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Marcus Bell  
*Grand Valley State University*

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# Reflections of Whiteness: The Origins, Progression, and Maintenance of White Supremacy as a Cultural, Political, and Economic Force in American Institutions



**Marcus Bell**  
McNair Scholar



**George Lundskow, Ph.D.**  
Faculty Mentor

## Abstract

*Despite the prevailing national discourse that implicates race as an outdated phenomenon, ongoing social science data identifies race as very predictive in determining life outcomes. Over the last 40 years the emergence of “whiteness studies” has sought to redefine racism from individual actions of bigoted persons to institutional systems of privilege and disadvantage. While there have been a number of studies detailing the failures of reconstruction to embrace an equal citizenry fully, and also a number of studies detailing the eventual assimilation of European immigrants, few studies have sought to connect both into one simultaneous entity. Using historiography and historical comparison methodologies, this research examines primary and secondary data sources in order to illustrate how racism, factionalism, and violence doomed radical reconstruction and cemented white hegemony into American culture through its various institutions. It also examines the bloody decades following reconstruction and the early 20th century transformation of the category “white” from an ethnicity to a race, thus creating the badge of whiteness and securing its privileges for generations to come.*

## Introduction

In contemporary America, to be white is to be considered American. The normalcy of whiteness, the category that all others are compared to, is accompanied by a set of systematic privileges that advantages those of the dominant race at the disadvantage of all others (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). From education to life expectancy, from criminal justice to political representation, white hegemony permeates every institution in American society, and African Americans are typically at the opposite end of the spectrum (Brown, 2003). While white hegemony is the life force of America’s institutions, white supremacy or white domination is what allows it to go unchallenged (Leonardo, 2009).

Despite the continuing levels of residential and school segregation, the vastly unequal levels of school funding, the increasing achievement gap between black and white students at all levels of education, the differences of accumulated wealth, the higher rates of black incarceration, the higher rates of blacks living in poverty, and the ongoing discrimination in healthcare, medicine, and employment, racism is largely seen as a thing of the past, only relevant on the periphery of American society. In fact, the most common form of racism accepted by the general public is “reverse racism,” the notion that being white in America is to be disadvantaged, while being a member of a minority group comes with its advantages. Author Tim Wise (2008) writes, “Interestingly, whites often deny the importance of racism in determining the life chances of blacks, even as they give voice to beliefs that are themselves evidence of the very racial prejudice they deny” (p. 40). He continues: “In one of the more respected opinion surveys from the 1990s, six in ten whites said that discrimination was less important in determining the position of blacks in society than the ‘fact’ that blacks ‘just don’t have the have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty.’” In other words, whites could extol their belief in negative stereotypes while simultaneously denying any salience of racial discrimination.

Social scientists and historians of color

turned a critical eye towards the white majority in the early 19th century with the works of Frederick Douglass and David Walker. Just as in the 1800s, scholars of the 20th century such as W.E.B Du Bois, James Baldwin, and later in the century Thandeka, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison, due to their marginalized status, were generally overlooked and disregarded as nothing more than fodder from “the African American left” (Roediger, 2007, p. xvi). For example, powerful insights by Du Bois (1903), such as “The opposition to negro education was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the south believed an educated negro to be a dangerous negro” (p. 29), or perhaps even more profound: “to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in the land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships” (p. 12), were dismissed as unimportant complaints from an inferior being. When Malcolm X (1965), a man considered to be a “black radical,” spoke to crowds of thousands of black folk, proclaiming things such as “Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond haired, blue eyed Jesus! We’re worshipping a Jesus who doesn’t even look like us!” (p. 263), he was considered dangerous, and his words of truth were considered to be that of a raving lunatic.

The first work on race relations that detailed the haunting, often violent opposition to full black inclusion in American society, and was actually taken seriously was *An American Dilemma* by Gunnar Myrdal in 1944. Myrdal was a Swedish sociologist who was funded by the Carnegie Foundation because of his intellectual ability and moral objectivity. In a sweeping indictment of American injustice and racial inequality, Myrdal concluded that the “dilemma” of which he spoke was not that of black inferiority, but that of white superiority: A superiority that was founded on a social, not biological basis, and was perpetuated by continuing levels of racism, both overt and ingrained in institutions. He wrote:

There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of white Americans desire that there be as few Negroes as possible in America. If the Negroes could be eliminated from America or greatly decreased in numbers, this would meet the whites’ approval—provided that it could be accomplished by

means which are also approved. Correspondingly, an increase of the proportion of Negroes in the American population is commonly looked upon as undesirable. (p. 47)

Concluding his accusation of white supremacy, Myrdal noted, “White prejudice and discrimination keep the negro in low standards in living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in its turn, gives support to white prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus virtually ‘cause’ each other” (p. 193). While initially accepted and at first considered a classic, *An American Dilemma* was eventually overshadowed by World War II and the more militant offerings of the civil rights movement. However, in the late 20th century, Myrdal’s work once again found its way to prominence in the new wave of studies aimed at identifying institutional discrimination, a new wave that would come to be known as “whiteness studies.”

### Contemporary Inequalities

Of course, times change, and the American Civil Rights movement achieved significant progress towards racial equality. Consequently, a plethora of erudite professionals, including sociologists to historians to political scientists, have come to the forefront in an attempt to tackle racial discrimination in its now mostly covert, post-civil rights manifestation. Studies examining white privilege and the various mechanisms of maintaining it have illuminated new ways of not only looking at racism today, but also new ways of looking at history in general. In its path of analysis, whiteness studies leaves no American institution uncovered. For example, in his 2009 book titled *Race, Whiteness, and Education*, Zeus Leonardo, speaking of the bipartisan legislation and political acceptance of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), wrote: “Insofar as NCLB is guided by an ideology of whiteness, it depends on the continuation of racial differences as part of a logical, rather than social, outcome. In other words, ostensibly giving public schools a chance to show progress, NCLB gives whiteness the right to declare students of color failures under a presumed to be fair system” (p. 136). Commenting on the roles that schools play in African American communities, and the conservative “free market, competition solution,” Jerome E. Morris noted:

Low income, predominantly black communities especially need stable institutions, and for many urban communities, schools can serve this function. This has to be taken into consideration when policy makers conceptualize choice models that transfer African American students away from their communities. Although it is important to increase choices for parents who do not want their kids to attend the city’s school, if city schools are not viewed as viable choices for African American students, it could have dire effects on the roles that schools play in predominantly black communities. (p. 147)

Whiteness allows school reform to treat a gunshot wound with a Band-Aid. Legislation that provides choice for relatively few of the students who are forced to attend condemned schools does nothing to solve the problem of the condemned school. With the penalties of failure associated with NCLB, poorer schools that serve predominantly students of color are only getting poorer.

In terms of wealth accumulation, Thomas M. Shapiro (2004) found that in 1999, 26% of all white children grow up in asset-poor households, compared to 52% of black children who share the same fate. For every white kid growing up in an asset-poor household, there are two black kids doing the same—a statistic that is even more disturbing when we consider the fact that African Americans only make up 13% of the population, while whites comprise upwards to 70%. Shapiro also noted that the average African American family has only 10 cents of accumulated wealth for every one dollar the average white family has, a ratio that holds constant even when the comparison controls for educational attainment, size of family, and annual income. These findings are consistent with U.S. Census data that showed in 1991 the median net worth of white households was \$44,408, compared to \$4,604 for black households. In 2004 the U.S. Census showed the median net worth of white households was \$121,000, compared to \$19,000 for black households (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991, 2004). The two primary reasons for these gross inequities in wealth between black and white households are equity arising from home property values and intergen-

erational transfers.

While technically applicable to whites and free blacks (over 90% benefited whites), the Homestead Act of 1862 made over 270 million acres of land available for virtually nothing. Today, over 40 million whites are direct descendents of those benefiting from the Homestead Act, and over 15 million still live on the land in question. Furthermore, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), part of the National Housing Act of 1934, lent over 120 billion dollars in government backed home equity to Americans. What is troubling about this is the fact that, for the first 30 years of its existence, the FHA, through restrictive covenants and district redlining, systematically operated in an all white fashion, and almost completely barred blacks from receiving any of these funds (Katznelson, 2005, p. 48). The FHA, along with the G.I. Bill and various other parts of The New Deal, is credited with creating the American middle class. Millions of middle class whites owe their lives to these programs that in retrospect constitute "affirmative action for whites."

A recent study found that the "baby boomer" generation is in the process of inheriting over seven trillion dollars in assets from their parents and grandparents (Wise, 2008, p. 240). Considering the baby boomer generation started in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the assets that their parents and grandparents accumulated were done so in a time of American history in which racism in all of its manifestations was generally accepted, and blacks faced open discrimination. Looking back, sociologists and historians agree that America at the close of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century operated in a racial caste system, and the constitutional rights of blacks were violated in all of America's institutions. While much of this took place 50-150 years ago, the opportunities provided and the wealth passed down have had an impact on every subsequent generation, and they still impact the economic landscape today. Coupled with the benefits accrued from the Homestead Act and FHA discrimination, there are substantial levels of wealth inequality between white and black families.

In terms of crime, referencing the now infamous Baldus study, a study examining over 2000 murder cases between 1973 and 1979 that resulted in death penalty sentences, Randal Kennedy (1997) observed that

"among the variables that might plausibly influence capital sentencing—age, level of education, criminal record, military record, method of killing, motive for killing, relationship of defendant to the victim, strength of evidence, and so forth—the race of the victim emerged as the most consistent and powerful factor" (p. 329). Coming under criticism, Baldus subjected the data to 230 non-racial variables in order to control for anything that might have influenced the results, and still concluded that in the state of Georgia, the odds of being condemned to death were 4.3 times higher for defendants who were convicted of killing a white victim than those who killed a black victim (Baldus, 1979). Findings like these give footing to the pervasive feelings of helplessness and insecurity blacks feel in regards to police and the criminal justice system in general. They also suggest a psychological and material defense of whiteness: psychologically in the sense of security and confidence whites may have in the neutrality and application of the criminal justice system, and physically, in the literal increased likelihood of being put to death for having a white victim.

Furthermore, Kennedy (1997) asserts that "Alongside racially biased police brutality, the specter of wrongful convictions at trials tainted by bigotry has long haunted the collective conscious of African Americans. In addition, racially biased miscarriages of justice have strongly influenced American culture, particularly African American culture" (p. 24). It is also hard to ignore the positive correlation between the increase in black incarceration and the national war on drugs. In *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society*, Michael Brown (2003) found that "between the mid 1980's and the mid 1990's, the number of black men sentenced to prison for drug offenses increased by more than 700%, and the fastest growing segment of the prison population was black women, incarcerated mainly for nonviolent crimes" (p. 135). It would be reckless and irresponsible to deny the high prevalence of street crime perpetrated by African Americans (indeed most critiques of whiteness to date make this claim), but it is equally reckless, and perhaps even more irresponsible, to turn a blind eye to the salience of racial discrimination in all facets of the criminal justice system, from racial profiling to jury nullification to the application of the death penalty. For that matter, preoccupation with

street crime neglects the far larger losses incurred through corporate crime and willful mismanagement for personal gain, all perpetrated by white executives. From 2001-2009, Enron, Arthur Andersen, Tyco, WorldCom, Global Crossings, AIG, Lehman Brothers, Bear-Stearns, and numerous smaller players accounted for nearly two trillion dollars in criminal and negligent losses, compared to about 108 billion dollars in street crime losses for the same period (FBI Crime Statistics and Analysis, [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)).

The influence of whiteness invades areas of contemporary society other than education, criminal justice, and wealth accumulation. It also exacerbates inequalities in healthcare, employment, and political representation. With regards to disparities in healthcare, as Michael Brown (2003) noted, "Disparities that often mean life itself," in 2003 the National Cancer Institute (NCI) reported that cancer deaths are increasing much faster among blacks than whites, sometimes 20 to 100 times faster (p. 25). The NCI also noted that even though breast cancer is more prevalent among white women, black women are more likely to die from the disease. Furthermore, infant mortality, a condition that the medical profession agrees could easily be reduced with better medical care for the mother and child, is over twice as high for blacks than it is for whites (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). In this sense, racial inequality not only has a powerful impact on the quality of life one lives, but on life itself. On average, whites not only enjoy a higher quality of life than blacks, but they are also more likely to live, as indicated by lower infant mortality rate and longer life expectancies.

With regards to employment, from less than high school to advanced degree, whites earn more than blacks annually. What is more telling, however, is that the white-black annual income gap increases with educational attainment. The gap is the smallest for whites and blacks who do not possess a high school diploma, and highest for whites and blacks who possess an advanced education degree (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Educational Attainment in the United States, 2003). In addition to these numbers, according to the Statistical Abstracts of the United States, a table provided by the U.S. Census that measured unemployment rates from 1980 to 2004, regardless of economic stability or instability, regardless of the decline in low skilled

manufacturing jobs, and regardless of the exponential increase in educational attainment by black men and women, the national unemployment rate has for blacks remained stable at two to two and a half times higher than the national unemployment rate for whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004). These findings illustrate the employment hegemony that whites enjoy and are indicative of the inequalities that are present in other institutions as well. When the economy is doing well, whites will fare better than blacks. When the economy is doing poorly, whites will fare better than blacks. On average, it does not matter if we are comparing Ph.D. holders or high school drop outs, when it comes to employment, whites will fare better than blacks.

The apparatus that perpetuates these systemic inequalities in the age of individualism is as complex as it is profound. First, any analysis of the persistence of racial inequality has to discuss the re-segregating of America's neighborhoods and schools. In 1966 Thomas Pettigrew, an African American historian, noted, "Residential segregation has proved to be the most resistant to change of all realms—perhaps because it is so critical to racial change in general" (pp. 112-113).

While these studies empirically demonstrate salient racial inequality, it is important to note that contemporary inequalities in housing, education, employment, healthcare, wealth, and politics have historical roots and can all be traced back to a missed opportunity for full racial inclusion following the Civil War.

### **The Present through the Past**

In the four decades following the war that emancipated the slaves, newly freedmen and northern blacks saw the United States Government act on their behalf for racial equality for a brief moment in history during radical reconstruction, only to have any social, economic, and political gains taken away from them in the form of race riots, black codes, poll taxes, lynchings, and eventually Jim Crow laws. The early 20th century saw the assimilation of European immigrants such as Greeks, Irish, Jews, Poles, and Italians into the category of white, a designation that was previously out of reach to those considered higher than blacks, but lower than whites. This was a watershed moment in American history because it enabled racial discrimina-

tion to identify American citizens easily in dichotomous white and nonwhite terms. In a country that places privilege on white skin, easily identifying who is white and who is not has a powerful effect on where one can live, go to school, gain employment, watch a movie, or even receive medical treatment.

This is what I wish to examine. The failure of reconstruction not only meant the re-enslavement of African Americans in all but name, but it also opened the door to Jim Crow indoctrination, indefensible acts of violence against blacks, and the disenfranchisement of blacks, all of which doomed future generations of blacks to a disempowered existence of poverty, segregation, and poor educational and occupational opportunities. Coupled with their acceptance as white, European immigrants who previously faced discrimination now enjoyed institutional advantages that set in motion the rise of white supremacy along readily determined racial lines that encoded racism in institutional processes and cultural standards. While overt racism would continue, the new white supremacy established a new racism in the subtleties of standardized forms, procedures, alleged objective assessment, and the intricacies of individual perception.

### **Conceptualization of the Current Problem**

The institutionalization of white supremacy into American society was synonymous with an intertwining of otherwise contradictory notions. That is, white supremacy not only originated in but was strengthened by the American ideals of democracy and independence. Democracy and discrimination are polar opposites, yet the existence of slavery within a country that fancies itself the land of opportunity, a country that promises the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, indicates who is entitled to said opportunities, and who is not. As Joel Olson (2004) notes, "Reflecting American society at large, the discipline has generally treated race prior to, or outside the political realm. This pre-political conception of race tends to separate racial inequality out from democratic ideals, which makes it difficult to recognize the ways in which race and democracy are interconnected" (p. XII). He continues, "Logically, absolute equality and privilege conflict. When equality is reserved for some, however, it can coexist

with privilege" (p. XVI). This is the essence of white supremacy: the existence of racial privilege within a democracy, the existence of unearned rewards accrued through race within a meritocracy, the existence of racial advantage in a country that alleges equal opportunity for all.

After the end of Civil War, and the official emancipation of all African slaves, white supremacy was implemented through four distinct mechanisms: social and economic apartheid, biological determinism, cultural apathy, and racial terrorism. Social and economic apartheid refers to the separate institutions of economy that were reserved for whites and blacks. This included employment, schools, criminal justice, politics, and social life. Biological determinism refers to the science of racial superiority; the notion that whites were genetically superior to blacks and that it could be proven scientifically. Cultural apathy refers to the north and its own vices as they pertained to race following the Compromise of 1877. These vices included their own social policies and behaviors that discriminated against blacks and an indifference to the racial terror that blacks experienced in the south. Finally, racial terrorism refers to the unprecedented and largely unpunished violence aimed at blacks at the hands of whites in the south. This violence, coupled with political, cultural, and economic inequality, was intended to relegate African Americans to second class citizens, but citizens nonetheless.

Social and economic apartheid, cultural apathy, biological determinism, and racial terrorism all occurred in a dialectical matrix. There was no chronological or linear process, one did not cause the other, and they often happened in conjunction with one another. The amalgamation of all four, however, effectively created a racial hierarchy within the walls of a democracy and laid the ground work for white supremacy for generations to come.

My use of the term "white supremacy" also warrants a little clarification. In America, largely because of its openly racist past, white supremacy is generally accepted as overt, public displays of racial discrimination. White supremacy is equated with the Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazis, and hate groups who openly tout the legitimacy of white superiority and the inferiority of all other races. With this conceptualization in mind, it would be easy to interpret my use of the

term “white supremacy” as outdated, or an indictment of America as a nation that openly discriminates against blacks in a hostile manner reminiscent of the antebellum slave state or the Jim Crow south. My conceptualization, however, for the purposes of this project, treats white supremacy as the systemic advantages conferred to whites on the basis of their skin color. These privileges come in many forms and impact many institutions. They are often times subtle in their practice, but their consequences are no less destructive than the racial oppression faced by African Americans throughout America’s ugly racial history. It is precisely because of its subtlety that contemporary white racial privilege is largely considered a thing of the past, and America is now in a so-called post-racial era. Overt and public racial discrimination of America’s past created white privilege, and the general indifference to its salient manifestation allows white privilege to continue today.

To be clear, white supremacy is the institutional practices that advantage whites at the disadvantage of other races. White supremacy is privilege within a democracy. White supremacy is the legacy of accumulated wealth and the ability to be considered the norm to which all other colors are compared. White supremacy allows whites to be taken as individuals, and not be a representative of their race.

## Methods

To illustrate how white supremacy came to be, I analyze a 60 year period from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the early 20th century case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, which essentially led to the assimilation of all European immigrants. The overall method is historical-comparative with statistical augmentation, all from secondary sources. I intend to reconstruct the economic and cultural origins and development of white supremacy in the United States and its impact on the present. My literature review includes studies conducted on family wealth, whiteness, meritocracy, education, residential segregation, and employment, as well as historical studies of salient time periods: the pre-and post Civil War period and the first 25 years of the 20th century. I also will be looking at primary historical documents such as the U.S. Constitution, Supreme Court legislation, and quotations

from prominent political figures throughout American history. This review incorporates all types of sources: journal articles, census data, primary historical documents, and secondary studies. I will conclude my analysis by bridging connections between past and present, illustrating various ways which historical inequalities and racial oppression benefits whites today in the realm of education, employment, housing, and wealth accumulation. These bridges, in conjunction with contemporary forms of white racial privilege, combine to maintain a constant and even strengthening presence of white supremacy in the American landscape.

The components of legitimizing white supremacy—social and economic apartheid, biological determinism, cultural apathy, and racial terrorism—all happened within the context of radical reconstruction and the 40-50 years following the end of radical reconstruction in 1877. This context is marked by four watershed moments: The creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865, the Compromise of 1877, the 1896 United States Supreme Court decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson*, and the 1923 United States Supreme Court Decision in *The United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. While other moments during this time period, including the passing of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, southern elections, Supreme Court decisions, passed legislations, race riots, and northern resistance, were very influential in the institutionalization of white supremacy, the four aforementioned moments warrant additional explanation because of their lasting legacy in solidifying racial privilege.

## Reconstruction

While the Emancipation Proclamation (occurring in two parts) was issued in late 1862 and early 1863, perhaps a more symbolic day for the hundreds of thousands of “technically” freed slaves was April 9, 1865. On this day, the much heralded General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, marking the official end of the bloodiest war ever to take place on American soil. It was one thing for the slaves to be told that they were now free by President Lincoln, but it was another thing altogether to see the fight to preserve the institution of slavery come to an end.

The Confederate Army had been defeated, and the shackles and chains that had held the slave in bondage for so long were finally to be removed. The whips and lashes that had for centuries penetrated the skin and spilled the blood of servants were finally to be put away. With the Union persevering, newly freed slaves and northern blacks alike saw a genuine opportunity for America finally to live up to its ideals and truly become the land of equality and opportunity, where blacks and whites could lift their heads as brothers and sisters of a dignified and unified land. Sadly, it was not to be.

## Social and Economic Apartheid

Initially, the promise of reconstruction and the possibility of racial equality seemed not only attainable, but inevitable. The Freedmen’s Bureau was created in 1865 and was established to help the newly freed slaves, previous freedmen, and even poor whites. Through the various policies of the Freedmen’s Bureau, blacks were able to build schools, participate in politics, and get elected to office. The benefits and rights conferred to blacks were relatively small, but given the previous status of slaves, blacks had at least some reason to believe that things were changing for the better. The south had other plans, however.

First, with the election of ex-Confederate soldiers and former slave holders, policies signed into law upheld the institution of slavery in all but name. A series of laws referred to as “black codes” kept the freedmen disenfranchised, subjected them to violence with little to no protection under the law, and punished them for rudimentary infractions or “vagrancy laws,” by which the only way the penalty could be mitigated was by paying a hefty fine (which the vast majority of ex-slaves could not afford) or becoming indentured servants for a specified amount of time (Foner, 1984). These “codes” were designed to preserve the southern way of life; to maintain a physical and a status distance between the nearly four million newly freed slaves who resided in the south, a system of social and economic apartheid was put into practice.

To understand how an institution as vicious and inherently unequal as slavery could exist in a land that espoused equality, one must understand the origins of prejudice. Ideally, democracy and racial subordination

are contradictory to one another, so for them both to exist in the same country at the same time, subordinated groups had to be seen as less than human. Prejudice allowed whites to see African slaves as the product of an inferior race, therefore not afforded the rights and protections guaranteed by the United States Constitution. America was never meant to be a nation for anyone other than whites, therefore democracy and the subordination of the slave was not contradictory, but rather the natural order of things. Joel Olson (2004) writes, "Notwithstanding some soul searching by a few genteel slave holding intellectuals like Jefferson and Madison in the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries, there is little evidence of an American dilemma.... The democratic, egalitarian, and libertarian ideals were reconciled with slavery and genocide by restricting the definition of humanity to whites" (p. xvi). Examples of this sentiment are expressed in statements made by elected officials such as Governor B.F. Perry of South Carolina, who stated, "the government of my state is a white man's government and intended for white men only," and Governor R. M. Patton of Alabama, who proclaimed, "In the future, as had been the case in the past, the state affairs of Alabama must be guided and controlled by the superior intelligence of the white man" (Franklin, 1961, p. 51). An ex-Confederate officer elected to the Louisiana legislature agreed. In reference to newly freed slaves and education, he cautioned, "I am not in favor of positively imposing upon any legislature the unqualified and imperative duty of educating any but the superior race of man—the white race" (p. 46).

The ideology of white supremacy and black subordination did not begin with slavery, and abolishment of slavery as an institution did little to change this. Throughout the south following the war, ex-Confederate officers and even soldiers were being elected in mass numbers. As one historian put it, "In the south, some connection with the rebel service seemed to be the best endorsement in the eyes of the people" (Franklin, 1961, p. 44). Seen as dedicating themselves to an honorable cause throughout the war, southern populations not only sought to reward ex-members of the Confederate army, but also elect those who were more inclined to preserve "home rule," a euphemism for black subjugation. In reference to these Confederate politicians, Franklin noted, "Militia

colonels and cavalry captains found opportunities for service as members of the legislatures, as sheriffs, local judges, and the like. Whatever their views regarding reconstruction, the former confederates could look forward to an important role in the formulation and execution of postwar policies" (p. 45). It was simple; the rebuilding and restoration of the south after the Civil War was going to be in the hands of those who fought under the Confederate banner. These men were seen as the best chance of preserving the southern way of life, especially as it pertained to the Negro; they did not disappoint.

A number of southern states, including Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, and Georgia, within a year of the end to the Civil War, enacted their own various versions of policies, official and unofficial, that have come to be known as "black codes." "They recognized the right of Negroes to hold property, to sue and be sued (as long as both parties were black), and to have legal marriages and offspring" (Franklin, 1961, p. 48). Freedmen could handle no firearms or other weapons, and they were not allowed to possess or drink alcohol. Any Negroes who intermarried with whites were guilty of a felony, punishable by a fine, long prison term, or long assignment to servitude. In some cities, blacks were not allowed to come within the limits of particular cities without expressed permission from an elected official. Blacks were allowed to sign contracts as laborers for whites who owned land; however, if the contract was deemed to be broken or unfulfilled by the Negro (which was mostly determined by the subjectivity of the white land owner), then a fine was to be paid, and/or prison or servitude was enforced. Many communities required the Negro to be off the street by a specified hour, while others had laws against the Negro using insulting gestures or exercising the function of minister of the Gospel without a license. Some states required blacks to possess papers at all times that demonstrated or proved that they were "lawfully employed," while other states prevented slaves from renting land in urban areas purposely in order to limit their economic opportunities (Foner, 1984). Blacks who desired to pursue a profession other than farmer or servant (which mirrored the responsibilities of plantation slavery) were required to pay an annual tax of 10 to 100 dollars depending on the state. Whites were not subjected to these kinds of taxes. This is

something that Eric Foner described as a "severe blow to the free black community of the south, and to former slave artisans" (p. 93).

Apprenticeship laws also surfaced, which arguably caused the biggest uproar amongst newly freed slaves because they most resembled slavery. Apprenticeship laws required blacks under the age of 18 to work for planters without pay. "These laws allowed judges to bind to white employers black orphans and those whose parents were deemed unable to support them. The former owner usually had preference, and consent of the owner was not required" (Foner, 1984, p. 94). As one could imagine, after the abolition of slavery, there were a lot of what the powers could consider "orphans." Many children were torn apart from their families during slavery, and after the war ended, this fact was used to declare African American minors as orphans and essentially keep them as slaves. Even when families were reunited, whites could for any number of reasons declare the parents unfit, thus rendering their children orphans and confining them to forced, unpaid servitude.

These "codes" or laws, as they were seen by the white majority of the south, were not a return to slavery per se, but a way to maintain the southern way of life by ensuring the newly freed slaves devotion to their country. As one reporter at the time observed, "we acknowledge the overthrow of the special servitude of man to man, but seek to establish the general servitude of man to commonwealth" (Foner, 1984, p. 94). The south saw a massive increase in the punishment of petty crimes, crimes that almost exclusively applied to blacks. For example, laws in Georgia and Mississippi made the theft of a horse or mule a capital crime. South Carolina required blacks working in agriculture to present written authorization from their "masters" before selling produce. Laws emerged that prohibited blacks from hunting, fishing, and free grazing of livestock. As one Floridian legislature put it, "opposing the rights of blacks to hunt and fish was necessary because hunting and fishing allowed blacks to subsist while avoiding plantation labor" (p. 95). North Carolina made the intent to steal a capital crime, and "intent" was decided by white sheriffs, white judges, and even white citizens. Some states even made it illegal to own a dog; while some states allowed blacks to own dogs, they assessed taxes in order to do so. "Most of the laws employed such terms as 'master' and 'servant' and clearly

implied a distinction that consigned the Negro to a hopelessly inferior status" (Franklin, 1961, p. 49). John W. Burgess (1906) summed it up best when he observed that "Almost every act, word or gesture of the Negro, not consonant with good taste and good manners as well as good morals, was made a crime or misdemeanor, for which he could be first fined, and consigned to a condition of almost slavery for an indefinite time, if he could not pay the bill" (p. 46).

The south quickly established a racial pecking order. By electing ex-Confederate soldiers and officers to office, southern states were able to ensure separate institutions of work for blacks and whites, separate laws that were applicable to blacks and whites, and separate modes of punishment for laws that were broken. Socially, there was little interaction between blacks and whites, and many types of physical or spatial interaction were illegal for blacks and could land them in jail, or into a condition resembling slavery. The expedience to which this racial hierarchy was established troubled the north. The Civil War was still fresh in the minds of many northerners, so the southern attempt to maintain a form a racial slavery led to a backlash from the north, and southerners elected to Congress were not recognized when the 39th Congress convened in December 1865. Republicans, the progressive party of the time, outnumbered the Democrats 3 to 1, and with little to no resistance from President Johnson, the Republican members of Congress took over the responsibilities of reconstruction. This time period has come to be known as radical reconstruction.

### Radical Reconstruction

The term "radical reconstruction" was coined by the faction of Republicans who wanted equal rights and protection under the law for all previous freedmen and newly freed slaves. The notion of blacks being equal to whites in the eyes of the law was indeed a radical ideology to have at the time, but it should be noted that even those who subscribed to this "radical" ideology never maintained that blacks were equal to whites, but rather in order for America to live up to its promise, blacks should have equal rights under the law. One of the leading campaigners for black suffrage, Thaddeus Stevens, once openly announced, "I have never held to

the doctrine of negro equality in all things, but simply before the law" (Benedict, 1991, p. 55). Michael Benedict asserts, "Few Republicans during the war or reconstruction believed blacks to be the equal of whites. Republicans had insisted only that freedmen be secured equality in basic civil and (after some hesitation) political rights, not that they be conceded what was called at the time social equality." Most radical Republicans shared the similar sentiment that because blacks did indeed belong to an inferior race, it was all the more reason they should be protected by equal laws (Anderson & Moss Jr., 1991).

With this in mind, the proposals and actual policies that were enacted during radical reconstruction were designed to promote equal protection in the eyes of the Constitution, not to espouse the equal status of the white and black race. The inferior status of former African slaves was not challenged, not even by the radicals. So by contrast, white superiority or white supremacy was espoused by the very people who would be charged with reconstruction and the assimilation of nearly four million newly freed slaves. Even though the radicals were the best chance that former slaves had at receiving any sense of equality, it was never their intention to deny white superiority. White was superior, black was inferior, and thus white supremacy as an ideology saturated any recommendations, proposals, laws, policies, or Supreme Court decisions.

From the end of 1865 to the beginning of 1877, southern blacks saw their lives begin to change. Schools were built for colored children, and although these schools were often dilapidated and overcrowded, it was significant that the United States government was making an effort to educate Negro children. In the south, blacks were able to own land for the first time, and they were even able to rent it out, provided the people they rented to were also black. Southern blacks were able to work for wages for the first time, and even though their wages were far less than those of whites, they saw opportunity to create a life in their own image, to do things as they saw fit. Although white resistance was fierce and often times violent, the presence of Union troops helped to curtail the rise of southern violence and ensure the promise of radical reconstruction. Blacks understood this, and they took action. "Like emancipation, radical reconstruction inspired blacks with a millennial sense of living at the dawn of

the new era.... Blacks found countless ways of pursuing aspirations for autonomy and equality, and seizing the opportunity to press for further change" (Foner, 1984, p. 124).

Perhaps the institution most affected by the newly found aspiration and confidence championed by freedmen was politics. Not only did blacks turn out to vote in incredible numbers, but they also sought to be elected to office themselves. "One plantation manager summed up the situation: You never saw a people more excited on the subject of politics than are the Negroes of the south. They are perfectly wild" (Foner, 1984, p. 125). Blacks voted in overwhelming numbers, exercising their newly gained suffrage, and as a result many black politicians were voted into office. Former slaves and previously freed blacks still living in the south finally felt as though they had political representation. Even though the radical Republicans were legislatively fighting on behalf of blacks, they only were willing to fight for so much, and they could never understand the physical and psychological existence in legalized racial servitude.

### Racial Terrorism

Some important forms of racial domination occurred overtly. "At least two motifs would run through any biography of the United States: an enduring democratic heritage and a legacy of social domination along ethno-racial lines" (Hiers, 2007, p. 2). The social domination mentioned by Wes Hiers was the result of various policies, institutions, laws, and coercion that regarded African slaves as sub-human. The most visceral and visual aspect of these practices was the unbridled and largely unpunished violence aimed at people of African descent at the hands of whites. Public whippings, beatings, rapes, race riots, and most of all lynchings were the different forms of violence used to ensure black subjugation. "Thousands of lynchings in the decades before World War I gave menacing force to everyday reminders of white supremacy" (Sharfstein, 2003, p. 1486). The initial racial backlash against blacks following the end of the Civil War was at least partially blunted by the passing of civil rights legislation and the presence of Union troops. With election of Rutherford B. Hayes to the White House in 1876 and the Compromise of 1877, all Union troops were removed from southern states, hate groups such as the Ku



Klux Klan rose to prominence, and the racial terrorism of blacks increased exponentially, leaving southern blacks in a state of constant fear for their lives.

While radical reconstruction was by no means successful in leveling the playing field between whites and newly freed slaves, it did make many strides. As Theresa Richardson (2000) writes:

The 13th Amendment assured the right of all African American to freedom from involuntary servitude. The 14th Amendment assured the right to citizenship; and the 15th Amendment provided self-determination with right to vote. The dogma of race once unleashed, however, was not to be reined in easily. The purpose of reconstruction between 1865 and 1877, in the years of radical republicans, was to dis-empower the planter class aristocracy of the south. Slavery was abolished, schools were set up, former slaves acquired land, and the right to vote was briefly acquired along with the experience of holding an elected position. The aristocracy was temporarily displaced and the plantation economy destroyed. (p. 316)

The key word here is “temporarily.” The presidential election in 1876 ended with a lot of ambiguity and controversy. The Democratic candidate, Samuel J. Tilden, won the popular vote and accumulated 184 Electoral College votes (at the time 185 votes were needed to win the Electoral College). Three southern states that were under Republican control during radical reconstruction, Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina, all had their results disputed by both candidates. The campaign managers for Rutherford B. Hayes claimed victory in all three of these states, which led to a stalemate between the two candidates, as well as their supporters. “The ensuing deadlock proved irresolvable by traditional means and in one of the wisest pieces of statecraft ever evolved by an American Congress, an extraordinary electoral commission was created, composed of members of the Senate, House of Representatives, and Supreme Court” (Peskin, 1973, p. 63). Hayes was declared the winner of the election, and immediately the cacophony of outrage was direct and demanding. “The decision of the commission in favor of Hayes,

in a strictly partisan eight to seven vote, so angered Democrats that many of them openly threatened revolution, while others in the House of Representatives began a filibuster to prevent Hayes’ inauguration.”

Hayes sought a compromise. In order to prevent the impending filibuster and be recognized as President of the United States, Hayes withdrew the military from southern states, thus officially ending reconstruction. Hayes also sought to establish a southern constituency that was not dependent on the Negro vote, and the only effective way to sway the majority of southern whites was to give them patronage to protect their “home rule.”

## Discussion

This study addresses an apparent paradox. If racism is still prevalent in contemporary America, and America as a nation believes that racism is unjust, then where is the national outcry? Why is there no movement to secure the equal distribution of opportunity and fairness in the realms of education, employment, housing, politics, and healthcare? Why is it that politicians do not stress the need to eradicate racial privilege, and why is there not an abundance of congressional legislation being proposed to secure a fair and just playing field for all Americans?

Furthermore, are young people really more tolerant when it comes to matters pertaining to race? Is reverse racism the only type of discrimination that really matters today? The answers to all of these questions are complex and contradictory depending upon whom is asked. No realistic party will dispute the concrete and malicious nature of racial oppression in the past, nor will they dispute the negative impact that past racial discrimination had on disadvantaging people of color following social change and reform. What is not so acknowledged are the advantages this very same oppression conferred to whites and its significance not only to contemporary inequality, but also to the way in which mainstream America interprets racism. No realistic observer can dispute the contemporary racial disparities between whites and people of color in areas like educational attainment, employment, income, healthcare, and national crime rates; what is not so clear is the cause of all these inequalities.

Conceptually, we have typically understood racism too narrowly. Some views treat-

ed racism as a matter of individual choice or prejudice, that particular individuals perpetrated discrimination or aggression against other individuals with the justification of racial superiority. The feelings underlying these actions, whether biological and/or cultural superiority, and the slurs that result from such attitudes, whether the more overtly malicious “nigger,” and “coon,” or the coded “Urban,” and “ghetto,” the notion of superiority and inferiority still remains. In terms of economics and politics, racism was viewed as an institution, both as slavery and later as enforced apartheid in the form of de jure segregation.

With slavery abolished and mandated segregation legally invalidated by the Supreme Court, the purely overt understanding of racism leads people to believe that racism is no longer relevant because it no longer exists. What mainstream America and even scholars of race and ethnicity often fail to realize is that segregation was not challenged for the sole purpose of integration; it was an attempt to undermine the contextual structure that made legal segregation possible and morally acceptable: white supremacy. In contrast to overt racism, the concept and practice of white supremacy, however, legitimate a perception of white superiority and non-white, especially black, inferiority as an essential truth—a truth that is self-evident and requires no rational proof. It is both an assumption and a feeling that can be encoded into individual perception, cultural values, and institutional function. Failing to understand, or refusing to recognize this distinction—that white supremacy can exist without significant malicious racism and can nevertheless contribute to inequality and oppression—confounds our collective ability to understand properly the persistence of racial inequality and subsequently to develop solutions.

## Dual Legacies

The continuing salience of the narrow conception of racism that limits understanding to overt and malicious attitudes and practices results from what I call the dual legacies of racial oppression. The first legacy is institutional advantage. This refers to institutions of family, education, government, and business that function to serve the interests of some dominant group in order to perpetuate their dominance and simultaneous

inequality. This includes multiple forms of dominance, such as gender and class, as well as race. These and other forms also tend to intersect. The focus of this paper, however, is race.

The second of the dual legacies, and perhaps the more damaging of the two, is the outdated interpretation of racism. Scholars, politicians, law makers, police officers, conservatives, liberals, blacks, whites, indeed, the greater part of mainstream America, all tend to understand racism as a historical manifestation, started and completed in the past, that is no longer relevant. In this misunderstanding, racism is a thing of the past.

### **Institutional Advantage**

The legacy of white supremacy permeates all facets of American society. Racial discrimination of the past cannot be separated from racial inequality today, because institutions that allow racial oppression to exist cannot be separated from the people who practice discrimination. People look at various institutions as being objective and neutral, therefore past racial inequality was a result of the actions of people living at the time. In this regard, America in the eyes of many people today is past its racial hierarchy because its contemporary citizenry openly extols the ideology of equality and inclusion. This paradigm allows for the institution that provided the contextual framework for racial oppression essentially to go unscrutinized and evade its own culpability in the very racial oppression being characterized as no longer relevant.

The proposed “neutrality” of America at the institutional level was the breeding ground for genocide, slavery, imperialism, terrorism, and legal apartheid for almost 400 years. As these practices took place, time did not stand still, and neither did policy, legislation, opportunity, precedent, and wealth accumulation. Fortunes were made, wealth was accumulated, legends were born, and traditions were established all in a time when the great American spirit of competition was restricted to whites only. America grew to become the most powerful nation on earth, and its ideological scaffold was white supremacy. American industry skyrocketed, its economy flourished, and it did so under the veil of inherent white superiority. Employment opportunities were color coded, with the higher paying jobs being reserved

for whites only, with the lower, menial jobs reserved for people of color. As the number of jobs grew, people of color were suddenly deemed qualified for jobs that were previously considered too sophisticated for them; jobs that were now vacated by whites who moved up the employment ladder. When the number of jobs fell, credentialing, or college degree requirements set in, and higher educational attainment became essential for quality employment. These forces combined to create a “last hired-first fired” reality for people of color; a reality that can still be felt in contemporary America.

Soldiers returning home from World War II were able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and other forms of veterans assistance, allowing them to go college almost for free. The Federal Housing Administration provided hundreds of millions of dollars in home equity, and in concurrence with the GI. Bill, it is credited with creating the American middle class. For the first 25-30 years of their existence, these programs essentially operated in an all white fashion, virtually excluding all people of color. Urban renewal projects, district redlining, and restrictive covenants barred people of color from living in affluent, suburban neighborhoods, which in turn barred them from attending better funded schools with better trained faculty. For the first three decade following the end of World War II, the American middle class was not only created, but also flourished under the welfare state. Alongside the FHA preceding the Second World War, federal initiatives following the war, such as veterans’ assistance programs and the G.I. Bill, provided literally millions of Americans, the vast majority of them white, with the opportunity to go to college, start businesses, relocate to better neighborhoods, and elevate their socioeconomic status. Ira Katznelson (2005) writes, “No other New Deal initiative had as great an impact on changing the country as the Selective Service Readjustment Act.... Even today, this legislation, which quickly came to be called the G.I. Bill of Rights, qualifies as the most wide-ranging set of social benefits ever offered by the federal government in a single, comprehensive initiative” (p. 113). Comprehensive, wide-ranging social benefits that were provided by the government, and without specific barriers mandated by race, were in practice able to operate in a predominantly all white fashion for the first 30 years of their existence.

Similar realities exist in education. Educational attainment dramatically rose throughout the 20th century, and for over 60 years racial segregation was legally enforced. The remaining forty years of the 20th century have been marred by de facto segregation, unequal school funding, unequal distribution of resources, and disparate levels of quality instruction. Preceding the landmark *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling in 1954 that invalidated the separate but equal doctrine, schools in the south were forcibly segregated by race under the ruse that as long as the school systems were equal in the education they provided to children, it was perfectly democratic to separate them by race. In reality schools were anything but equal, as children of color were forced to attend schools that were lacking in every conceivable category that was conducive to a quality education. At the same time, the north was marred with de facto segregation, the type of segregation that is very prevalent today. Although not as direct or as obvious as Jim Crow segregation, “voluntary,” or “natural” segregation is almost just as destructive as legal apartheid. For the better part of the century, Jim Crow provided white students with opportunities that were simply not available to black students. These opportunities, bolstered by racial discrimination in federal initiatives such as the G.I. Bill, extended to college and provided many options for upward social mobility. This social mobility comes in handy today when it comes to positioning young children for better educational opportunity. Parents can rely on family wealth, wealth that was accumulated in the era of open racial hostilities, to buy houses in better, more expensive neighborhoods, thus affording their children the chance to attend better schools. Some parents even can use family wealth to send their kids to expensive private schools; schools they otherwise would not have been able to afford (Johnson, 2006, p. 157). These practices do not mention race and are essentially uninfluenced by any government policy to date. Therefore they are not considered racist or contradictory in any way to the American promise of meritocracy, even though advantage and disadvantage are routinely inherited along racial lines. When taken together with the unequal allocation of schools funds, resources, and quality instruction, advantages made possible by past racial discrimination only serve to strengthen the influence of

white supremacy in the American educational system, and students of color will disparately continue to inherent disadvantage in the land of equal opportunity.

While America pretends to be past its racial apex, survey data indicate that a sizeable percentage of whites still believe in negative racial stereotypes about blacks. Tim Wise (2008) writes, "In one of the more respected opinion surveys from the 1990's, six in ten whites said that discrimination was less important in determining the position of blacks in society than the 'fact' that blacks 'just don't have the have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty'" (p. 40). How many of the white respondents who openly admit to at least some negative stereotypes are in a position to hire, fire, or lend money to people of color? How can institutions be considered race-neutral when there is a strong likelihood that people operating within those institutions may hold a personal bias against others based on skin color? Furthermore, with the persistence of negative racial stereotypes, the changes that are needed at the institutional level will be considered reverse discrimination or welfare handouts to undeserving poor. The historical legacy of racial oppression essentially created the socioeconomic position of African Americans as a whole, and the ongoing struggles of African Americans in the areas of educational attainment, unemployment, crime rates, poverty, isolation, and general deprivation are used to justify having racial stereotypes. Surely problems within the black community cannot be fully attributed to past and present racial discrimination. Personal choices and decisions made by blacks themselves have to bear the brunt of the bleak reality many blacks find themselves in. With that being said, the contexts in which these personal choices are made are a consequence of institutional forces that advantage whites in the land of equal opportunity. With the acceptance of the United States as an actual meritocracy, systemic inequality and white hegemony will not be vilified for the role they play in the urban pathologies that are condemned so much and attributed to personal responsibility.

### **Racism as a Thing of the Past**

To be sure, racism was slavery, and afterward, racism was enforced subjugation that left African Americans with no guaranteed

rights before the law. Racism was a black body hanging from a tree while whites commemorated the occasion with food and drinks. Racism was men dressed in hooded sheets brandishing shotguns and burning down black schools and churches. Racism was schools, movie theatres, neighborhoods, drinking fountains, jails, beaches, and hospitals that all held the moniker "Whites Only." Many believe that civil rights legislation washed away these aggressive and repulsive symbols in the decades since the civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

This narrow interpretation, combined with actual progress in reducing racial discrimination and a burgeoning black middle class, can be directly attributed to the almost universally accepted notion among whites, including white progressives, that racial discrimination is simply not a major problem in contemporary America. Taking it one step further, because racism is considered to be so inconsequential, progressive policies aimed at leveling the playing field, programs like affirmative action, are experiencing severe backlash and have been overturned in a number of states. "Reverse discrimination," that is, racism that advantages minorities at the disadvantage of whites, is largely considered to be the only real illustration of racial discrimination today.

To be clear, slavery, lynching, the KKK, and American Apartheid were indeed examples of racism; however, the society that allows these atrocities to take place is just as racist, and it bears equal responsibility when addressing issues pertaining to race. It is not enough to look at black men being lynched or the KKK burning crosses on people's front lawns; we also have to look at the justice, or lack thereof, that was afforded to these victims through the nonexistent arrest and prosecution of their assailants. It is not enough to look at slavery and the Jim Crow south; scrutiny also must be given to the presence of a racial caste system within the borders of a country that champions equality, opportunity, and freedom. Until the conceptualization of racism is made to include structural and systemic inequalities, rather than simply overt individual actions, any analysis of the impact of contemporary racial inequality will be highly ambiguous at best.

Today, because of the absence of racial enslavement and formal apartheid, racism is looked upon as a relic of history and con-

finied to the periphery of modern day society. Racism, once a pathology that caused a broad coalition of whites and blacks to band together, is now seen as an excuse for laziness and lack of personal responsibility. Blacks who speak against racism today are "looking for handouts," and whites who speak against racism are doing nothing but "encouraging indolence" or "haven't seen the way blacks live." It is true that America has come a long way in living up to its ideals of equality and inclusion. It is also true that younger generations are more tolerant than ever in terms of openness to people of different races. However, due to the narrow interpretation of what constitutes racism, even those who championed racial equity during the civil rights movement and even the most progressive of younger generations will still be apt to conclude that racism has for the most part been eradicated. Again, this can be evidenced by the growing backlash against affirmative action programs and the increasing rhetoric of reverse discrimination.

Confusing everyday racism or overt acts of bigotry, which can be perpetrated by any member of any race, with white supremacy or inherent institutional advantage, which racially speaking, can only be enjoyed by whites, is what allows fallacious notions of whites being disadvantaged in America to persist. This confusion also undermines ongoing attempts to remedy the racial hierarchy that currently exists in society. The progress that America has made on achieving racial equality must be acknowledged and even celebrated, but it cannot be mistaken for a completed objective.

### **The Continuing Salience of White Supremacy**

A latent consequence of understanding racism as overt actions by individual actors is the perplexity of intentionality. The necessity of psychological bigotry as a precursor for any action or policy to be considered racist blinds people to the reality of subconscious stereotypes that lead well meaning people to act in ways that discriminate against blacks, and seemingly race neutral practices that advantage whites at the expense of blacks, poor people, and other people of color. This is a phenomenon which Barbara Trepagnier (2006) refers to as "silent racism" (p.1). She writes that "Silent racism—the racist thoughts, images, and assumptions in

the minds of white people, including those that by most accounts are 'not racist'—is dangerous precisely because it is perceived as harmless." She continues, "The silent racism in people's thoughts, images, and assumptions shapes their perspective of reality. And a perspective that is shaped by racist thoughts, images, and assumptions—no matter how subtle they are—will produce behavior that reflects racist thoughts, images, and assumptions." A brief overview of how de facto segregation is perpetuated in our new "colorblind," so called "post-racial" America illustrates this point. At the individual level, well meaning white parents who want better educational opportunities for their children migrate to "better" neighborhoods with "better" schools. Although "better" can be composed of many attributes, perhaps the most powerful indicator of a "better" neighborhood is a white neighborhood (Johnson, 2006). There is no doubt that many parents are indeed racially conscious when choosing which neighborhoods to live in and which schools to send their kids to. Other parents though, parents who by all conceivable measures would consider themselves anti-racist, simply want what is best for their children. Combined with the inability of many black parents to afford to live in more affluent neighborhoods, thus hindering their ability to send their children to better schools, residential and school segregation are steadily increasing, and in many geographical locations are near or have exceeded Jim Crow levels.

At the institutional level, residential and school segregation is just as destructive as they were when America stood against it as undemocratic and unconstitutional. With schools being funded primarily by property taxes, schools located in more affluent neighborhoods receive considerably more funding and resources than schools located in poorer neighborhoods. The schools with better resources tend to be located in suburban school districts. The suburban school districts are located in suburban neighborhoods, and these neighborhoods tend to be predominantly or sometimes all white. Additionally, with the federal mandate of annual school progress as outlined in the national school initiative No Child Left Behind, schools are being shut down, and teachers are losing their jobs. What this means for schools with limited resources that are more at risk of being shut down is that better trained and higher quality teachers are not willing to teach there. Teach-

ers are not only looking for employment that provides more autonomy and better resources, but they also are looking for job security. This is not to say that all suburban schools are all white or all good, nor is it to say that all urban schools are all color and all bad; what it does say is that there is a strong correlation among race, class, and quality of educational opportunity. Current practices by individuals and current policies by institutions combine to create a disparate effect on white children and children of color. However, due to the lack of obvious prejudicial intent, the absence of legally enforced separation, and no overt mention of race, these practices are not considered racist, even though they overwhelmingly advantage whites and disadvantage minorities. This example illustrates the covert nature of white supremacy and how limited understandings of what constitutes racism hinder the possibility of remedying new forms of racial inequality.

## Conclusion

Racial oppression is not a static phenomenon. Racism today is not the racism of the antebellum south. Racism of the 1890s was not the same racism of the 1990s. At one point in history, racism was the enslavement of the majority of all blacks living in America. While at a different point in American history blacks were free from servitude, they were officially and unofficially separated from whites through its various institutions. Although the manifestations were different, the aura of white supremacy was the cornerstone of both slavery and apartheid, and America gave solace to a racial hierarchy that for centuries was considered a natural right. In place of the aforementioned biological determinism, cultural superiority and work ethic are now given credit for the gulf of racial disparities between blacks and whites. Whether discussing the "natural birth right" of whites historically, or the perception of "superior values and work ethic" among whites today, with the exception of emancipation and the eradication of de jure segregation (de facto segregation is still prevalent and even increasing), America has not been held responsible for the role it played in establishing white supremacy and promoting racial inequality. The transformative quality of white supremacy hides its salience and almost completely exonerates America for the role it plays in permitting it to take place and perpetuating

it across generations.

Today there is a term used to describe people who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum. The term is "underprivileged." This can be applied to poor people, minorities, women, or any group of people who are now, and have historically been exploited or discriminated against. Paraphrasing Tim Wise (2004), the passive voice of the term underprivileged implies that no one did anything. "It's as if one day someone said 'here is privilege and I'll be damned, there you are under it'" (p. 36). This addresses the overall structure of American society as it pertains to race. Speaking socially, culturally, politically, and economically, America was initially shaped and flourished under the banner of white supremacy. As a result, America has established generally accepted "race neutral" policies that inherently advantage whites but are not considered racist because these policies do not specifically mention race. Exacerbating the almost non-existent national outcry about institutional racism is the covert way in which it operates and the contemporary interpretation of what actually constitutes racism. This interpretation can be directly attributed to the overt history of racial discrimination in America, and it is an interpretation that is faulty on the basis that it was never complete to begin with. Assessing racism solely focused on individuals, not institutions, it failed to account for people who made decisions based on factors not relating to race.

In our culture today, I argue that any actions that are made without cognitive animosity towards blacks or other people of color are not considered racist, no matter the impact it has on promoting racial inequality. We are biased to focus primarily on intent, and in particular, individual intent, and less on social forces and outcome. This reduces racism to willful expression of racist sentiments, regarded as particular to racist individuals who are dismissed as ignorant or fringe members of an otherwise progressive society. Such inept understandings of racism place a formidable hurdle in the quest for racial equality in America today. In order to perfect our "more perfect union," any research aimed at analyzing racial inequality or even racial disparities must start with history. Racial discrimination is not some archaic, insignificant blemish on America's resume of equal opportunity, and it should not be treated as such.

Tim Wise (2004) also writes, "the term

underprivileged completely disregards the relative nature of the word under” (p. 64). This statement is as profound as it is succinct. People of all walks of life, conservative, liberal, poor, wealthy, white, black, etc., acknowledge the existence of people who are underprivileged, yet it is rarely if ever mentioned just who the underprivileged are “under” in comparison to. That is, there is no mention or analysis of anyone being over-privileged. Without any regard for ideologies, theories, and paradigms, it is inarguable that if something is considered “under,” then by definition there has to be an “over.” Whether the topic is race, class, gender, or sexuality, if one segment or portion of a particular demographic is underprivileged, then one part must be over-privileged. In the specific category of race, minorities, typically blacks and Hispanics, are considered to be under-privileged in the areas of educational opportunities, accumulated wealth, job opportunities, housing, political representation, and quality healthcare coverage. Their existence as members of an underprivileged class is almost universally accepted, even when the reasons for their membership are ferociously disputed. Conversely, since there is little mention of the over-privileged, possible reasons that bolster their life chances via the non-merit based availability of resources and opportunities not only go unexamined, but they are also taken as earned by the individuals who benefit from them. This not to say that all members of the over-privileged class do not work hard or do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them; it simply states that they are presented with unearned opportunities that are not readily available to members who are considered to be underprivileged. In the area of race, the over-privileged class refers to whites. The intersection of different forms of privilege, such as class, age, religion, and so on, all combine to create a segment of the population that is inherently advantaged by American democracy. However, in each subsection, whites are advantaged over blacks. In America, a poor white woman will surely be predisposed for worse life chances than middle or upper class white women, yet in all likelihood that same poor white woman will be predisposed for better life chances than a poor black woman. In a country that continually espouses race neutrality and equal opportunity, inherent advantages of any kind render these assertions obsolete.

After hundreds of years of racial bondage and oppression, following the Civil War, America had the opportunity to live up to its ideals. Equal opportunity, freedom, and justice for all were for the first time in American history something that was plausible in practice, rather than just rhetoric. Slavery was lawfully abolished, and the vicious war being waged that would ultimately determine the fate of millions of southern slaves and countless freedmen living in America had seemingly ended on the side of equality. White supremacy, however, was too strong to overcome. Immediately following the official surrender of the Confederate army, hoards of ex-Confederate officers, commanders, and supporters were voted into office throughout the south. They were elected into powerful positions of far reaching authority, such as mayor or governor, and they also were elected into more intimate, but no less powerful positions, such as sheriff or prosecutor. For former slaves living in the south, life in the post slavery era was eerily similar to life under institutional bondage. Emancipation brought freedom in name only, and for the first several years following the end of the Civil War, blacks living in the south were slaves in everything but name. White supremacy, already established by the very existence of racial slavery, continued to pervade American society at the individual and institutional level. White supremacy was not slavery, but it allowed slavery to exist. Therefore, the eradication of the American slave state did not mean the eradication of white supremacy; it only meant that it had to change forms.

Radical reconstruction was considered a coup for progressives who fought and died for racial equality. Blacks in the south, as well as the north, saw their rights increase exponentially. They were allowed to attend school, to vote, to own land, to be elected to office, and actually to earn a wage. Although the gains were significant, considering any form of freedom is better than no freedom at all, they were relatively small in comparison to the rights and opportunities enjoyed by whites (even poor whites), and the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution. Even many of the most ardent supporters of racial equality, the radical Republicans, did not consider blacks to be equal to whites in an existential sense. On the one hand, there were people who outright considered blacks to be biologically inferior to whites, and who thought American society should reflect as much. On the other hand, there were people who also thought

blacks were biologically inferior to whites, but it was precisely because of this inherent inferiority why they needed to be afforded equal protection under the law. In either case, blacks were considered inferior, and white supremacy continued to be the dominant ideology, even after emancipation, and even during radical reconstruction.

The end of radical reconstruction saw all of the progress that was made on behalf of blacks in America virtually wiped out. The rights bestowed upon newly freed slaves in the south were relatively small in comparison to full inclusion in a free society; nevertheless, they were important to the former slaves who saw them as a form of liberation. These relatively small gains were also big enough in that they frightened the whites to the point that they considered them a threat. Many blacks who were elected to office were immediately thrown out of office, and black citizens were ceremoniously disenfranchised. White supremacist hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan sprang up all across the south, and violence against blacks, even in the north, increased by considerable margins. Black churches and schools were burned down, and mass lynchings exploded with the brutal murders of hundreds, perhaps thousands of blacks that took place in broad daylight without any chance to pose a defense for the crime they had been accused of committing. The level of unequal treatment experienced by blacks at the hands of whites was a more violent rendition of the treatment they experienced immediately following the end of the Civil War with the black codes. Only this time, there were no radical Republicans who would speak on behalf of the newly re-disenfranchised. This was largely due to the perception that reconstruction had progressed too slowly and been somewhat of a failure.

At the dawn of the 20th century, science and intellectuals joined the side of white supremacy. In the form of eugenics, notables such as Francis Galton, Karl Pearson (who introduced linear regression and correlation to the social sciences), Margaret Sanger, George Bernard Shaw, and Konrad Lorenz supported the notion of biological racial hierarchy, with “negroids” at the bottom. Proponents hoped to use science to breed a superior population. The rise of eugenics and the assertion of biological determinism rendered moot any notions of social equality. Separate standards of living, individu-

ally and institutionally, while already in existence, became indoctrinated into law at the close of the 19th century with “Separate but Equal Doctrine” set forth in *Plessey v Ferguson*.

The first two decades of the 20th century saw the assimilation of southern and eastern European immigrants, people who had previously been considered less than white, into the dominant culture. This created a united racial category of “white” and secured privileges by virtue of their “whiteness.” With the ambiguity of who was to be considered white put to rest, white supremacy corresponded with the prosperity and growth of America as a country, a correspondence that indelibly infused white supremacy socially, politically, and economically into American culture and institutions. By the time America (forcibly) owned up to the obvious hypocrisy of a racial caste within a democracy, generations of whites had benefited from the overt white superiority that was ingrained in American institutions, while generations of people of color had been denied all that was promised to them by a Constitution that promised “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Even still, a truly inclusive democracy has not been realized.

While overt racial discrimination has been marginalized, the covert destructiveness of white supremacy still pervades society in every conceivable way. The people, albeit slowly, are becoming more tolerant, or at least confining their racist beliefs to private quarters, but the institutions that have always been infected with the disease of white supremacy still suffer from this malady. White supremacy was born with the founding of this country—it grew with the prosperity of this country—and if left unchecked, will continue to undermine all that is just within this country, and its citizens, both white and black alike, will suffer the consequences.

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