequalities in education, researchers also continue to find persistent patterns of racial discrimination in employment (see, e.g., Bendick et al., 1991; Pager, 2003).

Thus, affirmative action—as a policy originated to remedy the unjust enrichment of Whites and unjust impoverishment of people of color resulting from years of government-sponsored racial discrimination—has widely failed on a structural level. Although exceptional individual Blacks and other BIPOC folks have probably benefited from affirmative action programs (and it is hard to know what portion of the benefit is a result of nondiscrimination, as opposed to true affirmative action programs), these programs have failed to change the inequalities in the racial social structure. Moreover, a 1995 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor revealed that of the 300 cases filed by Whites against employers for so-called “reverse

discrimination,” only *ix* cases were found to have been unlawfully based on race. The rest of the cases involved erroneous assumptions, on the part of Whites who did not receive jobs or promotions, that affirmative action was used to give less-qualified minorities the position (Pierce, 2012, p. 39). Thus, much of the vehement criticism and debate concerning “reverse discrimination” and preferences for undeserving or unqualified minorities is simply factually inaccurate.

WHITE RACIAL FRAMING: TURNING THE MYTH OF REVERSE DISCRIMINATION ON ITS HEAD

Given that quotas, as well as all allocation programs that consider racial demographics in any meaningful way, have been declared illegal, it is curious that the rhetoric of quotas and reverse racism persists. Even more curious is the continued persistence of heated and emotional debates concerning affirmative action in the face of its clear failure to affect structural racial inequality. Sociologist Jennifer L. Pierce (2012) notes that the notion of reverse discrimination against victimized Whites became part of a dominant narrative in the post-civil rights era and thus became a “broader cultural memory” (p. 3). The cultural memory of the victimization of Whites by affirmative action supplanted our memory of a legacy of affirmative government action *for* Whites and President Johnson’s comment that equal opportunity was not enough to remedy the resulting racial inequality. Because of that shift in cultural memory, Whites massively rejected and resisted affirmative action (as well as antidiscrimination laws), and the result is that affirmative action has been a bust as a policy.

This process is an example of what Feagin (2006) has called “White racial framing.” The *White racial frame* can be defined as “an organized set of racialized ideas, emotions, and inclinations, as well

as recurring or habitual discriminatory actions, that are consciously or unconsciously expressed in, and constitutive of the routine operation and racist institutions of US society” (p. 23). This frame facilitates the development of a cultural memory of (false) White victimization and the collective forgetting of a legacy of (true) racial advantage for Whites and oppression of people of color. If we were to reject the White racial frame and reframe the debate about affirmative action in the context of the structural reality that President Johnson emphasized in his Howard speech, we could create a new and more accurate argument concerning affirmative action: Racially conscious affirmative action is *necessary* for democracy and the assessment of individuals based solely on their merit. Historical and current racial conditions provide Whites with unfair advantages in the form of access to resources that have been denied to people of color. To prevent Whites from feeling inferior because their successes are not based on merit alone, but instead stem from unearned privilege, we must institute affirmative action programs that correct for structural racial differences and racial oppression. This will result in a better system of evaluation of the talents and contributions of all individuals based on their relative access to resources.

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American Civil Liberties Union: <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/affirmative-action>

Americans for a Fair Chance: http://www.civilrights.org/equal-opportunity/fact-sheets/fact_sheet_packet.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor: https://www.dol.gov/ofccp/regs/compliance/ca_11246.htm

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Watch the YouTube video titled “Unequal Opportunity Race,” created by the African American Policy Forum (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBb5TgOXgNY>). Talk about the elements of structural racism visually presented in the video

- and the discussions about material inequality presented in this essay. What role, if any, should government play in the dismantling of racial inequality? Does it matter that government policies facilitated the creation of racial inequality?
2. What do you think of the counterframe presented at the end of this essay? Would merit be more accurately evaluated if we considered people's accomplishments in relation to their access to differential resources?
 3. Given that quotas and the hiring of less-qualified people of color over more-qualified Whites is not legal affirmative action, why do you think the myth of quotas has had such staying power?
 4. How do you think the current myths about affirmative action affect the experiences of people of color who are presumed to be in institutions (employment and education) as a result of affirmative action and not their qualifications?
 5. In a democracy, what is the relevance of racial inequality, or conversely, does a democracy require a commitment to some level of racial equality?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Imagine that you are the chief human resources officer for a major company in a diverse city and your board has asked you to develop a diversity plan to ensure that the company is truly providing equal opportunities to the community in which it is located. Using the materials you've learned from this reading, develop a diversity plan for the company that considers the following:
 - Recruiting (i.e., where will you advertise for your hires or go to locate your workforce?)
 - Hiring (i.e., how will individual applicants be evaluated in the hiring process?)

- Retention (i.e., what kinds of steps will you take to ensure that people from different backgrounds feel welcome in your company?)
- Promotion (i.e., what kinds of trainings or opportunities for promotion will you implement so people from diverse backgrounds will rise to positions of experience and power?)

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ESSAY 24 “BUT THIS IS ERASING HISTORY!” : THE MYTHS AND REALITIES OF MEMORIALIZING THE CONFEDERACY

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Following the 2015 murder of nine Black churchgoers by Dylann Roof in Charleston, South Carolina, that summer, a small group of mostly Black students at the University of Mississippi (where I am a professor) began to discuss what, if anything, they could do. Earlier that spring they, along with most of the nation, witnessed the video-streamed murder of Walter Scott by a South Carolinian police officer. Scott was shot in the back by the officer while fleeing for his life (Schmidt & Apuzzo, 2015). The students were also painfully aware of Freddie Gray, who had been murdered that same month in Baltimore while riding in the back of a police van. Gray's spine snapped due to the van's sudden deceleration. The Maryland state medical examiner's office ruled Gray's death a homicide because police officers “through acts of omission” failed to follow standard safety procedures (Fenton, 2015). Less than a month after Roof walked into Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, these students would also watch the video of Sandra Bland's arrest after a routine traffic stop and read with disbelief about her alleged suicide after having been found dead hanging in her jail cell. They, along with much of the rest of the nation, bore witness to and participated in the civil unrest that swept the nation that summer. And they, like many, continued to wonder what, if anything, they could do.

By August, these students had their own plan. They made a list of demands for campus administrators, including the removal of the Mississippi state flag from the flagpole in the center of the campus. The students drew connections between Roof's proud display of the Confederate battle flag, its prominent display in the official state flag of Mississippi, and the glorification of the flag and other Confederate

symbolism by White students on their own campus. As one of the students told my colleague in a feature for the late Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown*, "It infuriated me that Dylann Roof had been glorifying these symbols. And [students on this campus] wore them proudly, flashed them . . . revered them. And not that those symbols were responsible, but the same people that glorified those symbols were responsible for the deaths of people that look like me or that look like my grandma" (Foster, 2017).

As soon as the semester began in late August, the students went to work. They staged demonstrations in a historic green space on campus known as "the Grove" during home football games when thousands of students, alumni, and others gather in revelry to cheer on the football team. They wrote editorials in the student newspaper. They participated in a letter-drop campaign in the main administration building on campus, where more than 50 years prior, James Meredith was escorted onto campus by U.S. marshals following a deadly riot by a White mob protesting his enrollment and subsequent integration of the campus. By October, pressure was mounting on university and student leadership. A resolution authored by students proposing the removal of the state flag from campus was on its way to the student governing body for consideration (Lott, 2015). The students held a planned rally in front of the administration building in mid-afternoon. They spoke with conviction. Hundreds gathered to listen and to join in their demands. A smaller group of White counter-protestors, including members of a Klan chapter from Georgia, and members of a local League of the South chapter shouted racist taunts at the mostly Black students (Kirkland, 2015). Only one administrator, a Black woman who at the time worked within Student Affairs, stood between the mostly Black students and the group of White counter-protestors. The rest of the nearly all White, nearly all male administrators remained in their building. As an attendee of that protest, I recall looking toward the front of the building and seeing one peeking from behind the curtain of his office window.

The arrival of the Klan on campus proved to be the tipping point for student government representatives who until that time were ambivalent at best about the state flag. In the debate over the student resolution, one White male student declared that while he was not sure which way he would have voted before the Klan showed up, their appearance and their treatment of his fellow students made his moral obligation clear. The resolution passed with an overwhelming majority that evening (Levine, 2015). Shortly thereafter, the Faculty Senate voted unanimously in support, followed by the Staff Council and Graduate Student Council. With all four governing bodies now in favor, the administration had little room to maneuver. On a cold, rainy morning, and with little fanfare, the state flag was lowered, folded, and carried away by two university police officers (Ferguson, 2015).

While the students were ultimately successful in leading a movement to remove the state flag from campus, the Confederate monument at the entrance to campus remained in place. Later, its presence was contextualized with a plaque, but recently, it has been relocated to a Confederate cemetery in a more remote part of campus, just behind the old basketball arena and across the street from the football facilities. The statue's place on campus serves as a constant reminder to the majority-Black athletes on campus that while they may compete for the glory of a championship season, those students who fought and died to keep their ancestors enslaved made the *real* ultimate sacrifice, memorialized by the elegiac Greek couplet on the side of the statue's base that, translated, reads, "Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here, obedient to Spartan law, we lie." This couplet is identical to that which is engraved on the monument to the Spartan soldiers who died at the Battle of Thermopylae, as dictated through Herodotus's (2015) *The Histories*. Among Greek epitaphs it was commonplace to employ the term *stranger* as an appeal to sympathy from passersby. In this particular epitaph, the "stranger" is compelled to make a personal journey to Sparta to break the news of the soldiers' honorable sacrifice, "obedient to Spartan law."

Both the plaque and the relocation of the statue have been responses to the pressure brought by the student movement. But, unlike the removal of the flag, they have met much more persistent and overt resistance. Contradictory arguments are made by many, including claiming that the removal of the statues is “an erasure of history” while also maintaining that they are “just statues” and thus harmless (Hernandez, 2017; Hitson, 2019, 2020). It’s pretty clear on its face that both of these cannot be simultaneously true. It’s also clear that the resistance to their removal indicates that Confederate statues and memorabilia are serving some important purpose.

There are many criticisms and analyses of Confederate iconography to be made. In this essay, however, my aim is narrow. Here, I turn our attention toward the narratives these monuments convey. For example, as I explain later in the essay, the “Lost Cause” is a complex and enduring set of myths about the antebellum American South, its system of slavery, and its relationship to the rest of the nation. Monuments, memorials, and other Confederate iconography are symbolic representations of these myths, meant to condense and convey those myths through material forms and to reinforce the immaterial effects that accompany them. Understanding how the complex web of myths known as the Lost Cause endure more than 155 years removed from the Confederacy’s crushing defeat is a key task in understanding the movements to remove Confederate iconography from public spaces and the significant White racial backlash these movements engender.

WHERE DO THESE MYTHS COME FROM?

Beginning almost immediately after the end of the Civil War, men and women committed to the cause of the Confederacy—the enslavement of people of African descent—began to revise the history of the Civil War and its aftermath. Edward Pollard’s (1867, 1868) *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* and *The Lost Cause Regained* argued on the one

hand that the Civil War was fought to resolve two different ways of organizing society—one through enslavement, and the other through free labor—while at the same time claiming the root cause of the conflict was the matter of state sovereignty. Pollard himself was a member of one of the South's most powerful slaveholding families and before the war broke out, he published a book advocating for the reopening of the slave trade.

With the rhetoric and narrative provided by Pollard, various “Ladies Memorial Associations” and men’s veterans groups formed with the express purpose of reclaiming and reconstituting the Confederacy’s cause as just, honorable, and decent. Organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) engaged in a decades-long propaganda effort that included museums and shrines, monument building, magazines, editorials, pamphlets, fundraising, and even the manipulation of K–12 curriculum. Chartered in 1894, the UDC became the most enduring and influential of the women’s organizations founded to memorialize the Lost Cause and among either men or women’s organizations, the UDC was perhaps the chief propagandist (Cox, 2003; Janney, 2012).

Like other Progressive-era women’s organizations, the UDC provided a space for women to participate in untraditional activities, including fundraising, historical research, and public speaking (Case, 2002, p. 601). Historian Elizabeth Varon (2000) argues that women’s participation in organizations like the UDC was seeded during the secession movement, when it became understood that women’s patriotic duty was to compel their Southern men to fight for their way of life. During the war, it was women who were the first to memorialize the conflict and were responsible for finding the remains of their now-dead loved ones, as well as maintaining their burial sites (Case, 2002, p. 603).

From its founding, the UDC understood its mission as one that would influence the education of Southern children as to what it understood

as the true causes and consequences of the Confederacy and its war against Union “invaders” (see Cox, 2003). The Constitution of the Mississippi Division of the UDC, for example, states,

The objects of this association are memorial, historical, benevolent, educational and social; to honor the memory of those who served and those who fell in the service of the Confederate States; to protect, preserve and mark places made historic by the Confederate States; to collect, and correct and preserve the material for a truthful history of the War Between the States. (Mississippi United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1904)

Among the UDC’s primary purposes was the championing of the Lost Cause narrative. Unlike their male organizational counterparts, UDC members mostly came from wealthy families. Their social status provided them with access to resources necessary to produce their propaganda and conferred their work with a high degree of respectability and visibility (Case, 2002; Cox, 2003). Their chief assertion was that the Confederacy’s secession was justified and that the Civil War’s true cause was not slavery but rather “a different and directly opposite view as to the nature of the government of the United States” (Rutherford, 1915, p. 113). Reconstruction was deemed unconstitutional, and the extensive efforts to codify segregation and disenfranchisement across Southern states post-Reconstruction was viewed as wholly justified (Rutherford, 1916b).

Along with the revisionist history of the root causes of the Civil War, the UDC and its chief historian, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, made popular the trope of the “happy slave,” who fared far better on the antebellum plantation than they ever could as free men and women (Hoelscher, 2003). Emancipation, according to UDC propaganda, had led to the physical and moral corruption of Black men and

women who had now become “disorderly, idle, vicious and diseased” (Rutherford 1916a, p. 33).

To truly be effective in its mission to “educate” Southern White men and women on their “true” history, the UDC and other organizations understood they would need to shape how history was taught. For this, they focused their efforts on K–12 education. At the North Carolina chapter’s annual convention in 1909, for example, the UDC-NC’s division president declared:

We must see that the correct history is taught our children and train them, not in hatred towards the North who differed from us, but in knowledge of true history of the South in the war between the States and the causes that led up to the war, so that they will be able to state facts and prove that they are right in the principles for which their fathers fought and died; and continue to preserve and defend their cause, until the whole civilized world will come to know that our cause was just and right. . . . There is an expression often used by our people as the “Lost Cause.” Let us forget such, for it is not the truth. . . . No, our cause was not lost because it was not wrong. (Huffman, 2019)

In 1919, the UDC joined with the SCV and UCV to form the Rutherford Committee, named after Mildred Lewis Rutherford, who was perhaps its most prominent member. Also on the committee was Julian S. Carr, a former Confederate general who in his 1913 dedication speech for the University of North Carolina’s “Silent Sam” monument referred to the horsewhipping of a “Negro wench” for insulting a “Southern lady” as a “pleasing duty.” Meanwhile, of the men who fought and died for the Confederacy, Carr claimed:

No nobler young men ever lived; no braver soldiers ever answered the bugle call nor marched under a battle flag. They fought, not for conquest, not for coercion, but from a high and holy sense of duty. They were like the Knights of the Holy Grail, they served for the reward of serving, they suffered for the reward of suffering, they endured for the reward of enduring, they fought for the reward of duty done. (Carr, 1913)

The purpose of the Rutherford Committee was to develop and standardize Southern history and literature across Southern schools. Their 1923 pamphlet, "A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books, and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges and Libraries" (prepared by Rutherford herself), urged "all authorities charged with the selection of text-books for colleges, schools and all scholastic institutions to measure all books offered for adoption by this 'Measuring Rod' and adopt none which do not accord full justice to the South" (Rutherford, 1920, p. 3). Furthermore, "all library authorities in the Southern States are requested to mark all books in their collections which do not come up to the same measure, on the title page thereof, 'Unjust to the South'" (Rutherford, 1920, p. 3). The 1923 pamphlet contained 11 "statements of fact" to be used to measure the extent to which Southern history was given its proper due by the standards of the committee. Some of these statements of fact were the following:

- Secession was not rebellion.
- The North was responsible for the war between the states.
- The war between the states was not fought to hold slaves.
- Slaves were not ill-treated in the South, and the North was largely responsible for their presence in the South.

- The South has never had its rightful place in literature.

The committee's "measuring rod" was immediately embraced by the national UDC and its state divisions. The pamphlet's "simple" set of rules, summarized in just 23 short pages, made the Lost Cause easily digestible for the public, while also establishing clear guidelines for how to shape the narrative through educational curricula. Meanwhile, UDC divisions across the South were, due to the social status of their members and their prominent public voices, able to obtain appointments to state textbook commissions across the early 20th century. In Mississippi and Texas, state commissions actively partnered with UDC and UCV divisions in their textbook selections (Huffman, 2019).

The books selected mythologized, while at the same time obfuscated, the Confederacy's causes and consequences. In 1923, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the UDC chapter endorsed for use as a school textbook, *Young People's History of North Carolina* by Daniel Harvey Hill Jr. Hill, Jr. was the son of a Confederate general and had been North Carolina State University's president. His textbook met the standards set forth by the Rutherford committee, casting the Civil War as the fault of Northern abolitionists, Lincoln as a villain with a penchant for war, and the Ku Klux Klan as "controlled by the best men in the South and used only as a means of keeping order" (Huffman, 2019). The enslaved, meanwhile, were depicted as "brought into the colonies fresh from a savage life in Africa and in two or three generations were changed into respectable men and women. This fact shows, better than any words can, how prudently and how wisely they were managed."

For several decades, the efforts of organizations like the UDC and SCV to commemorate and celebrate the Lost Cause were steadfast and total. In 1932 alone, the UDC's North Carolina division had 183 portraits of Confederate officers and statements placed in North Carolina public schools. In 1933, the division helped place 865

Confederate flags across the state public school system—a number that was three times as many as the prior year (Huffman, 2019).

The interwar period, including the Great Depression, resulted in a significant decline in the political power of these Confederate memorial associations. Many of their founding members had aged out or were dead, and the national focus was no longer on internal battles of the 19th century but the external threats of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the work to entrench Lost Cause mythology within the K–12 educational system endured. The emergence of the modern civil rights movement produced a kind of “digging in” by proponents of Jim Crow segregation, including the production and promotion of new, state-commissioned textbooks that endeared nostalgia for the caste-system of the Old South (Cox, 2003; McPherson, 2005). In 1957, the state of Virginia commissioned a trio of textbooks that reframed the enslaved as happy servants, recast General Robert E. Lee as a “handsome man” who “sat straight and firm in his saddle,” and referred to the Civil War as the “Defense Against Invasion, 1861-1865” (Springston, 2018). The textbooks are estimated to have reached more than one million Virginian school-aged children between the years 1957 and 1970.

For much of the 20th century, Southern public schools adopted pro-Confederate textbooks, created school curricula that promoted the cause of the Confederacy, regulated the reading materials available in school libraries, honored Confederate holidays, and portrayed paintings of Robert E. Lee alongside those of the nation’s founders. The effect of this kind of cultural hegemony is expressed in John Dittmer’s (1995) study of Mississippi’s civil rights struggle, where Dittmer finds that as recently as the 1990s, most White Mississippians believed in the veracity of the Lost Cause due to “an interpretation drilled into the minds of generations of schoolchildren” (p. 12).

COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE

A sociological analysis of the Lost Cause mythology and the reverence toward Confederate monuments in particular might include the intersection of two complementary theoretical frameworks: (1) philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concept of "war of position," and (2) a cultural analysis of space, place, and power. Understanding the monuments in these contexts gets us closer to discovering why so many cling to them and the reasons why these artifacts should be removed.

The Lost Cause as an Enduring "War of Position"

Gramsci, an Italian political prisoner for the last decade of his life while under the Mussolini regime, was overtly concerned with how dominant groups rise to, and maintain, political power and influence. Gramsci's analysis focused on the power of the State, and how it wields its power against the masses. For Gramsci (1971), there are two main ways the State maintains power: (1) overt domination and (2) the manufacturing of consent. Overt domination occurs through the State's many apparatuses—from its criminal justice system, including its police, courts, and prisons, to its financial and economic regulations. Consent, however, is more complicated; it is developed *outside* of the State machinery and within civil society's institutions: the family, media, and schools, among others. While the first form of power relies upon technological, tactical, and military dominance, the second kind of power relies upon cultural domination. The institutions of civil society, taking their cue from the State, develop a common moral and social language for society's members, that positions the State's interests as natural, pervasive, and commonsense. Gramsci termed this second kind of power, *hegemony*.

Hegemony for Gramsci is not an outcome; it is a process. As a process meant to maintain a dominant group's authority and power, hegemony requires persistent actions by a dominant group in order to strengthen its hold across the institutions of civil society. Hegemonic power refers to when a dominant group is able to extend

its authority through both the functions and apparatuses of the state and the institutions of civil society (Hall et al., 2013, p. 203). For hegemonic power to function, it depends upon subordinated groups accepting the dominant group's ideas, values, and belief system "as normal reality or common sense . . . in active forms of experience and consciousness" (Williams, 1976, p. 145). Yet subordinate groups do not just acquiesce to hegemonic power. They resist in all kinds of routine as well as extraordinary ways. Thus, hegemonic power is often most clearly observable when the power of the dominant group is threatened, or during times of great political instability. According to Gramsci, this creates a "crisis of authority" as the masses begin to eschew hegemonic ideologies. Abolitionism combined with massive unrest among the South's enslaved population, including what W. E. B. Du Bois (2014) so aptly described as the "general strike" that swept across the Confederate states and ultimately led to their defeat, created a massive crisis of authority. The ruling planter class lost their primary source of labor, their land, their economic power, and of course their political and social status. The moment of Reconstruction was as hopeful a period of time for great social transformation as any in American history. But a series of events—the election of Rutherford B. Hayes, the regranting of political citizenship to the former ruling planter class, and the subsequent establishment of a new racial caste system in the South known as Jim Crow—paved the way for White, Southern elites to reassert their dominant position in Southern society.

In delineating a crisis of authority, Gramsci recognized that State power was not a given, and was always contested by groups and actors on the ground. Therefore, challenges to State-based power, like the power itself, unfold on two planes that are neither fully independent of the other. The first plane of contestation Gramsci termed a *war of maneuver* or a struggle of force and a direct confrontation against the State apparatus. Examples of a war of maneuver include violent confrontations between police and protestors or between protestors and counter-protestors. The second plane of contestation Gramsci termed a *war of position*. This war is

fought through the institutions of civil society and a confrontation against dominant culture by “creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society” (Cox, 1983, p. 165). A war of maneuver in which the Confederacy was defeated gave way to an enduring war of position in which the former planter class sought to reassert its dominance through political subterfuge, racial terrorism, and a widespread propaganda campaign known as the Lost Cause.

The relationship of Lost Cause defenders to the State is complex, and we must tread lightly in drawing broad conclusions about the State’s active role in enabling Lost Cause mythology. However, in the American South, Confederate monuments, memorials, holidays, and other events are codified into law, celebrated in state capitol buildings, and as the preceding analysis shows, well-entrenched within the public school system. Schools and mass media, along with the institution of the family, have served as the primary battlefields for this war of position in which Confederate memorial associations gained and maintained a hegemonic position relative to their dissenters.

Almost from the moment the war ended, former enslavers and their supporters worked to manufacture a particular memory of the South as a pastoral scene, benighted by invaders from the North who sought to destroy the Southerner’s way of life but that would one day “rise again” and return to its former glory. The first Confederate Memorial Day was celebrated in 1866, just one year after the end of the Civil War. That same year, former Confederate president Jefferson Davis helped lay the cornerstone of the Confederate Memorial Monument at the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama. Today, there are more than 1,700 monuments, memorials, bridges, parks, lakes, military bases, and other iconography on public spaces across the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). They range in prominence from the carving of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis into the side of Stone Mountain in

Georgia to the more commonplace (and thus often unnoticed) streets and buildings named for Confederate officers and statesmen.

The memorials, however, would have far less meaning for many White Southerners had it not been for the effort of the UDC, often in tandem with other memorial associations, to influence and shape how Southern history was taught to school-aged children. From its founding in the late 19th century, the UDC maintained a presence in Southern public schools—from routine visits to ceremonial events honoring the birthdays of Confederate leaders (Cox, 2003). The UDC sponsored essay contests on Southern history and literature in which students and teachers could compete. Through their social ties to prominent state legislators, the UDC helped to place portraits of Confederate leaders in public schools and even rename schools in memory of those Confederate leaders. Southern schools were, for the UDC, sites where a war of position would be fought and won (Cox, 2003; Janney, 2012; McPherson, 2005).

Often in partnership with other Confederate memorial organizations, the UDC members helped shape, and then held appointments on, state textbook committees in nearly every former Confederate state in the nation. Most if not all of these textbook committees were empowered to mandate required books for use within local public school districts. Using the Rutherford Committee's pamphlet as a guide, these statewide textbook commissions put enormous pressure on textbook publishers, many of which were based in the North, to eliminate anything in school-based textbooks that did not meet the standards set forth by Confederate sympathizers (Cox, 2003; McPherson, 2005).

Among the most widely adopted of these UDC-approved textbooks was Susan Pendelton Lee's (1900) *New School History of the United States*. Lee's textbook portrayed Lincoln as a warmonger and the South as the true defenders of the Constitution. Concerning the enslavement of people of African descent, Lee's (1900) textbook informed schoolchildren that

hundreds of thousands of African savages had been Christianized under its influence. The kindest relations existed between the slaves and their owners. A cruel and neglected master or mistress was rarely found. . . . The bondage in which the negroes were held was not thought a wrong to them, because they were better off than any other menial class in the world. (p. 262)

These myths were not only circulated among White schoolchildren. While the racial caste system of Jim Crow segregated White and Black schoolchildren into separate learning environments, Black children's textbooks were typically the discarded, older versions of those taught in all-White schools. Even in their own schoolhouses, then, Black children were forced to learn a version of Southern history that excused the system of slavery, demonized Reconstruction, and celebrated the efforts of the Klan and other racial terrorists to maintain a separate and unequal system all across the American South.

Confederate Iconography as Imaginative Geography

The late postcolonial theorist Edward Said (2000) coined the term *imaginative geography* as a way to describe how power, empire, and cultural hegemony coalesce in the shaping of physical landscapes, helping to reflect and reproduce the ideas, values, and beliefs of dominant groups. The production and maintenance of these landscapes function as a form of authoritative knowledge—locating “us,” “them,” and the differences between. Imaginative geographies, then, are a specific kind of hegemonic activity.

Said's analysis draws our attention to the idea of space and place as effects, or conditions, of hegemonic power. How the “story” of a given landscape is told is often a reflection of what the storyteller

wants the listener to know about that landscape, including what interests, ideas, or beliefs the listener should take away from the story. Told from the perspective of the dominant group, the “story” of Southern space and place, including the story told through its material culture (i.e., monuments, memorials, and other iconography) becomes part of the ongoing “war of position” (see Gramsci, 1971) meant to reinforce existing power relations (see Kelley, 2017).

Complementing Said’s analysis is that of historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (1992), in their book *The Invention of Tradition*. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) describe how dominant groups create a set of values and the traditions and objects that then become associated with those values. Objects and traditions become imbued with meaning and become part of how both dominant and subordinate groups ground their collective identities. The pastoral landscape of the American South—a familiar trope in its literature and within Lost Cause mythology—reflects more than just the common imagery of Greek revival–style architecture, manicured magnolias, and old live oaks. It also reflects the gendered and racialized economic relations that maintain them, and beliefs about the sanctity of those relations (MacKethan, 2004).

Imaginative geographies, and the invented traditions within them, serve important functions for dominant groups aiming to produce a common ideology that reinforces their dominant status. In this way, these imaginative geographies and invented traditions are part of what Omi and Winant (1994) term *racial projects*: simultaneously “an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56). Racial projects connect what race means to how social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon those meanings. Landscapes, including the cultural objects upon them, help to manipulate certain elements of the past, suppress others, and elevate still others in meaningful ways. Imaginative geographies reflect the suturing of representations and understandings of racial dominance to the physical landscape.

Physical landscapes are not natural or authentic then; they are purposeful, even manipulative.

A recent report from the Southern Poverty Law Center (2019) identified nearly 1,800 Confederate monuments, memorials, place names, and other iconography across the United States. Among these are 300 Confederate monuments in Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina alone and more than 100 public schools and colleges named for Confederate officers or statesmen. At the University of Mississippi, the landscape reflects a purposeful effort to imagine the South as a pastoral scene, and in doing so, suppresses the violence done to BIPOC folx from its founding to the present.

At more than 1,000 acres, and with numerous large, green spaces, the University of Mississippi is visually stunning. Mature oaks, magnolias, and pine trees intermingle with antebellum and Greek revival architecture. Sprinkled across its large swaths of green space are luxurious and well-maintained beds of daffodils, tulips, and hydrangeas. In the spring and summer, the smell of magnolias in bloom wafts across the grounds. In the fall, the changing colors of the leaves on the trees blend into the flower beds below, creating a cascade of reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. Each spring, campus landscaping crews re-sod the green spaces and rotate the flower beds. By summer, the campus resembles a botanical garden.

Hidden in plain sight, however, and only recently acknowledged through the strategic placement of a few plaques, is that the land upon which the campus now sits was taken by force from Indigenous people. Enslaved Africans, leased to the university from local plantations, built and maintained its first academic structures. The Confederate monument that was prominently on display at the campus entrance for over 100 years now resides upon a massive gravesite for Union and Confederate dead, adjacent to and visible from the university's football practice field. The building in which I work is named for L.Q.C Lamar, a Confederate statesman who helped draft Mississippi's articles of secession, in which the opening

lines read, "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world." Lamar, like most former Confederate officers and statesmen, received a full pardon from the U.S. government for his treasonous efforts. Upon having his political status reinstated, Lamar would go on to serve in the U.S. Senate before his appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Along with my building are several others named for prominent segregationists and architects of Jim Crow racial rule. Indeed, one building remains named for former Governor James K. Vardaman who, in 1907, declared, "If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched." According to lynching data from Tuskegee University, Mississippi's lynchings of Black people were the nation's highest over a period spanning more than 80 years.

The campus landscape, like many other Southern spaces, has historically served and continues to serve as an important vehicle through which to wage a war of position on behalf of the Lost Cause. The University of Mississippi aims to present its campus as a pastoral Southern scene. A common trope in Southern literature, the pastoral South is meant to reflect permanence, virtuousness, authenticity, and kinship (MacKethan, 1999). This pastoral scene is accomplished through antebellum-style architecture, lavish green spaces, and pristine horticultural displays. It is also accomplished, however, through the active suppression of its contested history and harsh present-day realities.

At the May 10, 1906, unveiling of the university's Confederate statue, a Rosedale attorney and then-candidate for governor by the name of Charles Scott gave an address at the request of the Albert Sydney Johnston chapter of the UDC (Twitty, 1906/2020). In it, Scott drew upon many of the common themes of Lost Cause mythology. He suggested that the South was misunderstood as treasonous when in fact "the people of the South were the loftiest and most unselfish patriots known in the annals of all time." He also claimed that Congress left no choice but to rebel due to "discriminating import duties," while at the same time abolitionists "industriously sowed the

seeds of sectional hatred and strife.” The Confederate soldier, meanwhile, was cast as “the most heroic figure of all the ages,” more valiant than “Alexander with his Macedonian cohorts,” “the bold adventurous Hannibal,” and “the great Cesar as he crossed the Rubicon” (Twitty, 1906/2020).

Yet Scott praised the efforts of Confederate defenders after the Civil War during what he called “the nightmare called the reconstruction, when these men boldly, aggressively, and intentionally overrode the letter of the law, that they might maintain the spirit of the law and preserve Anglo Saxon civilization as a priceless heritage for their children’s children.” This resistance, for Scott, was “the crowning glory of the Confederate soldier . . . overshadow[ing] all [their] brilliant victories on the field of battle.” The statue, Scott told the crowd, would stand “as an enduring monument to the memory of the Confederate dead. . . . It will serve, then, a double purpose by proclaiming to all future generations the gallantry of the Southern soldier and the nobility of the Southern woman.”

The statue, like the landscape that contains it, symbolizes and invokes the mythology of the Lost Cause, representing for passersby a “great and mighty” Southern history worth remembering. But at what expense? The presumed authenticity of this Southern landscape requires the active invention of a whole host of traditions and serves as the launching pad from which the most vigorous and violent defenses of the Lost Cause have been launched. Not only central for a war of position, the monument has also served as a key vehicle for launching a war of maneuver (Gramsci, 1971).

When White rioters attacked U.S. marshals in protest of James Meredith’s enrollment at the university in 1962, they regrouped near the monument as the marshals fired tear gas at them to disperse. There, former Army Major General Edwin Walker, who was forced to retire after violating orders to not distribute racist literature to his troops, climbed on the side of the monument and “congratulate[d] the students for their stand . . . and assured them of their right to protest

and the justness of their cause” (Eagles, 2014, p. 361). An Episcopalian minister attempted to mount the base of the statue and discourage more violence, but Walker “announced that the group contained an Episcopal minister whose position embarrassed him as an Episcopalian. Four men pulled [him] down, roughed him up, and sent him away” (Eagles, 2014, p. 362). According to a *Newsweek* article, Walker’s address to the crowd was, “Don’t let up now. You may lose this battle, but you will have to be heard. . . . You must be prepared for possible death. If you are not, go home now” (Anon, 1962). It would be a mistake to consider the choice to rally at the base of the Confederate monument in defense of maintaining segregation as pure coincidence.

More recently, in 2019 several Black student organizations planned a peaceful march and demonstration at the base of the monument as part of Black History Month. Neo-Confederate groups shared information about the plans via their Facebook groups and organized a counter-demonstration that weekend that would include a march from a Confederate statue in the downtown Oxford square to the monument on campus. Members of these groups promised to arrive armed and ready to commit violence toward anyone standing in their way. The university advised students, faculty, and staff to stay away from campus to avoid confrontation with the neo-Confederate groups. One neo-Confederate group member posted a livestream of his driving through campus while wielding an axe.

Notably, there are no monuments, plaques, or other markers that identify the land as originally belonging to the Choctaw Indians. Only recently has the university commissioned a few markers that acknowledge the role of enslaved labor in the construction of the original campus buildings. Meanwhile, the university’s previous leadership decided that they would contextualize the buildings named for enslavers and segregationists rather than remove their names entirely. And, while the Confederate statue that once stood guard over the entrance of campus for more than a century is no longer there, it remains on campus, tucked safely away in what was

previously a massive, abandoned gravesite for Civil War soldiers. Plans to renovate the cemetery, including plans to place grave markers over plots of land with no regard for historical or archeological accuracy, resulted in massive public backlash, and public condemnation from a variety of faculty and student groups. The chancellor of the University of Mississippi quickly backpedaled and abandoned the original plans. Nevertheless, the statue's new location was recently renovated to include a new walking path and nighttime lighting for visitors.

RESISTANCE

We would be remiss to declare the Lost Cause's efforts as totalizing. There is Frederick Douglass's searing indictment of the myth of American independence in his 1852 "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," and the demonstration of Black agency in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropology. There is also from the Black radical tradition that includes everything from the "sorrow songs" featured in Du Bois's (1903) *Souls of Black Folks* and Harry Haywood's (1948) declaration for Black self-determination in his "black belt thesis." And of course, there is the iconic figure of Bree Newsome climbing the flagpole outside of the state capitol building in South Carolina to remove its Confederate flag, her fist raised in a Black Power salute (Helms, 2015). Resistance to the Lost Cause and its symbolism, especially among Black Americans in the South, has always been present. It is, in fact, what has shifted the national conversation toward its current "crisis of authority," in which local communities, city and county governments, and entire states are reconsidering their relationship to Confederate iconography.

In 2001, a statewide referendum to change the Mississippi state flag failed by a nearly 2-to-1 margin (Firestone, 2001). Yet, five years after students at the University of Mississippi successfully fought to remove the state flag from their campus, the Mississippi state legislature overwhelmingly voted to immediately remove the state

flag from all government buildings and form a commission to design a new one without any Confederate emblems. Just a few weeks later, Bolivar County, Mississippi—a small Delta community that resisted federally mandated public school integration up until 2017—voted to remove the Confederate monument that sits in front of its courthouse. Summarizing the significance of this cultural shift, the vice president for the county’s board of supervisors, a Black man, stated that the town’s monument, and others like it, wrongfully honors enslavers and that “we’re doing right to end that celebration and celebrate something more positive” (Betz, 2020).

An analysis of this moment suggests that an opportunity exists for grassroots activists and other movement actors to make significant inroads in their ongoing “war of position” against Lost Cause proponents. A proper understanding of history, however, suggests that any inroads made will be met with significant backlash, what the historian Carol Anderson (2016) terms *white rage*. The front on which the battle of ideas takes place (i.e., within the cultural sphere) is always a contested one. Understanding how that contestation unfolds (i.e., the processes, actors, and events central to it) remains key for any mobilizing effort that hopes for success.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Anderson, C. (2016). *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*. Bloomsbury USA.

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What, if any, elements of “Lost Cause” mythology are you most familiar with? How did you become familiar with these elements?
2. How does the author argue that this mythology is part of a “war of position”? Do you believe that it was successful? Does the author? Why or why not?
3. What other public or cultural elements can you identify that have been a source of conflict and contestation? What have been the results of those conflicts?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Using the map provided in the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) report (<https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>), select one of the monuments identified and gather information on the history of the monument itself; when it was erected, by whom, and how people in the community responded.
2. Read the following short article on the origins of the anti-lynching song, “Strange Fruit” from <https://daily.jstor.org/the-unlikely-origins-of-strange-fruit/>. Now consider the lyrics of the song, which includes the phrase “pastoral scene of the gallant South.” Given the author’s discussion of the “imagined

geography of the pastoral South,” compare the map from the SPLC to that provided by the Equal Justice Initiative

(<https://eji.org/reports/reconstruction-in-america-overview/>).

What similarities do you see between these two maps? What, if anything, is surprising to you? How does this connect to the argument made by the author in regard to the role of these monuments in shaping the values and culture of a place?

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ESSAY 25 “SURE, BLACK LIVES MATTER, BUT WHY DO THEY HAVE TO LOOT AND RIOT?!” : DEBUNKING MYTHS OF BLACK PROTEST

Hersheda Patel *Georgia State University*
James Bridgeforth *University of Southern California*

I think we've got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, 1966

It has been over 50 years since Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explained that riots were partly a consequence of White America's refusal to fully hear and reckon with the material conditions of Black Americans. Although King contrasted riots with his form of nonviolent protests by condemning them as “self defeating and socially destructive,” he also recognized that a spirit of urgency existed among Black Americans who were exhausted by calls for patience as the wheels of justice and equality turned ever so slowly and their children and families fell further behind. It is important to note that while the civil rights marches of Dr. King and other activists are currently viewed as peaceful and supported by the general public, this was far from the case at the time. Despite their nonviolent nature, public opinion at the time was decidedly against such demonstrations, as 60% of Americans surveyed in 1963 expressed a belief that protests hurt efforts to bring about racial equality (Reinhart, 2019).

Since that time, the United States has accomplished many “firsts” in the quest for equality and justice. In 1967, the people of

Massachusetts sent the first popularly elected Black senator to the U.S. Senate. The same year saw Thurgood Marshall's ascension to the Supreme Court. In 2008, Barack Obama became the first Black person elected to the presidency and in 2020, Kamala Harris made history as the first Black and Asian woman elected to the vice presidency. Along with these milestones, there have been major strides in Black representation in almost every sector of the economy. However, despite all of this progress, the plight of Black Americans has remained stubbornly similar to what Dr. King described so many decades ago.

The percentage of Black children living in poverty is triple the percentage of White children living in poverty (Wilson & Schieder, 2018). The Black unemployment rate is consistently twice the unemployment rate of White Americans (Ajilore, 2020). The Black imprisonment rate is five times as high as the rate among White Americans, and Black Americans are more than three times as likely to be killed by police as White Americans (Gramlich, 2020; Schwartz & Jahn, 2020; see also Doude and Rodriguez in this volume). Even as the rates of Black student enrollment in colleges across the country has risen, Black students also remain clustered at for-profit and open access colleges, despite their performance on the SAT and ACT (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018). While open access colleges provide students with a pathway to higher education that otherwise might have been closed, many for-profit institutions engage in predatory recruitment and retention strategies that often leave students saddled with debt and without the credentials they sought (Cottom, 2017). So while progress has been made on many fronts in the fight for civil rights and justice for Black Americans, it is clear that Black Americans remain under attack both economically and physically in the United States. Based on these data, it seems doubtful that the voice of Black Americans has ever truly been heard.

Given all of this, it is unsurprising that, as the nation reeled from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic and yet more

Black people were killed by police officers, the summer of 2020 erupted into mass protests against racial injustice in cities across the country. What was surprising is how these protests came to be viewed, although perhaps it shouldn't have been. While 93% of the 2020 protests for Black lives remained peaceful (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2020), a 2020 poll showed that 48% of likely voters characterized the Black Lives Matter demonstrations as riots rather than protests (Fitz-Gibbon, 2020). The juxtaposition of these two realities brings us to the primary question of this essay: If Black Lives Matter protests have largely been peaceful, why do so many people view them as violent riots with little purpose other than destruction and vandalism? And what is the consequence of that perception, when contrasted with the actual goals of the movement? In order to answer these questions, we begin by exploring the ways that protests, particularly those in support of Black people and conducted by Black people, have been described in mass media, both historically and today.

RECENT REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK PROTEST IN POPULAR MEDIA

On the evening of May 25, 2020, media reports began to surface that a Black man had died at the hands of White police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As video footage of the incident spread throughout social media, it became clear that George Floyd had not just died, but that he had been choked to death as police officer Derek Chauvin knelt with his knee on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while other officers looked on (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020). The following day, protests in response to what many viewed as another state-sanctioned murder of a Black person began in Minneapolis. And, as day turned into night, violent clashes began to erupt between protestors and police officers. Media reports from the scene depicted a city on the brink of unrest, with buildings on fire and police officers deploying tear gas and rubber bullets against protestors. These images were quickly disseminated and soon

sparked similar protests in cities throughout the country, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Memphis, and St. Louis. At a protest in New York City on May 30, 2020, NYPD officers drove two SUVs through a crowd of protesters (Dewan & Baker, 2020). In response to the video of the NYPD officers driving through the crowd, Mayor Bill DeBlasio of New York City defended the officers' decision, saying, "It's clear that a different element has come into play here who are trying to hurt police officers and trying to damage their vehicles, and if a police officer is [in] that situation they have to get out [of] that situation" (Fallon, 2020). While government officials subsequently decried the destruction of property and reports of violence, less than one month later, police in Detroit responded similarly by driving their SUVs through a peaceful protest in support of Black lives (Bella, 2020).

As video footage of fires, broken glass, and protestors streaming in and out of deserted stores and businesses was played on a constant loop on most television stations, a consistent narrative of the protests began to develop. Instead of being viewed as reasonable reactions to a murder that had been broadcast across the world, the protests were positioned as violent riots that needed to be quelled immediately with as much force as possible. State and local officials began the process of establishing strict curfews (Reyes-Velarde et al., 2020), calling in the National Guard (Dwyer, 2020), and deploying hundreds of police officers dressed in full riot gear (Sahouri, 2020). The images were unsurprisingly reminiscent of those that were spread in the wake of previous protests for Black lives, particularly those that occurred in and around Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was fatally shot by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson (Brown & Fieldstat, 2014; see also Ray and Bailey in this volume). This prevalent narrative of protests demanding an end to racial injustice is also quite similar to depictions of the broader #BlackLivesMatter movement that demands an end to structurally racist policies and practices that continue to stifle the lives of Black people.

ORIGINS OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER

While Black liberation movements have been in existence for generations, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a specific and unique movement that was developed by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black boy. While it was a response to this case, the movement itself is intentionally inclusive. Garza describes BLM as

a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement. (Garza, 2014, para 11)

Even though the founders of this radically inclusive movement in service of Black lives have been abundantly clear about the movement's intention, BLM has been regularly maligned in the media by politicians, police unions, and other groups opposed to its beliefs (Clayton, 2018), including the media itself. Critics have taken offense at some of the policy proposals and statements that have emerged from various segments and leaders of the movement that they view as antithetical to traditional American values. For example, some leaders have called for reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States in addition to a restructuring of the U.S.

political system to ensure that Black people have political power and self-determination (Movement for Black Lives, 2016). While these policy proposals generally have broad support among the various groups within the BLM movement, it is important to understand the organizational structure of the BLM movement and note that the movement is not a monolith.

Unlike traditional civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the National Urban League, Black Lives Matter may refer to the official Black Lives Matter Global Network or any number of unofficial affiliates, independent subgroups, and self-proclaimed leaders of the movement working on behalf of Black people. In other words, it has been essentially decentralized in a way that previous movements haven't been. Critics have been able to exploit this fact by using language from some of these leaders and groups in disingenuous attempts to obfuscate the broader goals of BLM. In one prominent example, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany defended President Donald Trump's derision of the Black Lives Matter movement as a symbol of hate by saying,

Look, he agrees that all [B]lack lives matter, including that of Officer David Dorn, Patrick Underwood, two officers whose lives were tragically taken amid these riots. All [B]lack lives do matter; he agrees with that sentiment. But what he doesn't agree with is an organization that chants, "Pigs in a blanket, fry them like bacon," about our police officers, our valiant heroes, who are out on the street protecting us each and every day. (The White House, 2020)

Fact checking organizations have repeatedly debunked McEnany's claim, noting that while this chant was used by protestors at a march in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2015, that particular group has never been affiliated with or representative of the Black Lives Matter Global

Network (Dale, 2020). Moreover, Trump's purported support of the police would soon be called into question after the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, where Capitol officers were killed or severely injured by Trump supporters, allegedly at his urging. Nevertheless, conservative media outlets continue spreading this narrative that has painted BLM as a particularly violent group instead of its reality as a movement working for justice and liberation. Perhaps as a result of this coverage, media reports have detailed how the initial surge of support for Black Lives Matter protests has dwindled in recent months, especially among White Americans (Tesler, 2020).

To be sure, throughout history, Black liberation movements have been scrutinized, villainized, and criminalized long before Black Lives Matter. We cover some of this history in the next section and how BLM is just the latest example of ahistorical myths around Black protest.

HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

While the Black Lives Matter Movement is a recent example, the characterization of Black liberation movements as violent is not new. Black Americans' campaigns for equal rights have been portrayed as violent and unjustified at least as early as 1919 (Sugrue, 2020). At the end of World War I, as Black veterans and Black Americans from the first wave of the Great Migration settled in the North, tensions between northern Whites and Black Americans resulted in violence in at least 25 cities. The media reported these incidents as evidence of the growing influence of "radical propaganda" among Black Americans and the *New York Times* blamed Communist persuasion as the source of Black Americans' malcontent (TimesMachine, 1919). This coverage effectively silenced Black America's clear calls for racial justice and infantilized them as being under the control of foreign actors.

In reality, violence was breaking out as Black veterans, who had fought against fascism in Europe in World War II, began organizing for their rights at home and were met with backlash from White mobs. Often police ignored the actions of White mobs, arrested Black Americans for protecting themselves, or actively participated in violence against Black organizers and communities (Sugrue, 2020). Largely unchecked, White mobs were successful in destroying many Black communities, particularly successful Black business centers. The 1921 bombing of Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where over 300 people were murdered and surviving residents lost their homes and businesses is, perhaps, the most infamous example (Messer et al., 2018). These attacks on Black neighborhoods continued throughout the 20th century, including the 1943 attacks on Black workers in Detroit, Michigan, and Mobile, Alabama, by White mobs who feared employment competition from Black workers and the 1963 bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four young girls and injured at least 20 more (Sugrue, 2020). Despite evidence that Black liberation protests were responses to oppressive conditions and violence from White Americans, the media continuously ignored the role of White mobs and the complacency (and sometimes active participation) of police in the destruction of Black lives and livelihoods as a catalyst for Black liberation struggles and campaigns.

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

Why does the media present skewed representations of Black liberation movements and protests, you might ask? Great question! The media, also referred to as *mass media*, is a *social institution*, meaning, it operates as a mechanism for socializing members of society into the norms, values, and beliefs of our culture. Education, family, health care, and government are examples of other social institutions that have an explicit and clear role in maintaining the health and functionality of society. Mass media is categorized as a

social institution due to its ability to persuade and inform society through news, movies, shows, commercials, and other content (Silverblatt, 2004).

Similar to other social institutions, mass media is not an amorphous entity that acts of its own independent will but a system of organizations and people who bring their cultural beliefs, values, and understandings of the world into their work and decision-making. As mass media influences and socializes society, members of society bring those ideas back into media organizations as journalists, editors, producers, and media executives, perpetuating the *dominant culture* of society. This often puts social movements at odds with mass media, because social movements generally challenge the dominant culture of society, threatening both the system of mass media, which sells dominant culture, and the individuals who make up mass media, who are also creators and consumers of dominant culture. White journalists, story writers, and editors (even those who abstractly believe in the cause of anti-racism) can find themselves re-creating racialized narratives about Black liberation movements and protesters, because we are all steeped in a racialized society that reinforces hegemonic ideas of Black criminality and violence (see Ray and Bailey's and Doude and Rodriguez's essays in this volume) through the media and other socializing agents (Alexander, 2010). This creates *media bias* in the representation of social movements (Chideya, 2016).

Mass media determines how Black liberation movements, leaders, and demands are represented to an audience who are not actively involved in the movements. Media scholars have developed the *protest paradigm* as a framework for understanding how protests are received and represented in the media and the impact these representations have on popular perceptions of these movements. Lee (2014) defines the protest paradigm as "a pattern of news coverage that expresses disapproval toward protests and dissent" (p. 2727). The protest paradigm highlights the codependent but unbalanced relationship between media and protesters and it

generally operates in three steps. First, the media ignores the movement as well as the reason activists are protesting and their demands if there is no sensational activity to attract viewers. Second, movement leaders recognize that they need media coverage to appeal to those who may share their ideology but are not yet aware of the movement. To capture this audience, protest leaders create conditions to attract the needed media attention and spread their message, such as marches, boycotts, and speeches at large or significant venues. Finally, the media covers protests utilizing popular *frames* or “set paths for interpreting information” that “explain racial phenomena following a predictable route and misrepresent or mask[ing] oppression, inequality, and domination in society” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 74), often with little to no attention to adequately representing the causes being championed.

Although movement leaders need media coverage to raise awareness for their cause, the common frames media sources use to tell protestors stories ultimately diminish the key components of protestors’ cause and policy demands by shifting focus to specific aspects of the protest itself. This prolongs the conditions under which people live that drive them to protest and delays the process of addressing these conditions, thereby ensuring additional cycles of protest, as we have seen with Black liberation movements over time (Blauner, 1972; Ture & Hamilton, 1967), and ultimately creating more content for mass media operating under dominant and hegemonic framing. We offer further description of this framing in the following section.

MEDIA FRAMES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Media frames are the common ways media organizations tell stories to highlight and center a specific view or experience in the viewer’s mind. Media coverage most often employs three disruptive frames when portraying protests (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019):

1. The *riot and violence frame* highlights acts or rhetoric of violence or looting over any other aspect of the protests.
2. The *confrontation frame* highlights protestors' negative interactions with police, counter-protestors, or other officials.
3. The *spectacle frame* highlights strange or dramatic aspects of a protest, such as focusing on the size of the protest or attire of protestors.

Historically, media portrayals of social movements utilize frames in ways that diminish social movements, particularly those that challenge the status quo and social norms of the times. These portrayals silence the policy interests of movement leaders, ultimately derailing or delegitimizing the social movement.

Researchers have found that social movements that fundamentally challenge the structure of society or whose demands pose a substantial risk to the status quo are much more likely to have their cause distorted through media frames. For the past three decades, the status quo in U.S. culture has been to maintain the illusion that all races, genders, and socioeconomic classes are free and equal, despite data on inequalities in educational attainment, economic mobility, wealth accumulation, earnings, levels of criminalization, and health disparities that prove otherwise. This is *color-blind ideology* (see Bonilla-Silva, 2013; see also Thornhill in this volume). Social movements that assert that the United States is fundamentally unequal and challenge society to address these inequalities, as Black Lives Matter does, are a threat to this status quo, hence mass media is more likely to utilize negative frames in coverage of those movements (Leopold & Bell, 2017).

In this way we can see media frames as a form of *racial projects*, which are interpretations and presentations of racial dynamics that either seek to redistribute or maintain the current distribution of goods, resources, and power along racial lines (Omi & Winant, 2015; see also Ray and Bailey in this volume). In this sense, Black Lives Matter, as a movement, and mass media are both racial projects.

Black Lives Matter is an anti-racist racial project that aims to redistribute goods, resources, and power to Black Americans, particularly the most marginalized Black people, from whom these items have long been kept. Alternatively, mass media, through the utilization of media frames, works to maintain the veneer of racial progress, while delegitimizing the demands of Black activists in an attempt to maintain the current distribution of goods, resources, and power in society. Given that U.S. society is fundamentally built on the oppression of Black Americans, historically and contemporarily (Feagin, 2013), media frames can therefore be understood as racist racial projects.

The degree to which particular movements challenge the existing distribution of goods and resources impacts the nature of media coverage. In the case of environmental movements, protests are often ignored by the media until the issue affects affluent White communities (Heinz, 2005), at which point the media presents benevolent coverage framed in contextual storytelling of the surrounding issues (Wright & Reid, 2011). U.S. Indigenous peoples have a robust history of protests and social movements, but their movements, much like their history and their continued existence in this country, are consistently overlooked by the media (Alia, 2004). U.S. feminist movements have similarly been ignored by media at first, followed by the media mocking the movements and questioning the legitimacy of the cause. Notably, after the media belittle feminist movements, they frame them as non-threatening to the overall social structure and represent them as acceptable forms of protest (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Robinson, 1978). This framing is tied to gendered stereotypes in which women are not considered physically threatening, thus allowing feminist movement to be co-opted by the very companies, organizations, and social system against which women organized. This eventually diminishes the collective power of the movement (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019).

Conversely, after the media stops ignoring Black liberation movements, it frames them as violent riots. Even when media outlets

outwardly support the ideals of racial justice, they focus their coverage on rarer cases of violence or looting and invoke images of “untamed” and “wild” Black people in the streets—images that serve as throwbacks to slavery and Jim Crow era racist imagery (Alexander, 2010). An analysis of 6 months of Black Lives Matter protest coverage following the 2014 murder of Michael Brown found that media coverage of Black Lives Matter across various unrelated news outlets largely ignored the purpose of the protests and the issues that drove them. Instead, a bulk of the coverage used racialized language to frame protestors as violent, lawless, criminals “intent on lawlessness and destruction terroriz[ing] th[e] community while highlighting the inflammatory anti-BLM comments from bystanders and police” (Leopold & Bell, 2017, p. 726). These news articles featured quotes from the mayor requesting the National Guard come in to protect Ferguson citizens, falsely pitting Ferguson residents against protestors, many of whom were local residents. One article featured the story of a Ferguson woman who expressed initial support for the protests but later came to fear the protestors because they marched in the streets at night. Many other articles highlighted property damage and focused on descriptions of protestors as violent, protests as uncalled for, and illegitimate acts in support of “alleged” victims of police brutality (Leopold & Bell, 2017).

These articles are acts of media framing, where age-old racist myths about Black people, particularly men, being violent and threats to decent (White) citizens are employed and the underlying causes of Black protestors’ concerns are overshadowed (Alexander, 2010). The media has also highlighted the role of police in establishing “law and order” after “lawless” and “un-American” protestors rampage through the streets, while ignoring the ways police or White counter-protestors have incited violence at Black Lives Matter protests.

Regardless of how peaceful various Black protests have been, the “violent riots” frame persists, as evidenced in the coverage of BLM protests in the summer of 2020 (ACLED, 2020) and even the civil rights movement. Black protestors in the civil rights movement, which

emphasized peaceful protest and civil disobedience as a way to advocate for radical changes in their social conditions, were widely characterized as “radical challeng[ers] to existing political, societal, and economic structures in the United States” (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019) who were pushing a “communist racial ideology” (Madrigal, 2018). Ironically, but not accidentally, this iteration of the Black liberation movement is contemporarily touted as the epitome of proper, palatable, and peaceful protesting. Mass media utilizes this mythical version of a principled and acceptable 1960s civil rights movement as an ahistorical benchmark to which today’s Black Lives Matter movements are compared. When BLM protests do not match this mythical version of the civil right movement, contemporary protestors are shamed and vilified. This framing is so powerful that even some Black Americans employ this rhetoric against BLM protestors. For example, after the murders of Philando Castille and Alton Sterling, BLM protestors marched onto a highway in Atlanta. Then-Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed deployed a heavy police presence through Atlanta and told the media, “Dr. King would never take a freeway,” ignoring the truth of Dr. King’s legacy (where he did indeed take several highways) (Theoharis, 2016). Similarly, during the racial uprisings in the summer of 2020, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms once again invoked Dr. King to shame protestors who had caused property damage at malls and businesses in Buckhead, a wealthy Atlanta neighborhood (Habersham, 2020).

In addition to utilizing negative frames, mass media also undermines social movements by elevating people outside of the movement, including bystanders who are not involved in protests, to the same level of expertise as people intimately involved in the movements (McLeod, 2007). Similarly, news reporters often consult government officials to characterize the protests and movements. Due to their role as agents of the social structure, these officials are often at the heart of the very institutions the protestors are critiquing, placing them at odds with the movement, while simultaneously being presented as “experts” on the movement (McLeod, 2007). While these official sources may be more knowledgeable about the issue

under protest, they are less likely to understand or experience these social issues in the same way as the protestors. These reporting practices shape the narrative and representation of the protests and the larger movement in a way that ultimately obscures the full contexts that drove people to protest. When reporters, journalists, bystanders, and “official sources” represent protests in the media without full acknowledgment of the contexts that led to the rise of the movement, the media audience loses the contextual underpinnings of the movement and come to view the act of protest as a pointless activity (Leopold & Bell, 2017).

COLOR-BLIND IDEOLOGY AND WHITE PROTESTS

Since the 1960s civil rights movements, overt racism and anti-Blackness have become less socially acceptable. Even as racism and racialized outcomes persist, it is no longer acceptable to use racial epithets or explicitly name race as a reason for differential treatment. In its place, *color-blind racism* has become the dominant racial ideology of the United States. Color-blind racism utilizes racial frames (yes, “frames” again) to perpetuate and explain persisting racial inequalities without naming race or racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Color-blind ideology has allowed the dominant group (i.e., Whites) to hide behind the curtain of racial neutrality. Black Lives Matter has attempted to tear away that curtain and force White America to reckon with ongoing state-sanctioned violence against Black people. This has threatened the social order and the media organizations that uphold the color-blind status quo (see also Thornhill in this volume).

Interestingly, in recent years, White Americans have also attempted to disrupt color-blind ideology with more explicit and violent anti-Black, anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish, and anti-immigrant social movements, including the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, NC, and, most recently, the January 6, 2021, Capitol

insurrection, where White domestic terrorists wore anti-Semitic shirts and stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to “take back the country” and “stop the steal” (Kilgo, 2021; NPR, 2021). Historically, media coverage of conservative movements has focused on these groups’ demands and the rights of all to protest (Nelson et al., 1997) as opposed to vilifying protestors or their cause as is so often done with BLM. However, White extremist protests violate the neutrality of color blindness so extremely that media organizations cannot use “both sides” or “freedom of speech” frames without facing severe backlash from White viewers as well as BIPOC folks.

Most mainstream media outlets have increasingly framed racialized White protests as riots and violence (Kilgo, 2021; NPR, 2021). Color-blind ideology requires that anti-Black racism be hidden, and visceral White anger toward Black people and other people of color threatens the stability of the ideology. This is not a win for Black Lives Matter protestors or Black liberation movements, however. Color-blind ideology makes it impossible to address concerns about racism because we are not allowed to talk about race in private, at work, or in the media. While it is encouraging to see White domestic terrorists being held accountable in the media, this does not change media frames of Black protests or the material realities of Black people in the United States.

WHAT DOES BLACK LIVES MATTER WANT?

Black liberation movements demand radical change for the lived experiences of Black people, including the redistribution of wealth, equity in educational and economic opportunities, and the end of violent criminal legal systems that uphold racial oppression (Movement for Black Lives, 2016). Movement leaders, including BLM leaders, argue that the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws and discriminatory social policy, such as policies that denied Black Americans the right to get loans to purchase homes in good neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2018), have afforded White Americans

unearned generational privileges by denying equitable access to social programs and from the unpaid labor Black Americans. Some Black liberationists have called for these unearned privileges of Whiteness to be reinvested in the Black neighborhoods and families from which they were stolen.

This often upsets Whites who argue that they have worked hard to achieve what they have. Although Black liberationists do not contest the hard work of Whites, they point out that hard work does not reap equal benefits for White and Black Americans, as evidenced by the fact that White households led by high school graduates have 10 times the wealth of Black households led by high school graduates (Long & Van Dam, 2020). In fact, the average White household led by a high school graduate has more wealth than the average Black household led by a college graduate (Long & Van Dam, 2020). McIntosh et al. (2020) attribute these trends to White families' ability to transfer larger inheritances, including through home value, which can provide an economic buffer and collateral even for poor Whites. Still, poor Whites may find it hard to believe they have experienced any racial privilege and think it unfair that other people will rise out of poverty due to their race while they remain behind, thereby engendering anger toward Black liberation movements.

CONCLUSION

In his 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (1994) wrote about the dangers of those who are so beholden to a sense of decorum and order that they ignore the immediate need for justice. King wrote of the White moderate “who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action.’” It is this argument that we aimed to highlight in this essay, written more than 50 years after King was imprisoned. The activism that led to his detainment in that Birmingham jail cell in 1963 is largely identical to the work that the Black Lives Matter movement engages in today and is in service to

the same ideals of racial and economic justice for Black people—goals that were also similar to the ones discussed by Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. King (1994) concluded his letter with the hopes that “the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities.” Although we share those hopes, we also recognize that in order to realize the vision he describes, we must fundamentally change the ways that we engage with media by critically assessing how media framing may be impacting the way we understand the world. Becoming aware of these frames and asking questions about what might be missing from media coverage can empower viewers, who are also citizens, to think more critically about the information they consume and to demand greater clarity in the information provided. We can do this as consumers of mass media, as producers of content ourselves, and as individuals who seek to better understand the conditions in our society, so that we can work together to determine the actual changes necessary to transform those conditions.

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racial equity and justice in K–12 education policy and practice, with focus on racial crises in schools, the ways that educational leaders navigate those crises, and the policies and practices that shape their responses. He has been published in several peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Journal of School Leadership*, the *Rural Educator*, and *Education Review*, in addition to media outlets such as *Education Week*, the *Hechinger Report*, and the *Washington Post*.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Online

For information and policy recommendations on ending police violence in the United States, see Campaign Zero:

<https://www.joincampaignzero.org/#vision>

For more on the Black Lives Matter organization and to locate local chapters, see blacklivesmatter.com

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. The authors suggest that misperceptions about the Black Lives Matter movement are largely driven by media coverage. Do you agree or disagree? What was your perspective on this movement, prior to reading this essay?
2. What elements of “framing” do you think are the most significant for shaping public ideas about protest activities?
3. According to its website (blacklivesmatter.com), Black Lives Matter is an intersectional movement that values Black lives regardless of gender identity, sexual identity, economic status, disability, religious beliefs, and other categories of difference. Do you think most Americans are aware of this? How does this knowledge inform your opinion of the movement?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Racialized media depictions of civil rights activities have often been tainted by the prevalence of White supremacy. Use this activity from the Civil Rights Teaching project that encourages participants to engage with readings about the ways that media framing impacted public opinion of the civil rights movement:
<https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/teaching-race-media>.
2. Consider the emergence of #SayHerName and how it connects to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, using this TED Talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality.”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare).

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PART IV RACE IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

ESSAY 26 “WHY DO THEY GET TO USE THE N-WORD, BUT I CAN’T?” : PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

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Nigger may be the most controversial word in the history of the English language, capable of provoking everything from outrage to violence when uttered by the “wrong” person or in the wrong context. In 2017, comedian and HBO talk-show host Bill Maher caused a stir for calling himself a “house nigger” during a live broadcast. A social media backlash ensued and Maher issued an apology the next day, stating “I regret the word I used in the banter of a live moment.” HBO decried Maher’s use of the N-word as “completely inexcusable and tasteless” and promised to remove it from future airings. On his show the following week, Maher apologized again, adding that “the word is omnipresent in the culture” and that his use of it was in jest.

The outcry over Maher’s transgression was partially attributable to the N-word’s history as a racist term: It dates to at least the 17th century, when it was applied to slaves as an insult (Asim, 2007). Maher’s defense that the word is used frequently in popular culture raises a question asked by many White students today: Isn’t it unfair that Whites are prohibited from saying a word that Blacks are allowed to use without prohibition? After all, Black comedian Chris Rock went from bit player to superstar after declaring during a 1996 comedy routine that he “hated niggas” and hoped to join the Ku Klux Klan. A decade later, White actor Michael Richards torpedoed his career after screaming the N-word at a group of Black hecklers during a stand-up comedy appearance. Is there a double standard here, based on race? If so, what rules apply to those outside the Black–White binary? For example, in 2020, an old video surfaced of

Arab American actor Alia Shawkat using the N-word while quoting a Drake song. In a statement posted to social media, Shawkat wrote that her use of the word was a “careless moment” that she wished she could take back: “I regret using a word that carries so much pain and history for black people, as it is never a word to be used by someone who is not black.”

Shawkat’s mea culpa represents an acknowledgment of the word’s rooting in our troubled racial history. For many Blacks and non-Blacks alike, the word symbolizes the history of anti-Black oppression in the United States. On its own, the word has come to represent the virulent and violent institutions of slavery, Jim Crow, and a post–Jim Crow era marked by varied forms of institutional racism. In June 2015, President Barack Obama made international headlines for mentioning the word in a discussion about the ongoing problem of racism toward Blacks in the United States. In an interview for the podcast *WTF with Marc Maron*, Obama said,

Racism, we are not cured of it. And it’s not just a matter of it not being polite to say “nigger” in public. That’s not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It’s not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don’t, overnight, completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior.

Certainly, the term has been applied to enslaved Africans and to men and women lynched during legalized segregation, and it is *still* applied toward Blacks in a negative fashion. For example, in September 2020, vandals painted the N-word in front of the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center in Phoenix, Arizona. That same year, a White man named Brandon Troy Higgs was sentenced to 25 years in prison for shooting a Black man during an altercation. Because Higgs had called the victim “nigger” during the act, he was convicted of a hate crime. In 2015, White

supremacist and mass murderer Dylann Roof published a manifesto that included lines such as, “Niggers are stupid and violent.” Yet a good deal of the controversy and confusion over the term arises from its frequent use in rap music.

A BAD RAP?

Frequent and varied use of the N-word in present-day rap music remains a common—albeit controversial—claim to authenticity. Some believe that the use of the word in rap music has stripped it of its original racist meaning; others assert that any use of the term should be forbidden. This debate is further complicated by overlapping and intertwined matters of race, social class, and gender, all of which impact one’s “right” to say America’s most controversial word.

Nigga, a derivation of the pejorative *nigger*, has become somewhat commonplace, particularly in rap music, where it has been deployed with growing frequency. Even so-called “conscious” rappers say it often (Asim, 2007). Among the primary justifications for the widespread use of the N-word in rap music is that it has undergone what linguist Geneva Smitherman (1997) calls *semantic inversion*, or a process whereby people “take words and concepts from the [English] lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose entirely different meanings” (p. 17). In this context, the N-word is no longer a racist term but one whose original meaning is repurposed to symbolize camaraderie or affection. When Kendrick Lamar raps, “Me and my niggas four deep in a white Toyota” in his song “The Art of Peer Pressure,” this is how the word is intended and interpreted. At a 2018 concert in Alabama, however, Lamar brought a White fan onstage to rap along to “M.A.A.D City,” a song that heavily features the N-word. As the woman began rapping, using the word several times, the crowd began to jeer and boo. Lamar stopped the woman, telling her, “You got to bleep one single word.” Thus, even in contexts where White use of the word is intended to signify the inverted use of

the term, it can be interpreted as symbolizing its original racist meaning, which is important for White people to understand when using the term.

This is true even when Whites are not performing a song but rapping along to one. Audience participation and engagement and participation have always been central to rap music performance, and there is a growing presence of rap acts at largely White music festivals such as Coachella and Lollapalooza. Artists such as Kanye West, Childish Gambino, and Tyler, the Creator have encouraged White fans to use the N-word at their concerts, while others have discouraged White concertgoers from saying it (Diallo, 2019). In 2017, members of the mostly White Alpha Phi sorority at the University of New Hampshire posted a video where they rapped along to Kanye West's "Gold Digger," which prominently features the N-word. University officials condemned the video but accepted an apology from the Alpha Phis. Elysa Caisey, a board member of the university's Black Students Union, opined, "It wasn't a form of racism, but it was unacceptable. When you use a word like that, you need to understand the implications behind it" (Aresenault, 2017). As historian Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (2007), author of *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, explains, "Black people have refused Whites' opportunity to partake in the term, whether they hope to use it affectionately or not. . . . The Black intolerance for White use of the N-word clearly reflects the sensitivity of the word to Black people and the resilience of its power" (p. 67). The contested use of the word is further complicated by matters of gender and class.

GENDER, CLASS, AND THE N-WORD

Musicologist Emmett Price (2006) points out that having exclusive right to the term in rap music places Blacks in a "subtle position of power" over other ethnoracial groups, especially Whites (p. 57). In this context, the N-word upends (however symbolically and

temporarily) long-standing hierarchies of race by giving Blacks power and authority over Whites (Harrison, 2009). This may help explain the appeal of rap music for Blacks, particularly young Black men, a historically marginalized group. Rap music is a space where this group is afforded a command and respect not found as easily in other realms of social life. Moreover, its use by Black men is not only an effort to upend racial hierarchies but also an attempt to reinforce masculinity and stake a claim to patriarchal power. Rap music often entails a hypermasculine performance, where the frequent usage of the N-word appears to play a key role in that performance.

Black female MCs such as Eve, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim have employed the N-word frequently in their rhymes, typically as a means by which to accentuate both Blackness and masculinity. For example, on the song "Lookin Ass," Nicki Minaj built an entire song around the N-word, boasting at one point, "I'ma need a check from y'all niggas/I don't want sex, give a fuck about your ex, I don't even want a text from y'all niggas/I'm rapin' you niggas." In doing so, Minaj made a claim to authenticity, equated here (as elsewhere in hip-hop culture) with both Blackness and maleness. With lyrics that fluidly intersect gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, "Minaj offers themes of female empowerment while she simultaneously circumscribes her impact with patriarchal language and practices" (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017, p. 39).

White female rappers have also attempted to use the term, with a very different response. In 2011, Kreayshawn, a White female MC from Oakland, tweeted, "WTF YOU WANT FROM A NIGGA?! *DMX VOICE*." The tweet caused an immediate media and online stir and received a swift denunciation from Black male rapper Game, who blasted Kreayshawn on a track titled "Uncle Otis": "Lil' White bitch, better stay in your place/You call me a nigga, I'ma put the K in your face." Game told a reporter, "You can't be playing with that word, some people will take it serious. Especially coming from someone that's [not Black]. There's a lot of tragic history behind it" (Rodriguez, 2011). Taken at face value, Game problematized the term due to its

racist history, rather than its use by a woman. “Uncle Otis,” however, implies that White “bitches” have a position subordinate to men and that women who challenge male authority by using the N-word can be subjected to violence.

When asked about the kerfuffle, Kreayshawn responded that she never used the N-word in her recorded music but occasionally did so when freestyling. In Oakland, she claimed, all racial groups routinely used the term and members of the lower classes should be allowed to do so. “That word is used in the low income community more than anything,” she said. “I can see if I was some rich crazy trick and I was just saying this because it’s hip-hop. No, I was raised around this. Me and my sisters were all raised around this. People call me that” (Gipson, 2011).

Communications scholar Kembrew McLeod links rap’s emphasis on Black masculinity to “authenticity,” or the socially constructed belief that something or someone is genuine, original, true, or pure. McLeod (1999) asserts that, “to its core community members, hip-hop remains strongly tied to Black cultural expression” and male dominance (p. 140). Thus, in rap music, Black masculinity denotes “keeping it real,” while Whiteness and femininity are equated with artifice. According to McLeod, Black male rappers create verbal “rules” related to authenticity to preserve its “pure” core from co-option by outsiders, including Whites and women. Extending McLeod’s theory to the N-word, the prohibition against White and female use of the term is a means by which Black men can protect rap music from White and/or female co-option by upholding the belief that authentic rap music is the exclusive domain of Black men. This strategy is complicated by the fact that rap music is also created and consumed by plenty of folks who do not fit the Black–White racial binary.

BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

Scholars of the N-word (Asim, 2007; Kennedy, 2003) sometimes frame debates over its use as matters of Black versus White, but lots of rappers and rap-music fans who don't fit either ethnoracial category use the word. Concurrent with rap's rise in popularity, by the turn of the century, "numerous non-Black communities began using the term, and it became prominent in the lyrics of top-selling artists. Asian American, Latino, and numerous other non-Black practitioners and fans began to call one another by the term" (Price, 2006, p. 57). The practice remains commonplace today. For example, Latino rapper Tekashi69 (a.k.a. 6ix9ine) scored a hit with the 2017 song "Gummo," which detailed his gang ties and love for robbing enemies, shooting foes, using women for sex, and a host of additional Black "ghetto" stereotypes. 6ix9ine's appropriation of the N-word in the song could be viewed as a signifier of Black authenticity in a Black-dominated field: He portrayed himself as a "real nigga" with the pedigree to prove it. Backlash over Tekashi69's use of the N-word was nonexistent and "Gummo" sold two million copies within months of its release. This raises an important question: If Black use of the term is considered acceptable and White use is forbidden, where do Latinx and other ethnoracial groups fit into the debate?

Ogbar (2007) points out that Latino rap acts such as Cypress Hill, Fat Joe, and Cuban Link have employed the N-word in their songs without censure, while artists such as Kid Frost have avoided it. Ogbar believes that part of the reason for this is that Latinx people who said the term generally had Caribbean lineage that afforded them a degree of leeway not enjoyed by rappers with Chicano roots. He argues that the division between Latinx people of Caribbean and Chicano origin reveals

(1) the historical, cultural, and social relationships between different Latino nationalities and African Americans and (2) African diasporic connections between people in the Caribbean and North America. Since the early twentieth

century, Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York City have had relatively close social relations in various cultural and political institutions from sports teams (professional and recreational), to residential areas, to musical groups, and to politics. (p. 48)

Asked about his use of the word during a radio interview, Tekashi69, whose mother is Mexican and father is Puerto Rican, explained, “It’s the way I grew up, it’s my culture. I grew up in Bushwick, Brooklyn. It’s my vocabulary, it’s the way I talk. You know what I’m saying? It’s not like, ‘Oh shit, I’m not African-American, I’m not dark skin, I cannot say this.’ I can say it!” Some Puerto Ricans claim a unique relationship to Blacks that may render rappers from this group less scrutinized than Latinx MCs of other ethnic backgrounds. Studies of rap music, however, find a conviction among Latinx MCs of all ethnic backgrounds that these groups share historical, social, and cultural characteristics with Blacks in the United States, an opinion often echoed by Black rappers as well (Harkness, 2008).

Still, even Puerto Rican artists sometimes find themselves under scrutiny when employing the N-word. For example, in Jennifer Lopez’s 2001 remix of her song “I’m Real,” featuring rapper Ja Rule, she sang this lyric: “Now people screamin’ what the deal with you and so-and-so/I tell them niggas, mind their biz, but they don’t hear me though.” Lopez was lambasted across media outlets by Blacks (and others) who thought her use of the word was inappropriate. In some part, the critique was due to the fact that she isn’t considered Black despite her Puerto Rican roots and diasporic connections and despite the fact that she dated prominent rap mogul Diddy (a.k.a. Sean “Puffy” Combs). The outcry might also have been due to her status as a woman; where Tekashi69 and other Puerto Rican rappers have been given a “pass,” she was not and her claim to power through use of the word was firmly denied. The differences in these examples reiterate the complexities of the N-word’s use among groups of color.

Use of the term among Asian rappers provides further illustration of the controversies surrounding the N-word. Race and ethnicity scholar Nitasha Tamar Sharma's (2010) study of South Asian American (or "desi") rappers finds that male desis frequently use the N-word in referring to themselves and their friends, "particularly when there [are] no Black people around" (p. 241). While Sharma's desi MCs decry White use of the term as racist, in their own use of the word, they "emphasize their knowledge of context, respect for the music, and their position as non-White 'outsider' contributors" to rap music and hip-hop culture (p. 242). In 2016, celebrity singer-actress Tila Tequila raised eyebrows with a series of Twitter posts that questioned Black ownership of the word. "You can't expect people of all races 2 listen to popular music and not have the N-word embedded into their heads," she wrote. Tequila, a first-generation U.S. immigrant who was born in Singapore to a French Vietnamese mother and a Vietnamese father, received pushback for the tweet but insisted in another post, "If u want change then stop saying it in songs," before adding that rapper Nicki Minaj "has a song where she says 'Nigga' over 100 times. . . . What outcome did u expect?" Despite these and other arguments, some Blacks might find Asian use of the word offensive, particularly in light of the ways (some) Asian American groups are positioned as "model minorities" and thus enjoy a social prestige often not accorded to Blacks (for further discussion, see Zhou and Tran in this volume). Yet the question remains: Should Asians and any other non-Blacks be "allowed" to use the term?

In hip-hop culture—where Blackness is associated with authenticity and Whiteness with inauthenticity, and those who do not fit the Black–White racial binary fall somewhere in between—use of the N-word serves as a signifier of Blackness in a culture where Blackness is at the center of the status system. It also functions as a verbal means of distancing oneself from alleged White fakeness. Having the "right" to say the N-word is a claim to authenticity in a culture where "keeping it real" is paramount. Yet the fact remains that non-Black use of the word is questionable at best, offensive at worst.

Essentially, artistic license aside, language is a powerful conveyor of inequality, where the N-word remains historically and presently loaded with connotations of racism and injustice. Nevertheless, it is sometimes the “artistic license” aspect of the term that leads to its use among non-Blacks, especially those in the rap industry. But race is not the only factor in whether or not an artist, group, or individual employs the term; among Blacks, class also factors into the word’s use.

CLASS MATTERS

As alluded to earlier in the Kreayshawn example, class clearly plays a role in use of the N-word. Studies that frame its use as a simple matter of ethnoracial status overlook the crucial role of social class. While race is important, “more common, however, is the use of ‘nigga’ to describe a condition rather than skin color or culture. Above all, ‘nigga’ speaks to a collective identity shaped by class consciousness” (Kelley, 1996, p. 137). Despite popular perceptions to the contrary, in terms of sheer numbers, most poor people in the United States are White, and most Blacks are members of the middle or working classes. In part, this is due to the ongoing expansion of the Black middle class, a group that is increasing numerically and as a percentage of the Black population (Claytor, 2020; Pattillo, 2013). These structural changes have impacted culture within the Black community: There is a growing cultural divide between middle-class Blacks and those from lower and working classes. Cherise Harris and Nikki Khanna (2010) point out that, “because of the conflation of race and class in America, middle-class culture is often understood as Whiteness and Blackness is understood as the behavior and experiences associated with the urban ghetto” (p. 644).

Within the Black middle class there is an emphasis on “academic excellence, conservative styles of hair and dress, proficiency in Standard English, and the values of sacrifice and delayed

gratification” (Harris & Khanna, 2010, p. 653). Adopting such behaviors, however, does not come without penalty. Black people who do not dress, speak, act, and consume culture that symbolizes alleged Black low-income and working-class membership sometimes face accusations of selling out or being deemed inauthentically Black. As Harris and Khanna (2010) note, “Black middle-class respondents frequently describe rejection by other Blacks, often because of their lack of familiarity with Black [low-income] culture that has in large part become the standard by which authentic Blackness is measured” (p. 652). From this perspective, Blacks who signal association with the upper and middle classes by refusing to say the N-word may be labeled inauthentic by low-income and working-class Blacks. Conversely, Blacks who signal association with the Black lower and working classes by saying the N-word may do so as a claim to authentic “hood” membership.

The perception that there are two “types” of Blacks, symbolized by linguistic differences associated with upper- and lower-class status, illustrates the increasing cultural, social, and economic disparities described by scholars of the Black middle class. Michael Eric Dyson (2005) writes of an *Afristocracy*, which he defines as “upper-middle-class Blacks and the Black elite who rain down fire and brimstone upon poor Blacks for their deviance and pathology, and for their lack of couth and culture” (pp. xiii–xiv). He contrasts this with what he calls the *Ghettocracy*, which consists of the Black underclass and working poor. Dyson’s Ghettocracy construct also includes celebrity rappers “whose values and habits are alleged to be negatively influenced by their poor origins” (p. xiv) and who romanticize a fabled (and fictional) Black ghetto in their music and lifestyles.

These issues are not limited to the Black population. Similar class-based differences have been found in studies of the growing Latinx middle class. For example, Gregory Rodriguez (1996) finds that Latinx people are stereotyped in the mainstream media as gangbangers or irate political activists. As occurs in the Black population, middle-class Latinx folks are accused by their working-

class and low-income counterparts of being sellouts, White wannabes, and cultural traitors: “Apparently, retaining one’s ‘authentic’ Latino ethnicity requires remaining in place both socioeconomically and geographically. Even the accomplished have often felt a need to feign ‘street-wise’ mannerisms and humble roots” (p. 2).

These class-based divisions, disparities, and tensions are reflected in rap music, mirrored, for example, in the perceived split between the so-called “conscious” rap subgenre and gangsta rap, where the N-word is found more frequently. According to historian Robin Kelley (1996), the style and sound of gangsta rap, including its use of the N-word, is partially a Black underclass response to the Black middle class. Gangsta rappers “remind listeners that they are still second-class citizens—‘Niggaz’—whose collective lived experiences suggest that nothing has changed *for them* as opposed to the Black middle class. In fact, ‘Nigga’ is frequently employed to distinguish urban Black working-class males from the Black bourgeoisie” (p. 137). Thus, in addition to its use as a linguistic divider between ethnoracial groups, the N-word is also deployed within ethnoracial groups to make class-based distinctions. From this point of view, the N-word is a discursive means of creating a space where, for example, working-class and low-income Black and Latinx people have more power than their middle-class counterparts, thereby reversing social-class hierarchies found within ethnoracial categories. While scholars of rap music have spent considerable energy on matters of race and ethnicity, less attention has been afforded to social class, particularly within ethnoracial groups. Focusing on the intersection of ethnoracial status and social class offers a more complete understanding of present-day rap-music culture, including its varied use or non-use of the N-word.

Nevertheless, some scholars believe that rap music serves as a sort of racial melting pot that disintegrates existing race-based tensions and allows for greater understanding between ethnoracial groups. For example, Pancho McFarland (2008) describes rap music as an

“interethnic contact zone,” a location where “young people of various ethnicities come together and exchange ideas, experiences, understandings, and analyses, resulting in profound changes in individuals and in the cultures of each group” (p. 173). Hip-hop scholar and author Bakari Kitwana (2005) asserts that White assimilation into hip-hop culture marks “the dawning of a new reality of race in America” (p. xii).

The politics of language surrounding the N-word, however, serve as a potent reminder that ethnoracial and social class divisions have hardly disappeared. Debates over who has the “right” to say the N-word or how using the term reflects on those who choose to say it or not say it illustrate how race, social class, and gender continue to be key means by which people remain divided. Nevertheless, what cannot be forgotten is the loaded history of the terms *nigger* and *nigga*, which is why they remain controversial in the first place.

PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND THE N-WORD

While most of this essay focuses on the N-word and the varied ways some justify its use, it is important to consider arguments for why it shouldn't be used. As noted earlier, the N-word is, to say the least, racially loaded and embedded in a long, troubled, and violent history of anti-Black oppression. As such, while it is commonly used in the rap industry, some White rappers don't believe they have the right to use the term. Eminem, easily the world's most prominent and respected White MC, has never used the term publically or on a commercial recording, saying to a *Rolling Stone* reporter in 2000, “That word is not even in my vocabulary” (DeCurtis, 2000, p. 18). When an early homemade recording of a teenage Eminem using the term in a derogatory manner surfaced a few years later, he immediately issued a public apology. What did Eminem understand that others did not? Perhaps he understood that even as a prominent player in the Black-dominated rap industry, he was still a White man, and given his White privilege, it was inappropriate for him to use

even a derivation of a word that has been used to oppress Black people in systematic fashion. In an interview for the Southern Poverty Law Center's magazine, *Teaching Tolerance* (now called *Learning for Justice*), Neal A. Lester (2011), dean of humanities and former chair of the English department at Arizona State University, argued,

We know that as early as the 17th century, “negro” evolved to “nigger” as intentionally derogatory, and it has never been able to shed that baggage since then—even when black people talk about appropriating and reappropriating it. The poison is still there. The word is inextricably linked with violence and brutality on black psyches and derogatory aspersions cast on black bodies. No degree of appropriating can rid it of that bloodsoaked history.

Lester, who in 2008 taught the first ever college-level course designed to explore the word *nigger*, went on to discuss how students in his classes admit to using the term:

In their circles of white friends, some are so comfortable with the N-word because they've grown up on and been nourished by hip-hop. Much of the commercial hip-hop culture by black males uses the N-word as a staple. White youths, statistically the largest consumers of hip-hop, then feel that they can use the word among themselves with black and white peers. . . . But then I hear in that same discussion that many of the black youths are indeed offended by [whites using the N-word]. And if blacks and whites are together and a white person uses the word, many blacks are ready to fight. So this word comes laden with these complicated and contradictory emotional responses to it. It's very confusing to folks on the “outside,” particularly when nobody has really talked about the history

of the word in terms of American history, language, performance and identity.

While this discussion from Lester further illustrates the complexity of the term's use, it also illustrates this unmistakable, simple truth: At its core, the word is freighted with a history of anti-Black racism and oppression that still resonates today. For these reasons, it cannot be casually used without consequence by Whites and other non-Blacks whose ancestors haven't been victimized by anti-Black oppression and who don't currently experience this kind of oppression. Moreover, as Lester (2011) indicates, Black use of the word as a method of reappropriation and reclamation may also be ineffective, as "the poison is still there." In this manner and in other ways, the power reclaimed by Blacks' reappropriation of the term may be temporary and fleeting in a society still characterized by institutional racism and the continued systematic subjugation of Black Americans.

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Audio/Visual

Barack Obama discusses racism and other issues on the podcast *WTF with Marc Maron*:

http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_613_-_president_barack_obama

A conversation about the N-word between rapper KRS-ONE and comedian Paul Mooney, titled “When the ‘N’ Word Is Part of a Routine”: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6560171>

Radio Capicu discusses and debates Latino use of the N-word in a show titled “Should Latinos Use the ‘N’ Word?”: <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/radiocapicu/2008/02/28/radio-capicu-should-latinos-use-the-N-word>

Michael Eric Dyson and Bill Maher discuss Whites’ use of the N-word. <https://youtu.be/cqKtRbEM2WM>

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Is the N-word more or less acceptable when stated by certain people? If so, for whom is it more or less acceptable? What role do race, social class, and gender play in this?
2. Do people make too big of a deal over the N-word? Do you believe that it has lost its original racist meaning?
3. Is the “-er” form of the N-word more offensive than the “-ga” form? Why or why not? Is the N-word acceptable in the context of rap music and hip-hop culture? Why or why not?
4. Would you feel comfortable saying the N-word in any context? If not, under which contexts would you feel comfortable or uncomfortable saying it? What are your reasons for this?
5. Is it okay to use the N-word when rapping along to songs that include the word? Should certain groups not use the word when rapping along? Which groups?
6. How is the N-word different from or similar to other forms of “injurious speech,” such as *redneck*, *spic*, *chink*, *bitch*, *ho*, *gay*, *queer*, and *fag*?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. If you are a White student who says the N-word, think about when and how you use it. Do you say it publically and privately? Do you say it around people of color? Do you use the word when rapping along to songs? Do you believe that there is a double standard for Whites when it comes to White use of the N-word? If yes, why do you think this double standard exists?
2. If you are a Black student who uses the N-word or doesn't use the N-word, what are your reasons for this decision? What standards or rules should apply to Whites when it comes to the term? Should all Whites be "allowed" to say the word or just certain Whites? If only certain Whites should be allowed to say it, which ones and why? What about those who do not fit the Black-White racial binary?
3. If you are a non-White and non-Black student who uses or does not use the N-word, what is your justification for this? Do you use the word when rapping along to songs? Do you believe that there are different standards applied to different ethnoracial groups, such as Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native Americans, and other groups, when it comes to the N-word? What are these standards, and why do you think they exist?

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ESSAY 27 “IT’S APPRECIATION, NOT APPROPRIATION! I DON’T KNOW WHY YOU’RE OFFENDED!” : UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

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In 2015, activist and actress Amandla Stenberg posted a video on social media about Black cultural appropriation. The term *cultural appropriation* can apply to any marginalized racial, ethnic, national, or cultural group and refers to the process of taking another’s culture and adopting it as one’s own (Young, 2010). Stenberg, an African American teenage actress at the time, posted the video with a fellow classmate as an assignment for a history class. The video discussed aspects of Black culture in America such as hip-hop music and hair and showcased how the appropriation of these expressions by White artists has largely excluded the Black artists responsible for such trends. Because of her status and platform as an actress, the video gained many views and received media attention. Later that same year, Stenberg received critical attention again when she responded on social media to then-teen socialite Kylie Jenner after Jenner posted a picture of herself wearing a cornrow wig. Cornrows and other natural styles that are commonly associated with individuals of African descent have long been criticized as unprofessional or messy (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Thompson, 2008). Stenberg posted a reply to the picture, stating that what Jenner was doing was cultural appropriation, as she was profiting from wearing the Black hairstyle.

Many replies to Stenberg’s response chastised her for starting an argument about race, as many were convinced that the original post by Jenner was merely meant to be a fun fashion statement. She eventually posted a reply reiterating that appropriation occurs when members of dominant-status groups are praised for exhibiting

features or engaging in mannerisms of a subordinate group that is frequently discriminated against for engaging in the same behavior and practices. Cornrows (and other types of protective hairstyles, such as braids) have a meaning and history that is diminished when appropriated. Cornrows serve as a protective style for many women with natural hair and are used to help hair maintain its length and fullness while also preventing breakage. They also serve as a symbol for fashion and creativity within the Black community in terms of the various designs possible. However, in White-dominated spaces, styles such as cornrows and braids are considered unprofessional and have even led to Black women being fired from their jobs (Byrd & Sharps, 2014) and countless Black girls being punished in schools. By contrast, when Whites wear these hairstyles, they are praised as edgy or trendy.

Hair is a part of one's presentation of self and is reflective of one's identity (Synnott, 1987; see also Goffman, 1959). It is also symbolic of beauty, economic power, status, and individual beliefs (Bellinger, 2007). Within African culture specifically, it can reflect status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, or place in the life cycle (Sieber & Herreman, 2000, p. 56; see also Bellinger, 2007). For all of these reasons, Jenner's cornrow wigs are a form of cultural appropriation ultimately designed to capitalize on elements of Black and African culture while Black people who wear cornrows are deemed unprofessional and undesirable, relegated to a marginalized status. Cultural appropriation occurs when members of a group in power have the privilege not to be burdened by negative stereotypes for donning elements of other cultures.

Perhaps a more recent example of cultural appropriation in business has been the appropriating of Gullah Geechee culture, which came under scrutiny during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gullah Geechee community of South Carolina is a group of African Americans with strong ethnic ties to their African heritage. Leaders of this community have lamented the cultural appropriation of the Gullah or Geechee culture by White-owned companies who have branded the culture

through commercial advertisement and other means to drive profit. As examples, they cite companies with names like “Gullah Gourmet” and “Geechie Boy Mill” (Harris, 2020). Thus, while these companies have profited from Gullah Geechee culture during the pandemic, the Gullah-owned businesses and restaurants have been struggling, which has made the economic consequences of the pandemic more difficult for them to bear (Harris, 2020).

Cultural appropriation is a common phenomenon, not singular to the appropriation of Black culture. For example, Gwen Stefani appropriated Japanese culture and aspects of broader Asian culture. She featured stage dancers called the Harajuku Girls in her lineup for several years, exploiting a sect of real women from the Harajuku district of Tokyo, Japan known for their unique style (Ahn, 2007). While some may argue that Stefani was appreciating and showcasing their style, she used the Harajuku Girl namesake as a human accessory, objectifying real Harajuku women and profiting from that objectification.

In another example of Asian cultural appropriation, some have taken to wearing a bindi as a fashion accessory. The bindi comes from Hinduism and is a dot of red color placed in the center of a woman’s forehead. It represents the Nasadiya Sukta, which is considered the point at which creation begins (Harish, 2020). It further symbolizes wisdom, concentration, and energy, and represents the “third eye” (which is a concept in many religions that represents perception and foresight). Some celebrities (e.g., Beyoncé, Selena Gomez, Iggy Azalea) have chosen to wear a bindi as a fashion statement, despite its deep religious and cultural intent. Furthermore, it is common to see it worn at music festivals, where in fact many aspects of Indian, Native American, and Asian cultures are appropriated. This is problematic in part because the activities at these concerts usually include alcohol and drug use and the symbolism behind wearing a bindi (or kimono or Native American headdress) is defiled through its juxtaposition with such activities. In more recent years, executives of

music festivals like Outside Lands in California have begun banning Native American headdresses, a sign of progress.

Wide-scale instances of cultural appropriation occur each year at Halloween. When individuals dress up as cultures not their own, they are exaggerating the features of another's culture, which can be very offensive to the origin culture. When done frequently, appropriation contributes to ideal type depictions that become the societal expectations of the origin culture. For example, many Native American costumes available in retail stores have no symbolic meaning. By contrast, every bead and every feather on a tribal outfit has a specific meaning to a specific tribe ("Indian Pow Wow Attire," n.d.). Mass-produced Halloween costumes do not provide this meaning, and often such costumes are sexualized, which in the case of religious robes is particularly offensive to Native American communities (Keene, 2013). Also, there is a qualitative difference between dressing up as a supernatural character such as a zombie or fairytale princess and dressing up as a Native American, Asian, or Black person. In the latter case, real people from real cultures are being exploited and usually presented in stereotype. When an individual appropriates a culture, it is a covert form of discrimination that does not take into consideration the social significance of another group's experience.

Perhaps the most common example of cultural appropriation occurs in sports, through the use of American Indian mascots. Many of these mascots are caricatures with exaggerated features and practices (see also Williams in this volume). The misrepresentation of Native Americans has a long history in the United States—from the exploitation and genocide of Native Americans under colonialism to the stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans in film (Churchill, 1998). This history is what has led to the decimation of the Native American population, thus spawning portrayals of Native peoples as people of the past and therefore exploitable through mascots, company logos, and stripping their lands for oil (Nelson, 2020). At times, cultural appropriation occurs that is considered religiously and

morally offensive to origin cultures. This has been the case for Native Americans where, for example, sacred symbols and figures have been used to sell products such as liquor and tobacco (Alaniz & Wilkes, 1998; Merskin, 2001). Because they are perceived as people of the past and objectified by mascots and logos, we often overlook or ignore the social problems that affect Native American communities, such as extreme poverty, disease, and unemployment. As seen in the previously mentioned examples, cultural appropriation is problematic because it threatens the identity of a culture and/or its members and leaves its members vulnerable to discrimination, stereotypes, and diminished resources and opportunities (Young & Brunk, 2009).

Some companies are beginning to recognize the damage caused by cultural appropriation. In the Gullah Geechee example discussed earlier, some of the companies accused of appropriating their culture have decided to change their company names (Harris, 2020). In 2015, Adidas agreed to provide financial support and creative design to any high school willing to drop its Native American mascot (Wagner, 2015). Some schools and universities have received approval to use mascots associated with particular tribes, while others have embraced a mascot change (Remillard, 2005; Strauss, 2014; Ulmer, 2014). Arguably the most famous example of a college team named after a Native American tribe is the Florida State University Seminoles. The official stance of the university and the Seminole tribe is that of a mutually beneficial agreement where the university has permission to use the Seminole namesake and the tribe is financially compensated. The case for cultural appropriation with FSU stands strong though, through the misuse of traditional robes, headdresses, and jewelry by the student body, especially during sporting events.

In 2018, the Major League Baseball team Cleveland Indians discontinued the use of the logo Chief Wahoo, a long-criticized caricature of a Native American and will change their name to the Guardians in coming years (Wrap Staff & Welk, 2020). Following

broad-scale recognitions of systemic racism in the United States in the summer of 2020, many sports teams opened dialogues and review boards to discuss the possibility of changing mascots or team names appropriating American Indian cultures or tribes. In July, the National Football League team, Washington Redskins, decided to remove their logo and undergo a name change, but only after major pressure from financial shareholders (Wrap Staff & Welk, 2020). Professional sports teams such as the Atlanta Braves, Kansas City Chiefs, and the Chicago Blackhawks are more reluctant to change their mascots (Lutz, 2020) due to fan appeal, financial greed (Brady, 2014), or perhaps a misunderstanding of the stakes (see also Williams in this volume). To understand why cultural appropriation persists despite widespread objection to it, we need to understand the social issues and questions behind it.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

To provide some background on the impact of cultural appropriation, one needs to understand the concept of assimilation, as it contributes a great deal to racial, ethnic, and cultural dynamics in the United States. Ostensibly, the United States is a proverbial melting pot made up of numerous cultures, races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Of course, invoking the melting pot metaphor means one might envision a process whereby all cultures eventually blend into one broader culture: the American culture. However, when you think of different cultures within the United States, do you envision just one culture, or do you envision various subcultures? If we envision the latter, then a more appropriate metaphor for America would probably be something like a salad bowl. The salad metaphor recognizes the different components of the salad individually, but collectively, the contents are labeled salad.

The problem with the melting pot metaphor is that it assumes each culture does blend smoothly into the dominant or White American

culture. The term *dominant culture* refers to the culture of the group with the most social, political, and economic power in any given social category that by extension becomes the referent group in public discourse. As the referent group, it becomes the standard or norm and thus invisible while the social characteristics of groups without power become highlighted. For example, when we speak of race, we think of Black, Latinx, or Asian people. Whites are often not included in the immediate thought because public discourse deems Whites as normative. Another such referent group is cisgender men. When one speaks of gender, usually people think of cisgender women. However, gender also applies cisgender men, transgender people, and other individuals who identify with genders other than cisgender or transgender. The dominant group controls and has access to the distribution of various resources, capital, and power. Thus, it influences ideologies (such as the concept of gender) and decides which beliefs ultimately become the status quo. This process is known as “hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971). In a social world where White upper-class (and even middle-class) cisgender men compose the hegemonic group, they define and control cultural values and norms—values and norms that have historically devalued and presently devalue the cultural attributes of people of color as well as other marginalized groups.

Cultural hegemony allows for control of cultural production, where Whites as the hegemonic group can ultimately use media and public discourse to maintain hegemony, or power and privilege. One way that happens is through the use of controlling images. According to Collins (2004), the 20th century brought the influx of such images through White-dominated and White-controlled media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, movies, television, and the Internet. It is through these media outlets that people of color become othered. Othering is the social process of a dominant group designating the parameters of a subordinate group (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Schwalbe et al. (2000) use the term *oppressive othering* to describe how one group seeking domination over another frames the subordinate group as morally or intellectually inferior. This is a form

of boundary maintenance where dominant groups maintain boundaries between subordinate-status groups to protect their access to resources and maintain their social, economic, and political advantage. The White-dominated media participate in oppressive othering and boundary maintenance by, for example, framing Black people as unintelligent, Latinx people as hypersexual, Asian American people as perpetual foreigners, and Native American groups as people of the past. Collins (2004) argues that these kinds of images are then used by social institutions to unequally distribute goods and resources such as access to education, employment, and housing, to name a few.

Indeed, cultural appropriation is another way Whites maintain cultural hegemony. Cultural significance is often left out during the adaptation process, and what remains are features or elements of the oppressed culture as adapted by members of the dominant group. The intentional “borrowing” of culture from a historically subordinate status group is problematic, as the values and reasoning behind the original groups’ rituals or practices are undermined or erased completely. When we allow this to happen, the cultures of people of color are exaggerated and denigrated, which by extension elevates White culture. As such, BIPOC cultures remain othered, White culture remains the norm, and the cultural hegemony that Whites enjoy remains intact.

Often, cultural appropriation goes unnoticed, particularly by Whites who may be guilty of it. In large part, this is due to racial privilege, meaning advantages of opportunity, power, or prestige. It is important to note that while not all White people have the power and means to establish and carry out this dominance (e.g., poor Whites), all Whites benefit from being a part of this dominant-status group. This is particularly true of cultural appropriation, where even poor Whites benefit from having the status of Whiteness elevated—a natural consequence of appropriation. Because of White privilege (McIntosh, 2011), Whites who are accused of appropriation may argue that they are simply appreciating a group of color’s culture—

not co-opting it—and have a right to show their appreciation. However, when there is widespread backlash from people of color, it is not necessarily the right of a member of the dominant group (who has been afforded social privileges, whether they are aware of it or not) to question people of color's claims of appropriation. Instead, it is perhaps an opportunity for Whites to reflect on how appropriation occurred. When White people dismiss these concerns, they run the risk of further perpetuating the long history of exploitation, racism, and discrimination that has long characterized the experiences of people of color in the United States. It is also important to note that a member of a marginalized group can engage in the appropriation of another minority group. Such was the case when Beyoncé wore traditional Indian attire and engaged in appropriating certain cultural symbols in Coldplay's music video, *Hymn for the Weekend* (see Peralta, 2016). The point remains, when cultural appropriation occurs, it needs to be called into question.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I MIGHT BE APPROPRIATING?

When one is a member of a privileged group, it is always important to remain aware of privilege and instances where you might be using your privilege to oppress another group. In the case of cultural appropriation, you can do the following:

1. *Assess.* Simply ask yourself if you would be offending a culture by your actions. Most individuals are aware of their own culture, race, or ethnicity. If you are trying a new style and are considering wearing a bindi, locs, or a Native American headdress, think about why members of those origin cultures do so. Many of these cultural markers have come to be associated with fashion statements, but that is not how they are perceived in the origin cultures.
2. *Consider your social location.* Becoming more aware of your own privilege will help you be more socially responsible. We are

individuals with the right to express ourselves, but we are also morally and ethically aware that there are things that should not be said or done. This is because all actions occur in context, and we should require ourselves to be aware of how such actions have historically contributed to the disadvantaged circumstances of subordinate groups.

3. *Recognize and acknowledge.* If the culture is not yours, it is not your place to make a claim that you are appreciating the culture or that members of the culture should be proud their culture is being displayed. Bonilla-Silva (2010) discusses such flawed arguments in his book *Racism Without Racists*, where he showcases how Whites use coded language or actions that ultimately contribute to the boundary maintenance of dominant-status groups.

Remember that the ability of subordinate groups to challenge behaviors that have historically kept them under disadvantaged circumstances is a sign of progress. Challenging an oppressor who has systematically kept various status groups at political, economic, and social disadvantage is a step toward parity.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Prior to reading this essay, how would you have described cultural appropriation? After reading it, has your description changed? If so, why or how?
2. The author discusses how cultural appropriation leads to the othering of groups of color. The murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 (preceded by the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery) was the catalyst to a mainstream recognition of systemic racism in America. Discuss in groups how you see cultural appropriation fitting into the larger issue of systemic racism.

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Spend some time discussing popular occurrences of cultural appropriation, perhaps by a sports team or celebrity. Do you consider these occurrences as harmful? How do they compare

- with cultural appropriation that may have occurred within your own peer group or your school?
2. Now that you have had the chance to read and reflect, have you ever appropriated marginalized cultures? Be honest and reflective. This exercise is meant to help you recognize your privilege and instances of injustice. With your new knowledge, reflect on how you can avoid appropriating a culture. What will you do in your own peer group to bring awareness to a situation where cultural appropriation might be occurring?
 3. Consider the collection of images featured in the following article:

Rice, Z. C. (2015, May 12). Stunning images show how Native American fashion looks without cultural appropriation. *Mic*. <https://mic.com/articles/118150/stunning-images-show-how-american-indian-fashion-looks-without-cultural-appropriation#.BCqJ5HhIn>. In what ways does this collection address the issues of cultural appropriation discussed in this essay?

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ESSAY 28 “I’M NOT RACIST; SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS AND FAMILY ARE . . .” : FROM “FRIENDS AND FAMILY” TO ALLIES, ACCOMPLICES, AND CO-CONSPIRATORS

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The summer of 2020 brought a wave of protests over police brutality and White supremacy that many hadn’t seen in their lifetime. The videotaped killing of George Floyd in May 2020 by police officer Derek Chauvin found the United States watching in horror as Chauvin slowly choked the life out of Floyd with his knee on his neck, while Floyd cried breathlessly for his deceased mother. Other extrajudicial high-profile murders in 2020 had previously been in the news, including the February murder of Ahmaud Arbery who was accosted and killed by two White men while jogging. Then, in September, shortly after Floyd was murdered, the country would rally against a grand jury’s failure to indict all of the officers involved in the murder of Breonna Taylor, who was unarmed and asleep but nonetheless shot and killed by police in her own home as they executed a faulty search warrant. While extrajudicial killings of Black Americans are nothing new, what was new was that there was a president in office stoking the flames of White supremacy in some of its most dangerous forms, including neo-Nazi groups and other violent extremists. What was also new was that the COVID-19 pandemic had hit the United States, causing the closures of many workplaces, schools, public facilities, and other parts of everyday life that often serve as a distraction to the social world around us. As a result, through increased consumption of television, Internet, and social media while much of the country was shut down, we became a captive audience to racial injustices that had been playing out for centuries but that perhaps many had been able to distract themselves from previously.

As we watched these images, loud cries could be heard from White Americans, saying, “I want to do something! What can I do?” A series of demonstrations broke out throughout the United States, with White people marching and protesting alongside BIPOC groups, while others at home pondered the ways they could make a difference in their communities and in the country. Essentially, Black protestors at the center of the summer 2020 demonstrations were calling the United States inherently racist, as indicated by the killings of innocent Black people and the racist rhetoric and policies of former president Donald Trump, not to mention the country’s brutal racial history. This prompted many Whites to examine their role in protecting and perpetuating White supremacy and asking themselves if they (or in some cases, their loved ones) were indeed racist.

Of all the names White Americans could be called in American society, *racist* ranks as one of the worst. As psychology professor Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) says, “The word *racist* holds a lot of emotional power. For many White people, to be called racist is the ultimate insult” and the equivalent of a gut-punch or being called “low-life scum” (p. 89). One of the reasons why the term is considered anathema by most Whites is because of the images it conjures in the public imagination. For example, in sociologists Joe Feagin and Hernán Vera’s (2000) book *White Racism*, one of their White respondents referred to Black people a number of times as “apes” and admitted that her parents “always instilled in me that blacks aren’t equal.” Nevertheless, she maintained: “I don’t consider myself racist . . . when I think of the word racist, I think of KKK [Ku Klux Klan], people in white robes burning black people on crosses and stuff, or I think of the Skinheads or some exaggerated form of racism” (pp. 215–216; see also Anderson, 2017; Ashmore, 2009; Culp, 1993). This was how many in the United States previously thought about racism—that is, in its most extreme forms—while they continued to ignore other subtler yet insidious forms like employment discrimination, funding inequity in schools, voter disenfranchisement, and sentencing disparity. But, when extremism arrived on their

doorstep during the Trump administration in the form of neo-Nazi and far right violent groups, too many still couldn't recognize and react to the threat when it obviously appeared.

The widespread support for former president Trump and his overtly racist and nativist rhetoric led many to ask what had changed after the election of former president Barack Obama, when the country had been characterized as “post-racial” (see Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Dawson & Bobo, 2009) or as having transcended the importance of race. Yet, among White people, Obama's presence had actually activated strong levels of “racial resentment” (Riley & Peterson, 2019), or “a mixture of anti-Black feelings with the finest and proudest of traditional American values, particularly individualism” (Sears, 1988, cited in Riley & Peterson, 2019, p. 8). In other words, the prominence of a Black president increased anti-Black racism and the sense that Black people (as well as other BIPOC groups) were looking for unearned resources or undeserved handouts. Thus, instead of characterizing the United States as *post-racial* since Obama, political scientist Michael Tesler's (2016) research suggests that “Obama helped usher in a ‘*most* racial’ [emphasis added] political era where racially liberal and racially conservative Americans were more divided over a whole host of political positions than they had been in modern times” (p. 3; see also Carol Anderson's (2017) book *White Rage*). CNN commentator Van Jones even characterized Trump's election as a “White-lash against a Black president” (Riley & Peterson, 2019; see also Anderson, 2017). This “White-lash” was also clear in the slew of voter suppression laws enacted after Obama's election and re-election (Anderson, 2017), as well as the laws enacted after Trump's loss in 2020 when during the Biden administration, after having shut down many polling places resulting in long lines at the polls, Georgia made it illegal to hand out water to people waiting in those lines (McKay, 2021). Essentially, Trump's election, rhetoric, and policies merely exploited long-held White resentments (see also Thornhill in this volume) that had grown stronger over the course of the Obama administration, and perhaps even stronger when Trump repeatedly articulated those resentments

in the media (often on social media) and during his (televised) speeches and rallies.

Indeed, there was no way to avoid Trump's racism and its influence among his supporters. Having begun his campaign by criminalizing Mexican migrants, instituting a Muslim travel ban within days of taking office, caging migrant children at the border and in inhumane conditions (Romero et al., 2019), and racializing the COVID-19 pandemic by repeatedly referring to it as the "Kung Flu" (Lee, 2020; see also Zhou and Tran in this volume) or the "China virus" (Reja, 2021), it was difficult to ignore the overt racism he and his followers embraced. The latter example, in particular, contributed to the demonization of people of Asian descent and encouraged discrimination toward them online and in everyday spaces (Reja, 2021; Zdanowicz, 2021), perhaps even playing a role in the mass murder of several Asian women in the Atlanta metro area in 2021 (Wootson & Sotomayor, 2021). Moreover, his disregard for BIPOC communities suffering disproportionately from the harm of the virus (COVID Tracking Project, 2020) was further indication of his racism. Still, even with these notable examples, folks in the United States were hesitant to label Trump and his MAGA ("Make America Great Again") followers as "racist." As sociologist Crystal Fleming (2018) says about "Trump country" in *How to Be Less Stupid About Race: On Racism, White Supremacy and the Racial Divide*, "For millions of white people, 'being racist' is somehow completely unrelated to articulating racist views and supporting racist policies" (p. 117). In large part, their reluctance is due to the fact that characterizing Trump or his supporters racist would suggest that he and his followers were "bad" or "evil" people. As writer Elaina Plott (2019) further highlights in an article for *The Atlantic*, "to accuse a politician of holding virulent racist beliefs is also, if only implicitly, to condemn his or her voters of harboring those same tendencies."

During the Trump presidency (and even after the attack on the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021), social media and news outlets exploded with stories of family members and friends torn apart by

loved ones' support for his racist statements and behaviors (Luscombe, 2021; Plott, 2019; Reid et al., 2020). One woman who was a former Republican but still had "ardent Trump supporters" in her family explained that she still loved her family, but "I look at them differently. It's because they have willingly embraced someone who is so heartless and just shows no empathy to anyone in any circumstances" (Reid et al., 2020). For many in the United States, their friends' and family's support of Trump and his overtly racist rhetoric and policies raised questions about the moral character of people they held dear and whether or not they were indeed "good people."

Nonetheless, it is important to understand that racism is frequently practiced by "good people" and in the contexts of both individual and institutional racism. Being a "mean" person or a "bad" or "evil" person isn't necessarily a requirement for participating in racist behavior. Racists are often people who go to church, do charity work, love their families, and generally experience themselves and are experienced by others as "nice people" or "good people" (see also Feagin, 2020). They are similarly people who vote Democrat and consider themselves "liberals" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Sullivan, 2014). However, under particular circumstances, even "good people" are willing to participate in racist, discriminatory behavior.

Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) gives an example of this in his *New York Times* op-ed piece "The Good, Racist People":

In modern America we believe racism to be the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons and orcs. We believe this even when we are actually being racist. In 1957, neighbors in Levittown, Pa., uniting under the flag of segregation, wrote: "As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our

community a closed community.” A half-century later, little [has] changed.

In 1957, it was the “good White people” of Levittown protesting against integrating the now iconic post–World War II planned suburban community in Pennsylvania; most recently, it’s been those White Americans who’ve united under Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again” (i.e., MAGA). While some of those supporters have been members of White nationalist groups, many others are those that might be considered “regular,” “everyday,” or even “good” people. Thus, as Coates suggested in his article, racism isn’t limited to people many consider “evil” or “bad,” like White supremacists, but is also the practice of everyday White people who consider themselves “good” people, who don’t see themselves as racist at heart, and who believe their words or actions aren’t *intended* to be racist. However, focusing on what’s in a person’s “heart” rather than the impact of that person’s racist behaviors actually further perpetuates racism. It privileges specifically White people’s feelings and alleged intent over and above the harm to BIPOC Americans caused by racist attitudes and behavior—harm that is enacted in individual, organizational, and institutional racism. It was this harm upon which many Trump detractors focused and which ultimately put some at odds with family members who were Trump supporters.

The “good” = “non-racist” and “bad” = “racist” dichotomy is problematic for several reasons. One is that when White people are accused of being racist, it is read as them being a “bad person” and thus, when confronted over their racist attitudes and behaviors, all their efforts may go into proving they are “good people” (DiAngelo, 2018). By contrast, if they can place themselves on the “good,” “non-racist” side of the dichotomy, then they can claim that racism isn’t their problem and they have no work to do in terms of building their knowledge, thinking critically about race, or thinking about why what was said or done was hurtful (DiAngelo, 2018, pp. 75–76; see also Saad, 2020).

In a desperate effort to place themselves on the “good” side of the binary, White people often claim they can’t be racist because “some of my best friends/family members are [insert marginalized group here, e.g., Black, Latinx, Asian, Native American]!” Writer Layla Saad (2020) in *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, lays out a fairly representative list of common refrains by White “progressives”:

I voted for Obama. I have Black friends. I’ve had partners who are BIPOC. My kids play with nonwhite kids. I don’t even see color! When they talk about racism and white supremacy, they must be talking about those other kinds of white people. Not me. I’m one of the good ones. (p. 68)

These are statements that actually belong to White conservatives and White liberals and progressives alike (see also Fleming, 2018; Sullivan, 2014), and are an effort to avoid the stigma that accompanies the term *racist*. Yet a closer look into the “friends and family” defense, in particular, reveals the great amount of work we still have to do in the fight for racial justice.

THE “FRIENDS AND FAMILY” DEFENSE DEBUNKED

The “I have [BIPOC] friends!” is an old refrain that predictably and reliably appears whenever someone is accused of racism. However, increasingly, the “I have [BIPOC] family” defense is also being used by White folks in order to place themselves on the “good” side of the binary. For example, during a congressional session while clashing with a Black congressman, Rep. Cedric Richmond (D-LA), over whether White members of Congress were able to understand the experiences of Black men in the United States, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) took offense and revealed that he had a 19-year-old adopted

Cuban son which he suggested gave him intimate knowledge of the challenges Black people face (Solender, 2019). Even prominent conservative critic and daughter of the late Sen. John McCain, Meghan McCain, challenged Gaetz's assertion by tweeting: "My sister is from Bangladesh but that wouldn't give me any insight into what it's like to be Black in America."

The "BIPOC family" defense was also used during the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the U.S. Supreme Court. During the nomination process, Tea Party Patriots co-founder, Jenny Beth Martin, tweeted (September 27, 2020) of the conservative judge, "With two adopted children from Haiti, it's going to be interesting to watch Democrats try to smear Amy Coney Barrett as racist" (North, 2020). In response, Ibram X. Kendi, historian and author of *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2017), tweeted: "Some White colonizers 'adopted' Black children. They 'civilized' these 'savage' children in the 'superior' ways of White people, while using them as props in their lifelong pictures of denial" (September 26, 2020). He went on to tweet, "It is a belief too many White people have: if they have or adopt a child of color, then they can't be racist" (North, 2020). To be sure, the adoption literature points out the many racial biases prospective parents have, including ones that preclude them from adopting African American children, specifically (Khanna & Killian, 2015; see also Raleigh, 2016).

Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of family members being used as proof of being non-racist is the Kardashian-Jenner family. As a collective, the Kardashian-Jenner sisters have participated in a host of activities that have been widely considered racist. If we just focused on Kim alone, we could point to several instances of cultural appropriation including (1) originally naming her shapewear line "Kimono" (i.e., the same term used for a traditional Japanese garment); (2) wearing cornrows and calling them "Bo Derek" braids after the White actress who wore them in a 1979 film, rather than recognizing the history of Black women wearing them as a protective style for centuries (and have faced employment

discrimination when they're deemed "unprofessional; see Dennis in this volume); (3) darkening her skin (and almost appearing Black) for the cover of a magazine (despite the long history of Blackface in the United States); and (4) tweeting pictures of herself in a traditional Indian headpiece (maang tikka) that is reserved for special occasions. In cataloguing these events, writer Afika Jadezweni (2020) discusses how Kim attempts to position her biracial children as a defense against claims of racism and argues that Kim "operates on a self-awarded brand of exceptionalism that she thinks grants her impunity on the basis that she is married to a black man [then, Kanye West] and raising children of colour, therefore she cannot be culturally insensitive . . . by her logic. But it doesn't work that way."

These clumsy attempts by Kim Kardashian also point to the racial challenges multiracial children face in their families from ostensibly well-meaning White parents and relatives. In the current highly polarized racial climate, biracial people have come forward with reports of their parents remaining uncomfortably silent or being critical of the uprisings protesting extrajudicial killings of Black people during the summer of 2020 or defending racists, including Trump. They are similarly uncomfortable with relatives who claim they can't be racist because they have biracial people in the family (Wong, 2020). Nicole Holliday, a professor of linguistics who identifies as Black and biracial (in that order), says: "In my case, I think some of my family members truly don't understand that proximity to blackness isn't the same as being black, and that there are parts of my experience that they'll never understand . . . Their investment in colorblind racism is an emotional shield for them, but I feel like it also keeps them [from] really and truly seeing me" (Wong, 2020). The same holds true for Asian transracial adoptees, for instance, who occupy a similarly liminal space, where in the wake of the Atlanta-area spa shootings of Asian women, these individuals have been forced to confront family members who haven't given critical thought to their loved one's racial identity and how they might be affected by the shootings and the rise in overt anti-Asian racism (Mitchell, 2021; Munslow, 2021). These examples indicate that just being in proximity

to or even loving BIPOC people is not a substitute for critical racial understanding.

That it is possible to hold racist beliefs about BIPOC groups and still befriend, marry, partner, have children with, have family members, or even vote for a candidate that is BIPOC bears out in scholarly research (Childs, 2005; DiAngelo, 2018; Picca & Feagin, 2007). For example, regarding the latter, voter data show that it is entirely possible to hold racist views and still vote for a Black president (Pettigrew, 2009). In his article “Racial Views Steer Some Away from Obama,” Ron Fournier (2008) of the Associated Press (also cited in Pettigrew, 2009) found that a third of White Democrats ascribed one or more negative adjectives (e.g., *violent, complaining, lazy, irresponsible*) to Blacks, yet 58% of them still supported Obama in the 2008 election. Moreover, as sociologist Thomas F. Pettigrew (2009) pointed out, “while Nebraska voters gave one of its electoral votes to Obama, they also passed by 58% to 42% a ban on race- and gender-based affirmative action. Previously, voters in California, Michigan and Washington State had passed similar referenda, yet all three provided Obama wide winning margins in 2008” (p. 283). The ability of Whites to hold (or at least tolerate) prejudiced views and still vote for a Black candidate is also evident in the fact that some who voted for Obama in 2008 and/or 2012 also voted for Trump in 2016. *Washington Post* data (Uhrmacher et al., 2016) found that of the 700 counties that carried Obama in both 2008 and 2012, a staggering one third of them broke for Trump in 2016. *Slate* chief political correspondent Jamelle Bouie (2016) explains the seeming paradox like this: “In the same way it has always been possible for white Americans to love black individuals and vote for the subjugation of black people, it is also possible to like Barack Obama and also yearn for a return to [an] idealized past,” one where “whites—and white men in particular—were the uncontested masters of the country.” Clearly, this evidence suggests that it is possible to support and vote for a Black president and still harbor and act upon racial biases, up to and including voting for a racist president.

Likewise, research shows that it is also possible to be friends with BIPOC people and still participate in racist behavior. Leslie Houts Picca and Joe Feagin (2007) analyzed journals from 626 White students at more than two dozen colleges and universities in several regions over a course of 6 to 9 weeks. The diarists were asked to record their observations of everyday events in their lives that “exhibited racial issues, images, and understandings” (Feagin, 2020, pp. 145). Hannah, one of their diarists, discussed being out with three other White friends when her friend Dylan started telling racist jokes, including referring to Black people as “porch monkeys” and joking that the most confusing day of the year in Harlem is Father’s Day. Despite noting her own discomfort about his “jokes,” Hannah firmly maintained, “My friend Dylan is not a racist person. He has more black friends than I do, that’s why I was surprised he so freely said something like that. Dylan would never have said something like that around anyone who is a minority” (Picca & Feagin, 2007, cited in Feagin, 2020, pp. 146). As Picca and Feagin’s research suggests, in the minds of many Whites, social interactions with people of color frequently serve as proxy for racial tolerance and understanding. Yet Hannah’s account reflects three important points: (1) how easy it is for Whites, like Dylan, to have BIPOC friends and still make racist statements; (2) that for many Whites, like Hannah, such statements are not enough for them to label a person like Dylan a racist; and (3) that a good deal of racist commentary from people who allegedly have BIPOC friends happens in the social “backstage,” or areas where only Whites are present, and not on the “frontstage,” where strangers or people from diverse racial backgrounds are present and might express disapproval (Feagin, 2020, pp. 146–147; Picca & Feagin, 2007; see also Goffman, 1959).

Furthermore, as DiAngelo (2018) points out, the “Black friends” defense also doesn’t hold water because that White person still receives privileges the friend of color doesn’t and the friendship doesn’t block out internalized racist messages reinforced by the larger society (pp. 80). These White people also believe that if they aren’t talking about racism with their friends of color or if their friends

don't mention their racism, it means it isn't there. That silence is one way that racism actually manifests because it is an imposed silence where BIPOC people are keenly aware that their Whites friends and family are likely uncomfortable talking about it (DiAngelo, 2018, pp. 81), which then makes these White friends a damaging influence on BIPOC people in their lives (Sullivan, 2014).

When we take a closer look at the “friends” defense and examine its veracity, several issues arise. First, there is considerable doubt over whether these friendships even exist. A study from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that “fully three-quarters of white Americans report that the network of people with whom they discuss important matters is entirely white, with no minority presence” (Cox et al., 2016). This finding suggests that many Whites don't have close relationships with members of BIPOC groups—a finding we might expect given extensive neighborhood and school segregation (see Patel, Meanwell, & McClure and Thornhill in this volume).

Research also shows that Whites tend to exaggerate the depth of their friendships with people of color. In his book *Racism Without Racists*, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) used survey data from the Detroit Area Study to investigate the nature of White friendships. The data set included 323 Whites, 66 of whom were randomly selected for in-depth interviews. Of the 66, a little more than a third ($n = 24$) claimed that they had Black friends whom they characterized as “good friends,” “best friends,” or friends with whom they “hung out.” However, after probing a bit further, Bonilla-Silva (2010) found that the strength of these friendship ties was more tenuous than his respondents originally indicated. For example, White respondents tended to “otherize” their Black friends, using distancing terms like “these people” or “them,” and often didn't (or couldn't) identify them by their first names. Additionally, the contact with these friends proved very superficial and typically took place in the context of sports, music, or the occasional friendly talk with a fellow student or coworker; all of these were characterized as

“friendships.” Yet, as Bonilla-Silva indicates, “missing from these reports of friendship with blacks is evidence of trust, of the capacity of confiding, and of interactions with these friends beyond the place or situation of formal contact (classroom, assigned roommates, or job)” (p. 111). Finally, these “friendships” tended to evaporate after the class, rooming experience, band season, or job ended (p. 111). Thus, the friendships proved to be rather shallow and incomplete, which casts doubts on whether or not having BIPOC “friends” can really be used to prove one doesn’t harbor racial prejudices.

Moreover, even if one did have friendships or repeated interactions with people of color, research shows that when the stakes of social interaction are even higher, deeper racial prejudices emerge. Philosopher and Africana Studies scholar Shannon Sullivan cites theologian Thandeka’s (2007) work, where Thandeka details the story of Sarah, a White girl who brought her best friend home from school who happened to be Black. Sarah’s mother told her not to bring her “colored” friend home again, which likely subtly signaled to Sarah that maintaining that friendship could threaten her relationship with her mother (Sullivan, 2014, p. 109–110). Essentially, bringing her Black friend into the sacred space of the family home was taboo. Similarly, in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) notes the changing racial composition of children’s birthday parties as children age. Termed the “birthday party effect” (pp. 136–137), Tatum observes that in elementary school, birthday parties in multiracial communities reflect the area’s diversity, but as children get older, parents’ anxiety about puberty raises fears about interracial dating and causes birthday parties to become more racially homogeneous.

Attitudes toward interracial dating also often expose hidden prejudices, even among those Whites who appear racially tolerant and open-minded (Childs, 2005; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Sociologist Erica Chito Childs (2005) witnessed this firsthand in her own family. She married a Black man and noted that her sister and her family never expressed any opposition to her relationship and, in

fact, appeared supportive. However, when her sister's daughter wanted to attend the prom with a Black schoolmate she was dating, the sister and her husband refused to let him in the house, claiming he was "not right" for their daughter (Childs, 2005, p. 4). Childs maintains, "It was clear to everyone, however, that skin color was the problem. To this day, my niece will tell you that her parents would never have accepted her with a black man" (p. 4). From this story, it seems that Childs's sister and brother-in-law were accepting of interracial dating in theory, but when it came to *their daughter* potentially becoming involved with a Black man, the stakes were much higher and hidden prejudices suddenly emerged. In these ways, Whites who are seemingly tolerant can hold racist views that become evident when put to the test.

Just as it is possible to have BIPOC friends and family and still be racist, it is also possible to express interest in or appreciation for aspects of a group of color's culture (e.g., music, food, language) without having a true awareness or understanding of the sociopolitical struggle that group faces. For example, feminist and race bloggers have been calling attention recently to cultural appropriation (see Dennis in this volume). Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2009) refers to behaviors like this as similar to a form of "voyeurism," where the lives of people of color "are interesting for entertainment value" and the "privileged become voyeurs, passive onlookers who do not relate to the less powerful, but who are interested in seeing how the 'different' live" (p. 104). Similarly, Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1992) suggests that behaviors like these are a kind of "eating the Other," where some Whites believe that exposure to different peoples and cultures "will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group" (p. 24; see also Ott & Mack, 2010, p. 145, and the discussion on Kim Kardashian earlier in this essay). Many would point to the mass consumption of hip-hop music and culture by middle-class Whites as an example of these phenomena. Passing familiarity with BIPOC groups or mass consumption of their cultures rarely serves as a substitute for racial understanding and, in fact,

frequently reflects a covert form of “othering.” For all of these reasons, it is important to begin to shift our discourse away from appreciating diverse cultures and having BIPOC friends and family members as evidence of support for groups of color. Instead, we must move toward a definition of what it really means to stop being a passive actor in the context of a racialized world, and become an *ally* or an *accomplice*.

“THERE HAS TO BE LEVELS TO THIS”: ACTORS, ALLIES, ACCOMPLICES, AND CO- CONSPIRATORS

When we think of genuine anti-racist engagement, we need to think about it as having stages or levels. Above all, we want to avoid the stage of being mere *actors* in a racialized world.

Whiteaccomplices.org refers to “actors” as people who don’t disrupt the status quo and behave much like spectators during a game. In addition, their actions don’t explicitly challenge or name White supremacy, which is imperative in striving for social justice. In other words, when in the presence of someone speaking or behaving in a way that is racist, an actor might shrug it off or justify it as “that’s just how some people are” or “that’s just how some people do business.” For far too long, White Americans have participated in the racialized atmosphere as actors. What many realized, particularly during the Trump administration and after, is that anti-racism actually requires allies and accomplices. As sociologist Crystal Fleming (2018) notes, “Antiracists have to learn how to recognize racism in its subtle political, psychological, and sociological forms: the workings of institutions, publications, laws, and families . . . And you must see how your own socialization, behavior, and choices are complicit with multiple systems of oppression, racism included” (p. 46; see also Cabrera, 2012). As is clear from this quote, there is nothing about “friends” mentioned in her description; what BIPOC people need *at minimum* are allies, not “friends” or “actors.”

From “Friends” to Allies

The racial rationalizations discussed in this essay are often the result of well-meaning Whites attempting to express support for and identification with people of color, albeit in a superficial way (Feagin, 2001). Typically, it's an attempt to present one's self as an *ally* to BIPOC groups. Yet, the *action-oriented* nature of allyship is clear in various researchers' and thinkers' definition of an ally:

- According to Andrea Ayvazian (2009), “An ally is a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit” (p. 612). She goes on to say that being an ally means taking personal responsibility for the changes necessary in society and not ignoring or leaving others to deal with it: “Allied behavior is intentional, overt, consistent activity that challenges prevailing patterns of oppression, makes privileges that are so often invisible visible, and facilitates the empowerment of persons targeted by oppression” (p. 612).
- Sociologist Kristie A. Ford and coauthor Josephine Orlandella (2015) define a White ally as “a person who consciously commits, attitudinally and behaviorally, to an ongoing, purposeful engagement with and active challenging of White privilege, overt and subtle racism, and systemic inequalities for the purposes of becoming an agent of change in collaboration with, not for people of color” (p. 288).
- Paul Kivel (2012) adds that there is no one way to be an ally, as each person has different relationships to social organizations, political process, and economic structures. Nevertheless, being a racial ally is “an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done” (p. 157).

- Whiteaccomplices.org argues that “one needs to *act* [emphasis added] as an ally, and cannot bestow this title to themselves.” They further argue that allies act like disrupters and educators, they continue to educate themselves, and they don’t take breaks.

In these definitions, allies act on the basis of ethical commitments to a sense of justice and fairness, regardless of friendship; friendship isn’t mentioned in any of these. Moreover, in order to move into these action stages, it is likely that White people would need to reach beyond any guilt over their racial privilege in order to do the necessary social justice work. Fixating on guilt over racial privilege typically isn’t enough to move one toward action (Cabrera, 2012; Gaffney, 2016; Smith & Redington, 2010). And since it is impossible for Whites to merely give up their racial privilege, “[they] have a responsibility to use it in the service of greater racial justice” (Owen, 2009, p. 203).

Social psychologist Kim A. Case’s (2012) interviews and observations of 21 White women anti-racists has been particularly instructive in this regard. Case (2012) researched an organization called White Women Against Racism (WWAR), composed of White women from two universities in the Midwest. Among other things, the group endeavors to “bring White women together to do self-work around racism, privilege, and responsibility for helping effect change” while cultivating their anti-oppression skills in their personal and professional lives through “facing, examining, and decreasing [their] own racism” (p. 82). Most of these women willfully identified themselves as “racists” or as people who had at least done racist things. While some said this was a difficult identification because of the idea that “you have to be in the Klan to be racist,” others embraced the identity, like Pauline, a respondent who said, “We are all so scared that someone is going to call us racist. I find one of the ways to get over that is to do it yourself first” (p. 84; see also Fair, 2015). Some in the group even found that admitting their racism

made it easier to talk with other Whites about racism and call them out on their racism.

Case's (2012) research is also instructive because it suggests that being a White person with a disenfranchised status (in this case, a cisgender woman) doesn't automatically translate into a greater understanding of racism. Some of her respondents even discussed how their focus on sexism and their identities as feminists kept them from critically examining their Whiteness because "there is an assumption that feminists 'get it'" (p. 86; see also Case et al., 2020). Similarly, in his research on White men working through their Whiteness, Nolan L. Cabrera (2012), a professor of higher education, found that White men who were also gay or Jewish were able to express greater empathy toward people of color, but that those statuses did not guarantee an understanding of how racism operates. Having that understanding is key to allyship (Smith & Redington, 2010; see also Cabrera, 2012). It is a commitment to move beyond feelings to action and an unwillingness to abide by racist practices and behaviors even if one's group ultimately benefits from them. Moreover, allyship is more of "a personal striving rather than a goal with a definitive ending" (Case, 2012, p. 91; see also Ford & Orlandella, 2015).

There are *many* ways to be a White ally. In "Ten Things You Can Do to Improve Race Relations," racial inequality scholar Charles A. Gallagher (2012) offers that while ongoing and pervasive institutional racism may lead us to believe that there is nothing that can be done to improve race relations, "at the individual, interpersonal, and community level you can engage in activities to promote equal opportunity while building bridges between people from different racial backgrounds" (p. 401). Below is a list of ways to fight racism, from leading scholars, thinkers, and activists (Cabrera, 2012; Case, 2012; Fair, 2015; Gaffney, 2016; Gallagher, 2012; Smith & Redington, 2010; whiteaccomplices.org, n.d.).

- Engage friends and family in what you learn in your race classes, including asking them about the origins of their racial prejudices.
- Go to workshops and trainings on becoming a better ally and actually put that learning into practice.
- Correct outdated language like *Colored* or *Oriental*.
- Stop others from telling racist jokes.
- Challenge commonly held stereotypes of BIPOC groups so we don't have to continuously educate our oppressors.
- Be introspective and honest enough to examine why you act or behave in a certain way toward someone of a different ethnic or racial group.
- Donate to organizations with explicit racial justice missions and to bail funds for BIPOC protesters.

Also of great importance is remembering that as an ally, “your voice should never be louder than that of the people you are supporting” (Fair, 2015, p. 85). As Deen Fair says in her piece “An Open Letter to ‘White Allies’ from a White Friend,” “think of it this way: You are a backup singer to the movement. Your voice should merely serve as a part of the chorus, supporting the leading roles in the play” (p. 85). In addition, Whites should not expect credit for being an ally and should be ready to thoughtfully accept any criticism for how they may be practicing allyship (DiAngelo, 2018; Gaffney, 2016, p. 36; Sullivan, 2014).

Allyship can be challenging. People who practice it admit that sometimes they remain silent because they are avoiding disapproval and conflict, because of power differences between them and a person participating in racist behavior, because they fear that they

won't be able to effectively confront the behavior, or because they are simply exhausted (Case, 2012; Case et al., 2020; see also Smith & Redington, 2010). White women in Case's (2012) study also talked about the gendered pressures of the "good girl" persona, where girls and women are often taught to "be nice, good, don't start trouble, [and] be tactful" (p. 88). Yet Case rightfully notes that none of these women acknowledged the tension and unpleasantness that was already present for them as soon as the racist remarks or behaviors occurred. Essentially, we have been socialized to accept racism as the norm, and openly rejecting it is perceived as deviant behavior, even within our own families (see Sullivan, 2014; Thandeka, 2007). Nonetheless, allies refuse to sit idly by as such things occur.

Indeed, being an ally is risky, as it may result in losing friends or relatives who aren't like-minded. As a result, it may be difficult to enact or practice with a great deal of consistency (Ayvazian, 2009; Case, 2012). The level of discomfort involved in understanding privilege can itself be enough to put off Whites who are considering becoming allies. As psychologists Laura Smith and Rebecca M. Redington (2010) claim, "newcomers to multicultural and social justice training often find the path challenging as they are called upon to examine previously unquestioned assumptions" (p. 547). For example, for many White students who first begin to engage with a definition of racism that moves beyond the individual to the systemic level, understanding dynamics of power and privilege can be quite difficult. They may feel a sense of embarrassment, guilt, compassion, or even obligation (see Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 2017) toward BIPOC people and may want to act out of empathy. When BIPOC students are on the receiving end of this behavior, they may react with frustration toward yet another well-meaning White person who "doesn't *really* get it" (see Tatum, 2017) or in other ways exhibit what White students might perceive as a lack of proper appreciation. While this may cause White students to become angry at not being seen as individuals (Tatum, 2017) or as "one of the good ones," coming to terms with the challenges of social justice is part of the racial identity development process for Whites in a racialized society

(Hardiman, 1994; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1992). Furthermore, Kivel (2012) notes in “How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism” that the point of being an ally isn’t necessarily to curry favor with people of color: “We are not fighting racism so that people of color will trust us. Trust builds over time through our visible efforts to be allies and fight racism. Rather than trying to be safe and trustworthy, we need to be more active, less defensive, and put issues of trust aside” (p. 160). Thus, being a true ally requires some “unglamorous” work and often the help and support of like-minded others (Ayvazian, 2009; Case, 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Kivel, 2012; Owen, 2009; Smith & Redington, 2010; Tatum, 2017; Welp, 2009). And while all this may be hard work, it is important to realize that on the other side of the struggle to become an ally is “a joyful feeling of connection to humanity and a sense of integrity that comes with translating one’s beliefs into action” (Smith & Redington, 2010, p. 547).

Yet, as important as being an ally can be, it is the *accomplices* who assume some of the greatest risks in the pursuit for racial justice.

From Allies to “Accomplices” and “Co-Conspirators”

More recently, we have seen anti-racist educators and activists increasingly use the terms *accomplices* or *co-conspirators* in place of *ally*. The distinctions aren’t minor ones. According to Whiteaccomplices.org: “The actions of an *Accomplice* [emphasis added] are meant to directly challenge institutionalized racism, colonization, and White supremacy by blocking or impeding racist people, policies, and structures. Realizing that our freedoms and liberations are bound together, retreat or withdrawal in the face of oppressive structures is not an option.” They go on to explain how the actions of accomplices are informed, directed, and coordinated by or with BIPOC groups and “aren’t motivated by personal guilt or shame.”

Award-winning activist, educator, writer, and MSNBC contributor, Brittany Packnett (2019), adds to the categories of anti-racist practitioners with *co-conspirator*, and says the following:

[See] becoming an ally as a first step; see your aspiration as becoming an accomplice and then a co-conspirator . . . An ally shows up when it is convenient; an accomplice shows up when there is a risk. A *co-conspirator* [emphasis added] decides to go into the risk proactively because they helped create the plan in the first place. There has to be levels to this thing if you are going to participate and participate for a lifetime. So my first piece of advice is to be cool with being an ally, but be committed to becoming [a] co-conspirator.

Packnett goes on to suggest that accomplices and co-conspirators should listen for a year before engaging and then when engaging, “ask[ing] permission from the community that is most affected by the problem to be engaged.” According to Packnett (2019), rushing in with resources (e.g., education, money, influence, etc.) and attempting to set the agenda for the group and expecting them to follow it “is a surefire recipe for disaster” and can actually do more harm than good because the people who should be leading the work are being silenced by that White person’s privilege.

U.S. history is replete with examples of White folks who have participated in anti-racism as accomplices and co-conspirators. Ayvazian (2009) names the actions of anti-racist Whites throughout history whom we might place in these categories. For example, there is Laura Haviland, who was a conductor on the Underground Railroad and helped enslaved Africans flee to Canada, and John Brown, who was hanged after leading a rebellion against slavery in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. The civil rights movement includes more examples of White accomplices and co-conspirators, including Virginia Foster Durr, who drove Black workers during the

Montgomery bus boycott and, along with her husband, attorney Clifford Durr, and Rev. E. D. Nixon, bailed Rosa Parks out of jail; Rev. James Reeb, a Boston minister who was killed by segregationists over his participation in the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama; and Anne and Carl Braden, who fought for desegregated schools and open housing and even bought a house for a Black couple in an all-White neighborhood in Kentucky, for which they had their windows shot out, their house bombed, and a cross burned in their yard. A more recent example of a White accomplice would be Morris Dees, who started the Southern Poverty Law Center and brings lawsuits designed to obstruct the activities of White-supremacist hate groups.

When we think about how to go about the assessing and embarking on the journey of doing White anti-racist work, it might be helpful to keep the words of sociologist Robin DiAngelo (2018) in your mind:

I have found it much more useful to think of myself as on a continuum. Racism is so deeply woven into the fabric of our society that I do not see myself escaping from that continuum in my lifetime . . . Conceptualizing myself on an active continuum changes the question from whether I am or am not racist to a much more constructive question: Am I actively seeking to interrupt racism in this context? And perhaps even more importantly, how do I know? (p. 87)

YOU'VE ONLY TALKED ABOUT WHITE PEOPLE, BUT WHAT CAN BIPOC FOLKS DO?

As you likely noticed in this essay so far, I have focused on White attitudes and White anti-racist activities. While BIPOC people cannot be racist because we lack the social, economic, and political power to affect White people's access to institutional opportunities (see

Tatum in this volume), we can harbor prejudices toward other groups of color that may prevent the coalition-building necessary for liberation. Essentially, BIPOC people may also use the “friends” or “family” excuse as proxy for multiracial understanding, allyship, or solidarity. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the wide range of experiences in the categories we embody as BIPOC people (in my case as a Black woman, where Blackness includes African Americans, Caribbean Americans, African immigrants, Afro-Latinx folks, and others), as well as how other BIPOC groups experience racism in ways that manifest similarly or differently from our own group.

U.S. history contains key examples of multiracial coalitions and solidarity. For example, psychologist and MacArthur Faculty Fellow Jennifer Richeson (2015) reminds us that the legal strategies used in the landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case were extrapolated from its precursor, the 1946 *Mendez v. Westminster* case involving the segregation of Mexican American school children, where members of LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) worked with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) on the *Brown* case (see also Blanco, 2010). Importantly, Japanese, Black, and Jewish Americans filed friend-of-the-court briefs in both *Brown* and *Mendez*. In the 1960s and 1970s, Black and Latinx folks fought together during Martin Luther King’s “Poor People’s Campaign” (Richeson, 2015; see also Mantler, 2013). More timely examples include the way that Communities Against Asian-American Violence (CAAV) supported Akai Gurley’s family after as a Black man, he was gunned down by officer Peter Liang (Bhattacharya, 2020) who is Chinese American. The recent anti-Asian murders in the Atlanta metro area also brought demonstrations of Black and Asian solidarity—connections that Chinese American activist Grace Lee Boggs spent her life’s work forging (Boggs, 2016; Boggs & Kurashige, 2012)—where Asian Americans recognized their need to be allies for Black and Brown people in hopes of receiving the same in return (Moon, 2021). Because of the nature of White supremacy, some of these stories

have been erased or hidden from our view as they represent a direct threat to the perpetuation of this system. Therefore, it is imperative that BIPOC students educate themselves on cross-racial coalitions and become active participants in the movement toward the liberation of all BIPOC groups.

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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Readings

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Trainor, J. S. (2005). “My ancestors didn’t own slaves”: Understanding White talk about race. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 40(2), 140–167.

Websites

Whiteaccomplices.org: A website “developed to support White people to act for racial justice.”

Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—Los Angeles (AWARE-LA): <http://www.awarela.org> (The group’s mission is “to work toward the abolition of the white supremacist system and all systems of supremacy through building communities of Radical White people in solidarity with people of color in the larger movement for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice.”)

Anti-Racism and Social Justice @ Pitt Libraries:
<https://pitt.libguides.com/antiracism/ally>

Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence:
<http://www.safehousealliance.org/index.cfm> (The website also offers extensive information on racism and anti-racism in the organization’s manual, *Tools for Liberation: Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization*.)

Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance):
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/>

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Training for Change: <http://www.trainingforchange.org> (Provides activist training for groups standing up for justice, peace, and the

environment through strategic nonviolence.)

White Anti-Racism: Living the Legacy:

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/white-antiracism-living-the-legacy>

White Men as Full Diversity Partners: <http://www.wmfdp.com>

Audio/Visual

Mulholland, L. (Writer & Dir.). (2013). *An ordinary hero*. Taylor Street Films. (Film documents the story of Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, a White anti-racist who spent months in prison during the Freedom Rides and fought alongside leaders in the civil rights movement.)

Wah, L. M. (1994). *The color of fear*. Stir Fry Productions. (Film features a multiracial cast of men discussing the state of race relations and the challenges of allyship.)

Podcasts

Crenshaw, K. Intersectionality matters!

<https://www.aapf.org/intersectionality-matters>

McKesson, D. (with Brittany Packnett, Sam Sinyangwe, and Clint Smith). *Pod save the people*. <https://art19.com/shows/pod-save-the-people/>

Saad, L. F. *Good Ancestor Podcast*. <http://laylafsaad.com/good-ancestor-podcast>

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Do you think it is possible to have friends or family of another race and still hold racist attitudes? Why or why not?
2. Do you think it is possible to oppose interracial dating and not have racist attitudes? Why or why not?
3. What aspects of other cultures have you embraced? Do you feel equally as comfortable with the group of people who consider that culture their own?
4. Often in popular media, celebrities and artists co-opt parts of a racial or ethnic group's culture (as with the examples of Kim Kardashian discussed in the essay). What do you think about the way some celebrities co-opt Asian or Black culture, for example? Is this racist? Is it similar to or different from the use of Native American culture in the naming of sports teams (e.g., Kansas City Chiefs, Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Florida State Seminoles, etc.), as Williams discusses in his essay in this volume? Debate your classmates.
5. If you're a White student still struggling with issues of race and racism, with what do you struggle? What are your hang-ups around this issue? If you're a BIPOC student, what prejudices have you picked up about other groups of color, and how might you work through them?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. If you are a White student, think about the people of color whom you consider friends and examine the depth of your friendship. Do you know their last names? Do you know how many brothers or sisters they have? Do you know where they grew up? What is their experience of being students of color on campus? Consider finding out the answers to these questions if you don't already know them.
2. If you're a White student, visit Whiteaccomplices.org and consider their spectrum of actor, ally, and accomplice. Where do your actions fit on this spectrum? If you're not at accomplice level yet, quickly jot down your thoughts about why. What do you

think it would take to get you to the accomplice level? Also, given the many levels and methods of anti-racism they discuss on their website, what are you prepared to do in order to move along the spectrum?

3. If you're a BIPOC student, research BIPOC social justice groups in your area. Are any of them multiracial coalitions? If so, take note of their mission and their recent activities. If they aren't multiracial coalitions, why do you think that is the case? Are you prepared to take part in the activities of any of these groups? If not, what are the barriers to your participation?

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