

BETWEEN

BARACK

RACISM AND WHITE
DENIAL IN THE AGE
OF OBAMA

AND

A HARD

PLACE

TIM WISE

PRAISE FOR TIM WISE

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BETWEEN BARACK AND A HARD PLACE

Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama

Tim Wise



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Preface

On November 4, 2008, at a little after 10:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, television networks began announcing the big news: Senator Barack Obama had been elected 44th president of the United States, thereby becoming the first person of color to win the office in the nation's history. Immediately, the discussion turned to the historicity of the moment, and with good reason. For a nation built on the foundation of slavery, disenfranchisement, and white domination, the election of a man of color (and a man who, according to the racial taxonomy that has long existed in the United States, is indeed black) to the highest office in the land, is of no small import.

Millions of new voters, especially voters of color, had turned out in record numbers to cast their ballots for Barack Obama. In the days that followed, African American men and women who thought this moment might never happen, spoke of the pride they felt, having come so far in the past few decades, from a time when merely registering black people to vote could and did result in death. The Obama's victory says something about the United States, and about race and racism in this nation, hard to deny.

But what it says, and what it doesn't say, is ultimately not determined by the feelings of voters, however joyful they may be about Obama's victory. What Obama's political rise says about racism in America is to be determined by an honest appraisal of the real conditions on the ground in this place, not for Barack Obama, but for approximately 90 million persons of color in all: black, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, indigenous persons, and Middle Easterners. When that appraisal is conducted, the racial and ethnic reality of the United States is sure to be seen as far more complex than some might like to think. For while the individual success of persons of color, as with Obama, is meaningful (and at this level was unthinkable merely a generation ago), the larger systemic and institutional realities of life in America suggest the ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malaise—racism—which has been neither eradicated nor even substantially diminished by Obama's victory.

Herein I will explore what the political ascent of Barack Obama might mean, and more importantly what it doesn't mean, about race, about the power of whiteness in early twenty-first century America, and about America itself. This I will do in the form of two essays, the first of which argues that contrary to the beliefs of many, the evidence is clear: systemic racial discrimination and the profound inequity of opportunity continue to mark the lives of persons of color, Obama's own successes notwithstanding. Furthermore, not only does the success of Barack Obama not signify the death of white racism as a personal or institutional phenomenon, if anything, it may well signal the emergence of an altogether new kind of racism. Consider this, for lack of a better term, Racism 2.0, enlightened exceptionalism, a form that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individuals of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown rule. If whites come to like, respect, and even vote for persons of color like Barack Obama, but only because they view them as having "transcended" their blackness in some way, to claim that the success of such candidates proves the demise of racism makes no sense at all. If anything, success on these terms confirms the salience of race and the machinations of white hegemony. That 43 percent of whites voted for Obama—more than voted for any white Democratic candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964—is impressive, to be sure, but perhaps

less so than many would like to think.

In short, the 2008 presidential election may not have been a contest in which racism was vying against anti-racism, so much as one in which two different types of racism were competing for predominance. On the one hand was old-fashioned bigotry, or Racism 1.0, which could have caused enough whites to vote against Obama for racial reasons as to have ensured his defeat. This is the kind of bigotry that has long marked the nation's history: the kind that, in its most extreme moments has precipitated racist murder, lynching, and terror on a grand scale; the kind that led to dozens of white-on-black riots in city after city for much of the early 1900s; the kind that precipitated restrictive covenants and "neighborhood improvement associations" to block persons of color from moving into white neighborhoods; the kind that even now animates hate groups and hate crimes when taken to its illogical conclusion. It is racism with which we are, as a nation, familiar, even if we remain sadly naïve as to the depths of its depravity. And that familiarity allows us to know it when we see it, as we occasionally did in the run-up to the election, in hostile and unhinged e-mails attacking Obama for racial or religious reasons, or in Internet videos showing blatantly racist supporters of Obama's opponent, Senator John McCain, engaged in only the most thinly veiled racist invective. On the other hand, however, was Racism 2.0—a far less easily recognized type—which could allow him to win the presidency, but only because of his ability to ease white fears and transcend his still-problematic blackness, biracial though it may be. While Racism 1.0 appears to have suffered a defeat this time over—and for that, we can all be grateful—let us not overlook the possibility that Racism 2.0 may have been in full effect, and ultimately the reason for Obama's victory. And if that is true—a subject we will explore shortly—then there remains a great amount of work to be done.

Likewise, if Obama's win has the effect of creating a new archetype or model of acceptable blackness—in other words, if whites come to "need" black folks to be Obama-like in style, affect, erudition, and educational background in order to be considered competent or trustworthy—his singular victory could actually create higher barriers for the bulk of African Americans. Where whites have long been able to run the gamut of observable intelligence, articulateness, accent, and erudition and still become president, or obtain other high-ranking positions in the private sector, for instance, people of color have long worried about being tokenized, and accepted only when they make whites sufficiently comfortable or don't seem "too black" in the way many whites still perceive the larger black community. If Obama's success reinforces that tendency to isolate acceptable blacks from those who are "unacceptable," the consequences for overall racial equity could be negative rather than positive.

In the second essay, I explore the unique challenge to white America posed by Obama's candidacy and pending presidency. While overt racists will counsel backlash, and use Obama's rise to suggest that America is descending into a pit of cultural decay, and while mainstream commentators will counsel celebration, and use Obama as proof positive that racism is no longer a potent social force with which we must grapple, there is another option, at once more level-headed and yet aspirational to which we might turn. That option is to seize the moment, to channel the energy unleashed by the Obama campaign, to focus those who have believed so much in him and his mantra of "change" into productive antiracism and social justice work. The choice is to use this opening to develop and strengthen white antiracist identity, to insist on the audacity of truth and not just hope, to demand better of ourselves than perhaps even we thought possible. Just as Obama has issued a challenge to black folks to be more responsible for the problems in their communities—in part a message he sincerely believes, of course, but also one intended to make whites more comfortable with his candidacy—so too must whites take personal responsibility for ongoing racism, racial injustice, and the unearned privileges we continue to reap as a result. In other words, while it is certainly advisable

for persons of color to take responsibility for their lives, no matter the presence of racism, it is just as important for whites to take responsibility for our mess, including the mess of racism and privilege, irrespective of how we believe (often incorrectly) black and brown folks are behaving. Personal responsibility is a two-way street, in other words.

It is this call for “200 percent responsibility” that I hope will resonate with those inspired thus far by Obama, and move them from a focus on his personal success to a more liberating and collective vision of progress. In other words, the challenge to the nation—and for my money, especially for white folks—is to channel the energy and the inspiration of concepts like “hope” and “change” into constructive, meaningful endeavors for real social justice. The whole history of the struggle for freedom and true democracy suggests we will have to hold Obama accountable, as would be true with any president, and never become complacent, convinced that he has either the desire or ability to do the work for us. We must remember, it was never about Obama, and it isn’t now.

I should say here a few words about terminology used in this book, seeing as how misunderstanding is common when race is the subject being discussed. When I use the term “race” to refer to persons as “black,” “white,” or “persons of color,” I am not suggesting that these are concepts with even the slightest degree of scientific meaning. Indeed, most scientists now reject the notion of race as a biological or genetic construct. Rather, I use the terms in their social sense. Race has meaning not because there are “white genes,” or “Asian genes,” or “black blood” or “Latino blood,” but because it has been given meaning in the laws and customs of a society. Just as the women killed in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 weren’t really witches, and yet the belief that they were ensured their oppression and death, so too can race have meaning due to social circumstance, even if those being oppressed by the concept are not truly biologically different, in any meaningful way, from those doing the oppressing. To be white is to be a person, typically, of European descent and capable of being viewed as a member of the dominant racial group in the United States. To be black is to be, typically, a person of African descent, dark enough to be considered a member of that group that was historically at or near the bottom (along with indigenous persons) of the nation’s racial hierarchy. To be a person of color is simply to be anything other than white, in the eyes of most Americans. These categories are fluid, to be sure, and often contested, but in social terms they remain quite real, such that they describe, with frightening precision, the likely social status of most persons caught in these categories.

In the case of Barack Obama, of course, as many have noted, he is a man of biracial ancestry: the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya. While it is valid and valuable to note Obama’s biraciality—especially given the growing number of biracial persons in the United States whose racial identity is often ignored, or who feel as though they are forced to “choose sides” when claiming an identity for themselves—it is also worth pointing out that throughout U.S. history and still today, to be biracial hardly erases one salient fact: a person so designated will typically be seen as a member of whichever group is lowest in the racial hierarchy. So, to be black and white in terms of parentage is to be black. To be white and Asian is to be seen and likely treated as Asian, and so on. This is not to deny the unique forms of discrimination to which biracial people may occasionally be subjected as biracial persons, but it is to note that the racism directed their way is most often aimed at the darkest and least white aspect of their heritage. And so, while ancestrally biracial, in the social sense, as a resident of the United States, Barack Obama is incontestably black.

The term racism, as I use it, can and does mean two things: first, an ideological belief in the racial or cultural superiority or inferiority of certain people defined racially as members of a group; and secondly, as a system of inequity based on race, or perceived racial difference. In other words, it is both an idea and a structure of institutions, in which policies, practices, and procedures produce

inequitable outcomes. As with other “isms” (capitalism, communism, socialism, fascism, etc.), so too racism is more than merely an ideology. In the United States, racism has taken on particular historical forms, such as enslavement, genocidal land grabs, segregation, and racialized violence; and its practice amounted to one specific kind of racism: namely, white supremacy. And so when I use the term white supremacy, I do not mean neo-Nazism or Klan activity. Rather, I mean the entire structure of American institutions, historically and still too often today.

I wish to thank Greg Ruggiero at City Lights for suggesting I write this book, Elaine Katzenberg for agreeing to publish it, and my wife Kristy and our children, Ashton and Rachel, for putting up with me while I got it done. Even more, I thank my family for their love and devotion, their support and counsel, and the joy they have brought into my life. I also wish to thank those persons who have supported my work throughout the years—you know who you are—and who always manage to give me helpful feedback when I most need it. May you continue to believe in me, and may I continue to deserve whatever respect I have managed to earn so far.

Tim Wise
Nashville, Tennessee
December 2008

Barack Obama, White Denial and the Reality of Racism

Once Barack Obama became the Democratic Party's nominee for president of the United States, two questions emerged most prominently in media and personal discussions of his candidacy. The first of these, most often put forward by those who were seeking to draw rather sweeping and positive conclusions from their query, was typically posed as, "What does it say about race in America that a black man now stands on the precipice of becoming, arguably, the most powerful person in the world?" The second, presented somewhat more skeptically than the first, and more likely offered up by those whose hopefulness was a bit more tempered by an appreciation of history, most often sounded like this: "Is white America really ready for a black president?"

While we can hardly be surprised at how quickly these became the principal questions asked in the run-up to the November 2008 election, both nonetheless stemmed from premises that were largely false, or at least glaringly problematic. And as with any question that emanates from a false or incomplete starting point, such interrogations as these ultimately led down mundane analytical corridors, to destinations that, although interesting, were never truly the places to which we needed to travel.

For while the political ascent of Barack Obama, culminating with his victory in November over challenger John McCain, certainly says something about race, what it says is far from that which most—including those typically asking the question in the first place—seem to believe. Yes, it suggests that blind and irrational bigotry of the kind that animated so much white opinion for so long in the United States may well have receded (though not as much as we'd like to think, a subject to which I return below). But given the evidence regarding entrenched racial inequities in employment, education, health care, criminal justice, housing and elsewhere—and the studies indicating these are due in large measure to discrimination, either past, present, or a combination of the two—it most definitely does not suggest that racism has been truncated as an ongoing social problem for persons of color generally.

Though Obama's victory falls well short of proving that racism has been vanquished in America for reasons I will explore shortly, it is still worth noting some of the positive aspects of the Obama victory when it comes to race. For although I will insist that his rise says far less than many would suggest, we would do well to at least note a few of the beneficial outcomes, so we know what we have to build on in the future.

First, Obama's election to the presidency demonstrates that old-fashioned racism (or what I call in this volume Racism 1.0), though still far too prevalent in the nation, is capable of being defeated, especially when an effective coalition is put together, and when those who otherwise might fall back into patterns of bias and discrimination can be convinced that their interests (economic, for instance)

should outweigh their tendency to act on the basis of skin color. Given the harrowing state of the American economy as voters went to the polls in November, and given the Obama campaign message that his opponent would only provide tax relief to the wealthiest Americans while largely continuing the economic policies of the Bush administration, many voters (including white working-class voters who had been turning against Democrats for a generation) turned to Obama. Even if they harbored ongoing prejudices toward African Americans generally (and evidence suggests that many still did), they were prepared to vote their pocketbooks and break with a long tradition, stretching back decades, whereby so many of them had ignored economic interests for the sake of apparent “racial bonding,” against communities of color.

Especially heartening was the fact that part of the strategy for gaining the support of white working-class voters was to directly confront them on their racism when it was expressed, rather than finessing it. Labor leader Richard Trumka, for instance, as well as other labor organizers and Obama campaign in Ohio developed strategies for taking on white racism directly, rather than trying to sidestep it, in the hopes that voters would simply do the right thing for economic reasons alone. By calling out white racism and forcing white working folks to think about the irrationality of racial bonding—especially in the face of an economic free fall—these organizers planted the seeds of a potential cross-racial alliance, which, if tended carefully, could bear fruit in the future.¹

Secondly, and on a related note, the level of cross-racial collaboration (especially among youth) that made Obama’s victory possible was something rarely seen in American politics, or history. Although many, including myself, would rather see such mobilizing take place in arenas other than mainstream electoral politics, the fact is, efforts of this nature have to start somewhere. For young people who forged real and meaningful movement relationships in the Obama campaign, the possibility that they may continue to engage in grassroots organizing in years to come—and much of it around issues of racial justice—cannot be ignored. Long-term sustained activism is always more likely for those who have formed those genuine relationships and worked together for a common purpose, as so many young blacks, whites, Latinos and Asian Americans did in this election cycle. Likewise, that so many of the Obama campaigners witnessed racism up close and personal—whether canvassing or making phone calls for the campaign—can only have served to heighten the folks’ sensitivity to the problem of racism in America. So although the average white person may view Obama’s win as evidence of the death of racism (more on this below), those who worked on his behalf will have a hard time coming to that conclusion, having seen and heard so much raw and unexpurgated bigotry on the campaign trail.²

Finally, Obama’s win indicates that when a person of color has the opportunity to make his case day after day, for at least a year and a half (and really more, since Obama had been introduced to the public four years earlier during the 2004 Democratic National Convention), he is fully capable of demonstrating to the satisfaction of millions of whites (if still not most), his intelligence, wisdom, and leadership capabilities, sufficiently to win the job for which he is in effect, interviewing. So far so good.

But the bad news, and let us not forget it, is that most job interviews don’t last for eight months, and don’t involve millions of decision-makers, where at least in theory the biases of some can be canceled out by the open-mindedness of others. Rather, most job-seekers are facing a mere handful of evaluators, often only one, and if there is any significant bias in the heart or mind of that person (if that person adheres, even subconsciously, to negative stereotypes about folks of color), the job applicant who is black or brown faces an uphill climb that Obama’s success cannot erase or transform. Likewise, most persons of color don’t have the luxury of whipping out their memoir when applying for a mortgage loan, while searching for an apartment, or when they are stopped by a police officer on

suspicion of illegal activity and saying, “Here, read this; it’ll show you what a great guy I am.” Most folks of color face far less deliberative snap judgments on the part of employers, landlords, teachers, and cops, and in those instances, the ability of racial bias to taint the process of evaluation is of no small concern.

So, rather than ask what Obama’s success means in terms of race and racism in the United States in the twenty-first century, the better question may be what doesn’t his success mean for those things? What does it *not* tell us about how far we’ve come, and how far we still have to go?

As for the second of the two most often asked questions, while many whites may well not have been prepared to vote for a black—or as some may prefer, biracial—man for the presidency, there is another issue almost completely overlooked by the press: the possibility that Obama might well have won the nation’s highest office in spite of ongoing traditional white racism, and yet because of a newer, slicker Racism 2.0, in which whites hold the larger black community in low regard and adhere, for instance, to any number of racist stereotypes about African Americans—and yet carve out an acceptable space for individuals such as Obama who strike them as different, as exceptions who are not like the rest. That this “enlightened exceptionalism” manages to accommodate individual people of color, even as it continues to look down upon the larger mass of black and brown America with suspicion, fear, and contempt, suggests the fluid and shape-shifting nature of racism. It indicates that far from vanishing, racism has become more sophisticated and that Obama’s rise could, at least in part, stem from the triumph of racism, albeit of a more seemingly ecumenical type than that to which we have grown accustomed.

If some whites are willing to vote for a person of color, but only to the extent they are able to view that person as racially unthreatening, as different from “regular” black people, as somehow less than truly black, or as having “transcended race” (a term used with regularity to describe Obama over the past few years), then white racism remains quite real, quite powerful, and quite operative in the life of the nation. More than that, even in the case of the electoral success of a man of color, it might well have remained central to the outcome. The only question, really, was which kind of racism was likely to show up most prominently on election day? Would it be the traditional old-fashioned kind, rooted in conscious bigotry and hate, the Racism 1.0, which historically has caused many whites to act toward black folks with suspicion, violence, distrust, fear, and anxiety, and which—if it is prevalent enough—could have resulted in Obama’s defeat? Or would it be the newer, slicker, enlightened exceptionalism, or Racism 2.0, which still holds the larger black and brown communities of our nation in low regard but is willing to carve out exceptions for those who make some whites sufficiently comfortable? We now have our answer to that question, if we’re willing to examine it. But one thing about which we should be clear as we conduct that examination is this: the election of Barack Obama was not the result of a national evolution to a truly antiracist consciousness or institutional praxis. And this we know for reasons we shall now explore.

SAME AS IT EVER WAS: BARACK OBAMA AND THE PROBLEM OF WHITE DENIAL

That white folks would find it tempting, in light of Obama’s mass appeal and his ascent to the presidency, to declare the struggle against racism over should surprise no one. As we’ll see below, even when the system of racism and white supremacy was more firmly entrenched, white folks by and large failed to see what all the fuss was about. So needless to say, with Barack Obama now in the nation’s top political position, it is to be expected that once again white America would point to such a thing as firm confirmation that all was right with the world. Indeed, the day after Obama’s victory, the

Wall Street Journal editorial page intoned: “One promise of his victory is that perhaps we can put rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country.”³

In fact, even before Obama had been declared the winner of the election, proclamations of racism’s early death were becoming ubiquitous. And so, ten days before the vote, columnist Frank Rich, writing in the *New York Times*, declared that concerns about white racism possibly sinking Obama’s ship were so obviously absurd as to indicate evidence of “prevailing antiwhite bias” on the part of the media types who continually raised the subject. He went on to explain that white America’s distrust of blacks “crumbles when they actually get to know specific black people.”⁴ Though Rich did point out the willingness of whites to open up to individual blacks once they become familiar with them may be true for many, he, like most commentators, ignores the fact that most black folks will not get the chance to be known in this way by the average white person. As such, to proclaim this phenomenon observable in the presidential race (whites, getting to know Obama and choosing him in the voting booth) as common or likely to obtain in everyday situations and encounters seems a bit far fetched.

Then there was columnist Richard Cohen, who said in the *Washington Post* on the morning of the election, “It is not just that he (Obama) is post-racial; so is the nation he is generationally primed to lead,” and then closed his piece by suggesting, in a bizarre appropriation of civil rights movement language, “we have overcome.”⁵

On a personal note, about a week before the election I received an e-mail from a young white man who proclaimed his desire for Obama to win so that the nation would finally be able to “stop talking about racism, and move on to more important subjects,” and so that “blacks would have to stop whining about discrimination, and focus on pulling themselves up by their bootstraps instead.”

On election eve, before Obama had accumulated enough electoral votes to be proclaimed the winner, former New York City mayor (and Republican presidential candidate) Rudy Giuliani had made clear what an Obama victory would mean for the nation. Speaking of what appeared at the moment to be a sure Obama win, Giuliani noted that if the trend at that point in the evening held up “we’ve achieved history tonight and we’ve moved beyond ... the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness.”⁶ Interestingly, not only did none of the other commentators challenge Giuliani’s formulation, but they also failed to note the obvious irony of his comment. Namely, if an Obama win by necessity would indicate the veritable death of racism in the United States, then would an Obama loss have suggested deeply entrenched bigotry in the eyes of Giuliani and others making the same argument? Had McCain won, could we have expected these prophets of achieved color blindness to condemn their fellow voters for being so obviously racist as to vote against a black man? After all, if voting for Obama means people have put away racism, by definition, voting against him would have to mean they had not, right? Actually no, of course, but such a conclusion is where arguments like that of Giuliani necessarily lead.

In truth, such a proposition (that the victory of one person of color signifies a victory over racism aimed at nearly 90 million) is very nearly the definition of lunacy. And note, it is the kind of proposition one would never make regarding sexism in a place like Pakistan, just because Benazir Bhutto was twice elected prime minister of the place; or in India, Israel, or Great Britain, by virtue of all three having elected women as the heads of their respective states. Surely, had Hillary Clinton captured the nomination of her party and gone on to win in November, no one with even a scintilla of common sense would have argued that a result such as this signaled the obvious demise of sexism in the United States. But that is essentially what so many would have us believe to be true of racism thanks to the national effort that elected Barack Obama.

What white America has apparently missed, in spite of all the Black History Month celebrations

which we have lately been exposed, is that there have always been individually successful persons of color. Their pictures adorn the walls of our elementary school classrooms; their stories get told, albeit in an abbreviated and sanitized way, every February, when corporations and the Ad Council take to the airwaves to tell us about so-and-so great black inventor, or so-and-so great black artist, or so-and-so great black literary giant. What remains unsaid, but which forms the background noise of all the annual praise for the triumphs of black Americans (or, at other times, Latinos and Latinas, Asian Pacific Americans, or the continent's indigenous persons), is the systematic oppression that marked the society at the time when most of their achievements transpired. In other words, even in the midst of crushing oppression these hearty souls managed to find a way out of no way, as the saying goes. But that hardly suggests that their singular achievements, even multiplied hundreds of times over, actually rendered the system any less oppressive for all the rest. Thus, Madame C.J. Walker managed to become a millionaire developing and selling beauty products to black women in 1911. This achievement, though of importance in the history of American entrepreneurship, and to the narrative of black success, nonetheless fails to alter the fact that, on balance, 1911 was not a good year to be black in the United States, Madame Walker notwithstanding. Though I am hardly so naïve as to suggest that nothing has changed since 1911, the point still holds: the triumph of individuals of color cannot, in itself, serve as proof of widespread systemic change.

Although it is possible that the political success of Barack Obama could serve to open the minds of whites as to the potentiality of effective black leadership, it is also possible that it might deepen the denial in which so much of the white public has been embedded for generations. And although Obama's success has had a measurable effect on young men and women of color, who appear empowered by his example—and this could lead to greater levels of accomplishment for still more persons of color, thereby producing a ripple effect when it comes to collective racial uplift—it is also possible that this sense of pride may be stalled if Obama is unable to deliver on his promise of “Change We Can Believe In,” thanks to the exigencies of Washington politics. Long story short, what the rise of Obama comes to mean, regarding race or any other subject, remains to be seen.

But what we can say, without fear of contradiction, is that it does not signify, as some would have it, a fundamental diminution of institutional racism in the United States at present. Contrary to the proclamations of conservatives, both white and of color—such as Abigail Thernstrom and Warren Connerly, who have been among the chief critics and organized opponents of affirmative action programs since the mid-1990s—Obama's ability to attract white votes (and even then, let us remember, a minority of those) hardly suggests that we can put away various civil rights remedies and proclaim opportunities to be truly open and equitable. That white America may desperately want Obama's success to serve as the final nail in the political coffin of civil rights activism—and even the media seems to have evinced this hope, as with the August 2008 *New York Times* article that asked whether Obama marks the “end of black politics” altogether—hardly speaks to whether it should be used as that nail, or whether there is evidence to support the notion that his individual victories are proxies for institutional transformation.⁷

Though the evidence about our nation's progress says something else altogether, it turns out that white folks have never paid much attention to the evidence, and so denial has long carried the day. This, of course, is no shock in 2009. After all, it is not only the age of Obama, but the age of Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington, Colin Powell, Tiger Woods, the Williams sisters, J-Lo, Jackie Chan, Lucy Liu, Russell Simmons, P. Diddy, and any number of dizzyingly successful folks of color in the worlds of entertainment, sports, and politics. Hip-hop is, for most youth of whatever race, at least part of the sound track of their lives. With such apparent signs of progress, who can blame white folks for thinking the work has been done, and that it is now time to move on to other subjects, leaving the sta-

topic of racism in the dustbin of history?

Given such a transformation of popular culture as we have seen in the past few decades, it should hardly surprise us to read that according to a summer 2008 Gallup/ *USA Today* poll, more than three-fourths of whites say that blacks have “just as good a chance as whites to get any job for which they are qualified” (a proposition with which fewer than half of African Americans agree). Likewise, it can be much of a shock to learn that 80 percent of whites polled say blacks have “just as good a chance as whites to get a good education,” while fewer than half of blacks agree. Or that 85 percent of whites claim blacks have “just as good a chance to get any housing they can afford,” while only 52 percent of blacks agree. Or that only about a third of whites accept the proposition that discrimination has played a major role in producing income disparities between whites and blacks.⁸ Or that, according to a survey for CNN and *Essence* magazine, only one in nine whites believe racial discrimination against blacks is still a very serious problem, while nearly four times that many say it’s not a serious problem at all.⁹ And all this, despite a July 2008 *New York Times*/CBS poll, in which seven in ten blacks said they had suffered a specific discriminatory incident (up from 62 percent who said this in 2000).¹⁰ None of this is particularly surprising about any of this. The outward trappings of major transformative change appear to be everywhere, causing whites and blacks both, in the wake of Obama’s victory, to announce their hope and expectations that race relations will improve in coming years.¹¹ So white denial (and perhaps even a bit from persons of color themselves) makes sense. It fits the visuals beamed into our living rooms, incomplete as they are.

But as predictable as this denial may be today—and however maddening it must be to the persons of color whose very sanity and judgment, indeed life experiences are being called into question by such denial—it is far more enraging to realize that the inability or unwillingness of white America to see racial discrimination as a problem is a pathology with a lengthy and disturbing pedigree. Putting aside the fact that, as with the examples above, we seem to be able to name all the really powerful black and brown folks on a couple of hands—and this, one might suggest, indicates that they are, by definition, exceptions to a much different-looking rule—the bigger problem with white denial is that it isn’t a modern malady.

Though whites may now be seeking to use Obama as evidence of racism’s eradication, let us remember that long before he burst onto the national scene—indeed, even at a time when he was an infant, well before anyone could have foreseen what he would become, and even before the passage of modern civil rights legislation—white Americans were fairly nonchalant about the problems facing persons of color, choosing in most cases to deny what all their senses (and surely their eyes, fixed on the television as most already were by the early 1960s) had to be telling them: that they were living in an apartheid nation; that theirs was no land of freedom and democracy, no oasis of liberty, but rather a formal white supremacy, a racially fascistic state for millions of people.

And so, in 1963, roughly two-thirds of whites told Gallup pollsters that blacks were treated equally in white communities. Even more along the lines of delusion, in 1962, nearly 90 percent of whites said black children were treated equally in terms of educational opportunity.¹² All of which is to say that in August 1963, as 200,000 people marched on Washington, and as they stood there in the sweltering heat, listening to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, most whites seeing the news that evening were, in effect, thinking to themselves, what’s the problem, exactly? Dream? Why dream? Everything is just fine now. Isn’t it?

Or consider the 1950s, and the way in which white denial manifested so prominently among the very persons who had been most implicated in the maintenance of white domination. So, for instance, when racist forces in Congress issued their “Southern Manifesto” in response to Supreme Court rulings invalidating racially separate schools, they noted with no apparent misgiving that the push for

desegregation was “destroying the amicable relations between the white and Negro races that have been created through 90 years of patient effort by the good people of both races. It has planted hatred and suspicion where there has been heretofore friendship and understanding.”¹³

Although modern polling techniques weren't in place in the 1930s one can imagine few whites at that time seeing racism and the oppression of black people as a major concern. Likewise, even at the height of overt white supremacist rule in the United States—during the 1890s, as Black Codes and massive violence against post-emancipation blacks were reaching their zenith¹⁴—one can read editorials in newspapers all around the South in which it was proclaimed how well whites and blacks got along, and how everything would be just fine if those “yankees” would just stop messing with Dixie. And of course it was in the mid-nineteenth century that a well-respected physician of his day, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, opined that enslaved blacks occasionally ran away due to a mental illness called drapetomania, which apparently rendered them incapable of fully appreciating just how good they had it. In short, at no point in American history have whites, by and large, believed that folks of color were getting a raw deal. That we were wrong in every generation prior to the current one in holding such a rosy and optimistic view apparently gives most whites little pause. And so we continue to reject claims of racism as so much whining, as “playing the race card” or some such thing, never wondering even for a second, how a bunch who have proven so utterly inept at discerning the truth for hundreds of years can at long last be trusted to accurately intuit other people's reality.

Of course, Obama's own tendency to de-emphasize racism and ongoing social injustice hasn't helped. It may have helped Obama's campaign, make no mistake. In fact, had he spoken with any regularity about the frightening reality of U.S. history and the legacy of racism today, there is little doubt that he'd never have found himself so much as a contender for the presidency, a subject about which I'll have more to say below. But as astute as the political judgment of Obama's campaign team may have been on these matters, the general avoidance of race as an issue on his part does tend to feed mainstream white denial.

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SPOKEN: RACISM AND WHITE PRIVILEGE TODAY

And so it is worth taking note of all the things Barack Obama never mentioned on the campaign trail but which confirm the salience of racism in the modern era. As a well-read, highly versed (and by his own admission, once racially obsessed) man of color, there is little chance that he fails to know any of the following, and yet he mentioned none of it, at least not in public.

Even after he was forced to address race in the wake of the dust-up over remarks made by his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama played it close to the vest, talking more about how the historic legacy of racism had shaped the contours of racial inequity and had fed the black anger expressed by Wright, which anger was seen as so threatening to much if not most of white America. By speaking in terms of past injuries and the lingering grievances generated by the same, Obama deftly managed to speak about racism without forcing white folks to confront just how real and how present-day the problem is. Sure, speaking of racism even in the past can be risky, especially when you mix it with any discussion of what our obligations are today to address the legacy of that racism. But to make an issue of ongoing racism and presently dispensed privilege—which, after all, would seem to implicate the current generation of white Americans more than is suggested by a backward-looking historical point—would have been infinitely more risky. It is one thing to note that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and other forms of racism has been a massive racial wealth gap—indeed, the typical white family today has about eleven times the net worth of the typical black family and eig-

times the net worth of the typical Latino/a family,¹⁵ and much of this gap is directly traceable to history of unequal access to capital¹⁶—but it is quite another to point out that this wealth gap continues to grow, not only because of past unequal opportunity, but also because of present-day institutional racism.

And so rather than speak of these matters, Obama avoided them, and when he did engage them, he did so in a way that tended to paper over the ongoing racial inequities that beset the nation, in favor of a narrative far preferred by white folks: the narrative of the color-blind society achieved, or at least very nearly so. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, for instance, Obama speaks of the obstacles facing black and brown America as little different from those facing working-class and middle-class whites. To hear Obama tell it, all are in the same boat, and as he would explain during a speech in Selma, Alabama, during the campaign, the civil rights movement, or what he called the “Moses generation” had brought the nation 90 percent of the way to racial justice. It was now, according to Obama, time for the “Joshua generation” to carry the load the last tenth of the way.¹⁷

Income and Jobs

But in a land where the average black family has less than one-tenth the net worth of the average white family, and the average Latino family has about one-eighth as much, it’s hard to square Obama’s mathematical calculus of progress with the facts. So too when other data is considered, such as the fact that black high school graduates actually have higher unemployment rates than white dropouts; or the fact that white men with college degrees earn, on average, a third more than similar black men;¹⁹ or the fact that only 7 percent of private sector management jobs are held by African Americans, and another 7 percent by Latinos, while whites hold over 80 percent of all such positions;²⁰ or the fact that middle-class black families have to put in approximately 480 more hours per year—equal to twelve work weeks—relative to similar whites, just to make the same incomes as their middle-class white counterparts;²¹ or the fact that blacks, Latinos, and Native North Americans are 2.5 to 3 times more likely than whites to be poor, while Asian Americans are about 30 percent more likely than whites to be poor.²² In the case of Asians, higher poverty rates and lower incomes often remain the norm, despite higher, on average, educational attainment than whites’, thanks to high-skilled immigration. And so, as one study of Asian mobility in Houston, Texas, discovered, although Asian Americans in Harris County are 50 percent more likely than whites in the county to have a college degree, they have considerably lower incomes and occupational status than the less-educated whites with whom they compete for opportunities.²³

And given some of the data suggesting that things are getting worse for blacks—and in particular for black men—it is especially troubling to think that the public may come to believe the rhetoric about racial equity having been essentially achieved. So consider that at the same time America can make a black man president, data from the labor department indicates that for average young black men today, things are not nearly so rosy. Indeed, the typical young black male growing up today will earn 12 percent less than his father did a generation ago. Furthermore, the data suggests that while most middle-class white kids will grow up to do better, economically, than their parents did at the same age, most middle-class black kids will grow up to find themselves having fallen backwards and actually doing worse than their parents. Indeed, the numbers show that black youth from solid middle-class families are nearly three times as likely as similar whites to fall to the bottom of the income distribution, and nearly half of all black middle-class youth will do so.²⁴

Naturally some will suggest that this data, however troubling it may be, has little to do with institutional racism in the United States today. Perhaps non-discriminatory factors such as differenti-

qualification levels, unequal educational backgrounds, or family composition could explain economic disparities between whites and people of color. But while it is true that earnings disparities, wealth gaps, and differences in occupational status are not only the result of racism perpetrated by whites, the evidence that discrimination contributes to the phenomenon indicated by the data is strong. Even after controlling for such ostensibly race-neutral factors as differential test scores and grades, family background, and other variables that can impact income levels, white males still receive about 1 percent more than their otherwise identical black male counterparts.²⁵ But beyond mere income disparity data, direct evidence of ongoing racial discrimination is also plentiful, however much President Obama may have finessed it on the campaign trail.

So what does it say about how much we've transcended race, or rather, failed to do so, that according to a study from just a few years ago, conducted by economists at MIT and the University of Chicago, job applicants with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely to be called back for a job interview than applicants with black-sounding names, even when all relevant qualifications and experience are indistinguishable?²⁶ Or that, according to the same study, for black-named applicants to have an equal chance at a callback, they must actually have eight more years of experience than those with white names? One thing it surely says, but which has gone unremarked upon by most pundits, and which remained unspoken in the presidential campaign, is that white fears about so-called "reverse discrimination" are based on irrational and nonsensical delusion. After all, if it were real, white folks who couldn't catch a break when looking for a job, then a study such as this would have come to the exact opposite conclusion of what it actually found. When the researchers sent out their résumés to prospective employers, it would have been all the "Tamikas" and "Jamals" who got called in by enthusiastic companies bent on hiring black folks, and it would have been the "Connors" and "Beckys" left out in the cold to wonder what in the world had gone wrong. But this didn't happen because it never does. And yet, not only did Obama not speak this fundamental truth—that it is still very much the usual suspects who face the obstacles of race-based discrimination—rather, he pandered to the lie in his Philadelphia speech on race, wherein he mentioned, as though it were perfectly valid, white anger over losing out on a position because of a preference given to a minority.²⁷

What does it say that, according to another study conducted by Princeton sociology professor Devah Pager, white males with a criminal record are more likely than black males without one to be called back for a job interview, even when all credentials, experience, demeanor, and communication skills and dress style are the same between them?²⁸ Or that according to a massive national study conducted by legal scholars Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen, who examined tens of thousands of businesses, at least one-third of all employers in the nation are racially biased and discriminate regularly against job applicants of color, and at least 1.3 million black and brown job-seekers will face racial bias during their job search in a given year?²⁹ Other research would suggest far higher rates of discrimination than even the Blumrosen study was able to find. So, for instance, according to data from the mid-1990s compiled by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, as many as three-fourths of all businesses covered by civil rights and affirmative action laws were in "substantial violation" of those laws, because of ongoing discrimination against persons of color and women of all colors.³⁰

What about the fact that according to study after study for years—not to mention a healthy dose of common sense—most jobs, especially the most lucrative ones, aren't filled based on qualifications anyway, or open competition, so much as by networking and word-of-mouth? And what of the racial impact of this truth: namely, that it is disproportionately folks of color who end up "out of the loop" when it comes to such networks, thereby scratched from the start of the race and afforded less opportunity to demonstrate their abilities.³¹ Indeed it is the matter of social and professional

networking that explains, in large measure, why persons of color with the same education background as whites, and of the same age, doing the same job, so often earn much less.³² So, for instance, a recent study found that Chinese Americans in the legal and medical professions earn, on average, about 44 percent less than their white counterparts, despite equal qualifications and educational attainment.³³ Whereas white job-seekers are able to access more lucrative positions, be they professional, managerial, or even blue-collar, thanks to the networks within which they so often find themselves, black and brown Americans, equally qualified as their white counterparts, have to take positions with less capitalized firms and companies, with the resultant lower pay, because they simply aren't in a position to network with the right people. Although this form of exclusion is not illegal, it does amount to institutional racism—a kind of racism that is perpetuated within structural settings, even without deliberate and bigoted intent, due to the normal workings of long-entrenched policies, practices, and procedures. And for whites, the privileges that flow from the arrangement are substantial.

Surely the old boys' network (and the institutional racism embedded within it) explains the ongoing disparities in the awarding of government contracts to private businesses. Currently, about 90 percent of all municipal, state, and federal contracts are awarded to white-owned firms.³⁴ This result is not necessarily, or even likely, the result of overt racial bias; rather, it flows naturally from the way in which networking and connections are so central to the process of contracting and subcontracting. If a white-owned firm has subcontracts to offer, they will be most likely to turn to those smaller firms (also white-owned) whom they know, rather than to include black-, Latino-, Asian- or Native American-owned businesses, even when the latter may be capable of doing equally good or even better work, simply because they are less likely to know of such firms to begin with.

In all, it is estimated that African American workers alone lose over \$120 billion in wages each year thanks to labor market discrimination of one kind or another: monies they would be paid if opportunity were truly equal, but which they do not in fact receive, much to their detriment, and much to the benefit of the mostly white employers for whom they work, and who get to retain the unpaired amount in their own coffers.³⁵

Housing

Or consider the arena of housing. Although much attention has been paid to the overall housing crisis in America, little of that attention has examined the way in which racial discrimination continues to limit where persons of color can live, and on what terms. On the one hand, of course, there is a long and pernicious history of race-based housing discrimination, which has culminated in many of the racially separate residential patterns we see today. From restrictive covenants that prohibited families of color from purchasing property in most white neighborhoods, to overt violence against people of color seeking to move into formerly white space, to efforts like the FHA and VA loan programs, which for the first thirty years operated in a blatantly discriminatory manner, people of color have been deliberately deprived of assets, net worth, and housing equity that so many millions of whites have been able to take for granted. This history, the effects of which are transmitted intergenerationally (since assets or the decided lack thereof are typically handed down to one's children and grandchildren), has deprived people of color of hundreds of billions of dollars in housing equity over the years.³⁶

But in addition to these accumulated disadvantages of the past—which Barack Obama actually has discussed, albeit briefly, in his speech on race delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008—there are also significant barriers to equal housing opportunity today, which constitute still more evidence of the salience of race in twenty-first-century America. Indeed, according to recently released federal

estimates, 2006 actually witnessed the largest number of housing discrimination complaints (including race-based complaints) on record.³⁷ Despite federal fair-housing laws, on the books since 1968, there was virtually no enforcement mechanism in place to make the law meaningful for nearly a quarter-century, and private studies have long estimated that there are at least 2 million instances of racial discrimination in housing each year, ranging from outright bias in mortgage lending or rental markets to more subtle forms, such as “steering” buyers or renters to certain neighborhoods, based on race and whether they’ll “fit in.”³⁸ Other estimates place the number of race-based housing discrimination incidents as high as 3.7 million per year.³⁹ One study in 2001, which sent out matched and paired “testers” to look for rental housing in Houston, found that discrimination occurred in 8 per-cent of all rental attempts by black testers.⁴⁰

When it comes to persons looking to purchase a home, research has found that lenders often provide less detailed loan information to black customers than to whites, are quicker to urge blacks to seek loans elsewhere, and are more likely to discourage black loan seekers by telling them how complicated and time-consuming the application process might be.⁴¹ Additionally, according to data uncovered under the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, while blacks and whites with excellent credit appear to be treated equally, there is a substantial gap between the way whites and blacks with questionable credit are treated by the banking industry. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1999, nearly 70 percent of whites with poor credit are able to receive a mortgage, compared to only 10 percent of blacks with equally poor credit.⁴²

And as the nation is increasingly introduced to the workings of the subprime lending market, let us not ignore the particularly racial component of the mess. As several studies have shown, banks often reject applicants of color, even when they have credit records similar to whites with the same incomes. Then, these rejected applicants turn to secondary or subprime lenders, often owned by the very banks that turned them down (or which are subsidized by them in the form of credit lines), and which specialize in loans to persons who can’t otherwise get financing. These subprime lenders then charge far higher interest than the banks that originally rejected the supposedly high-risk applicant. By doing so, the lenders make huge profits and place borrowers in jeopardy by driving up the amount they must repay, thereby increasing the likelihood of default, late payments, missed payments, and even foreclosure. Since the originators of the subprime loans (most often independent mortgage brokers rather than regulated institutions such as banks) typically sell the loans to larger investors almost immediately after the paperwork is signed, they have little incentive to keep costs down for the borrower, since, if the borrower defaults, the lender, having already dumped the loan, will suffer no loss as a result.

A recent study of Citigroup (which includes Citi, the group’s subprime lender) found that Citi in North Carolina charged higher interest even to borrowers who could have qualified for regular loans. In the process, more than 90,000 mostly black borrowers were roped into predatory loans, and as a result paid an average of \$327 more per month for mortgages than those getting loans from a prime lender. This added up to over \$110,000 in excess payments over the life of the loans, on average. And at the same time that banks are steering blacks with good credit to subprime lenders, whites with good credit who apply for loans with subprime lenders are routinely referred to prime lenders, who offer loans at lower interest rates. Evidence from one sizable study in 2000 indicated that black, Latinos, Asian Americans, and indigenous persons all pay higher mortgage rates, on average, than white borrowers, even when income, debt load, and several measures of credit history are the same. Likewise, even high-income blacks are targeted for higher-cost loans, so that upper-income black families in black-majority neighborhoods are three times more likely than low-income white borrowers to have subprime, high-risk instruments for their home mortgages.⁴⁵

The collective impact of this housing bias is enormous. Most obviously, it deprives families of color of billions of dollars in lost potential wealth and assets. Studies place the cost of present-day housing discrimination at over \$4 billion annually for people of color, and further estimate that today's black communities have been deprived of nearly half a trillion dollars in wealth due to past and present housing discrimination in the United States.⁴⁶ White folks should probably think about that the next time they feel like complaining about black folks soaking up government money “looking for a handout,” since these numbers suggest the real problem is the way folks of color have been collectively denied equity and wealth that they had earned and to which they are entitled.

Education

Consider education. Even as much is made of America's “failing” schools and the often significant racial achievement gaps between whites on the one hand, and blacks and Latinos on the other, little attention is given to the way in which the policies, practices, and procedures within schools often perpetuate those racial inequities and even make them worse.

To begin with, and in part related to the ongoing de facto housing segregation patterns so common in the nation, students of color start out with substantial disadvantages relative to whites. The average black student, for instance, attends a school with twice as many low-income students as the typical white youth,⁴⁷ and schools that are mostly attended by black and Latino students are more than ten times as likely as mostly white schools to be schools with concentrated levels of student poverty.⁴⁸ In fact, even black kids with family incomes higher than those of whites are more likely to attend concentrated poverty schools.⁴⁹ This concentration of poverty in black and brown schools magnifies any number of social problems within the school environment, including inadequate nutrition and health care, family crises like long-term unemployment, and the emotional and material toll of growing up in marginalized spaces cut off from access to the social and professional networks so important to success among middle- and upper-middle-class families. It isn't that black and brown kids need to sit next to white kids in order to learn—and indeed, anyone who supports integration for such a “rub-off” purpose is guilty of crass and paternalistic racism—but simply that when kids who are poor are crammed in buildings, given the impression that they don't count (because they know they don't have the resources that exist in suburban and private schools), and then expected to learn and achieve at the same level as the kids in the neighborhoods that are economically viable, they figure out the game pretty quickly, and then proceed to fulfill every prophecy about them already heaped by far too many in the adult population.

Then, as if access and privileges denied to students of color—and, on the flip side, the advantages enjoyed by whites—weren't bad enough, schools serving mostly white and affluent students are able to spend considerably more, on average, per pupil than schools serving mostly lower-income students of color. In large measure, the financial imbalance stems from the principal funding mechanisms for education, such as property tax revenues, which result in more affluent areas having more to spend than working-class and poor communities. Even additional funding from state government to make up for the property tax shortfalls can't equalize opportunity: at best, such efforts result in formal parity, but given the greater challenges facing lower-income neighborhoods and the inability of poor families to kick in additional monies for the operation of their schools (something that is taken for granted in communities where affluent families live), this parity exists in name only. In practice, the funding gap, relative to need, remains substantial: on the order of roughly a thousand dollars per pupil, per year, between schools serving mostly white children and those serving mostly students of color. With fewer per-pupil resources, such schools then have a harder time attracting highly skilled and qualified teachers, which has an especially pernicious impact on student learning. In fact, high-po-

erty schools (disproportionately serving a large number of students of color) have, on average, three times as many uncertified teachers, or teachers who are teaching outside of their field of study, as teachers serving low-poverty and mostly white schools.⁵¹

Predictably, those on the right argue that money doesn't matter, and that what really makes the difference to a child's education is personal motivation. Yet one might take note of just how insincere such arguments sound, coming from people whose every other move in life is predicated on the notion that money does matter, and that it matters quite a lot. After all, these are the same folks who tell us they need tax cuts, so they can keep more of their money, presumably because it matters, and will lead to greater levels of investment and "trickle-down" benefits for all. These are folks who read the daily stock reports, presumably because money matters (and they want to know how much they have every single day). These are folks who send their kids to outrageously expensive schools if they can afford to do so. Either this means that money does indeed matter, or it suggests that persons such as this are ridiculously wasteful with their resources, squandering tens of thousands of dollars each year when they could do just as well sending their children to the public school down the street. Unless those who claim money doesn't matter decide to shut down their prep schools, forswear tutors and test prep classes for their kids, and announce to the world that they will be shuttling their children off to community college in lieu of the Ivy League—since, after all, why waste all that money?—the rest of us should probably remain skeptical of their assurances that money doesn't make much difference to the education of children.

Of course it's true that money or the lack thereof isn't the only issue. Additionally, there is the matter of how teacher expectations influence student outcomes, and how these expectations are often tied to race and class stereotypes. It is commonly believed, for instance, that blacks and Latinos are not as committed as whites to education and academic achievement, this despite multiple studies showing it is whites who manifest the most cynicism and nonchalance about doing well in school, and that black students are every bit as academically inclined and motivated as their white counterparts. As a result of the stereotypes however, which persist despite the evidence to counter them, teachers and counselors end up assigning students to certain classes—honors or advanced placement, standard or remedial level—based more on their own internalized biases about student ability than on anything objective. Black and Latino students, nationwide, are about half as likely as whites to be found in upper-level classes and twice as likely to be in remedial classes. Even when their prior performance would justify higher placement, students of color are still significantly less likely to be given honors or advanced-placement opportunities than whites, even when the latter have lower grades or test scores.⁵³ Partly this is due to educator bias, but it is also in part the result of systemic inequities: schools serving mostly white students have about three times as many advanced-level courses offered as schools serving mostly students of color. Thus, even in the total absence of racial bias on the part of school officials, the lack of certain course offerings deprives capable and hard-working students of color of equal opportunity with their white counterparts.⁵⁴ Evidence then suggests that children who are tracked lower tend to suffer a downward spiral in terms of performance, in part because of a lowered sense of self-efficacy, in part because of not being challenged, and in part because of their own withdrawal from work they find stultifying and meaningless, unlike the more engaging curriculum offered to those—mostly whites—in the advanced-level courses.⁵⁵

Then, in a move that certainly contributes to glaring racial inequities in higher education, colleges tend to over-rely on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, even as these instruments have been deemed inadequate to the task of truly selecting more qualified students, and have proven time and again to disproportionately limit opportunities for students of color, who, through no fault of their own, haven't been exposed to the same material and degree of instruction as most whites.⁵⁶

Beyond course offerings and the inequity generated by certain forms of testing, there is also a widespread disparity in terms of school discipline. As Indiana University's Russell Skiba has found after examining years of research on school disciplinary actions, students of color are considerably more likely than whites to be suspended or expelled, even though there is no statistically significant difference between the rates at which white students and students of color break serious school rules for which such punishment could be the result.⁵⁷ Although most Americans appear to believe that black and Latino students have far higher rates of drug possession, or weapons possession, or fights at school, over a decade's worth of data from the Department of Education suggests otherwise: in most years, racial differences in fighting are not dramatic; whites are equally or more likely to use or possess drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes on campus; and whites are equally or more likely to carry a weapon to school.⁵⁸ Yet because of racial stereotypes, it is students of color who are suspected of doing these things and therefore searched, detected, and punished.

Not to mention, as Skiba explains, the disparate punishment that is especially a problem for students of color is for offenses at the lower end of the seriousness spectrum. So while teachers may respond to rude or disrespectful in-class behavior by whites with a warning or a call to parents—because they are less likely to view such children as irredeemable threats to their safety and classroom order—the same behavior by students of color is regularly met with referral to the principal's office. And with enough referrals, suspension or expulsion typically becomes mandatory. So racially biased perception leads to an initially disparate discipline, which then is followed by disparity at greater levels of discipline, which then not only reinforces the stereotypes that gave rise to the disparate punishment, but also breeds frustration and resentment among students of color. This frustration is then directly correlated with a withdrawal of academic effort, followed by a greater risk of academic failure, which is then followed by a greater likelihood of economic hardship and even criminal activity in later years. By allowing racially disparate discipline to continue, the nation's educators literally create a school-to-prison pipeline, by virtue of marking certain kids as “bad” before they are even in high school in many cases. In such a setting as this, education becomes less a liberating force than one that reinscribes existing hierarchies of domination and subordination, less a “great equalizer” as it is often called, and more a terrible unequalizer for millions of youth of color across the nation.

Criminal Justice and the Law

Or consider the criminal justice system, perhaps the one arena of national life where racial disparities are most stark, and where evidence of unequal treatment is the most dramatic. In 1964, just three years after Barack Obama was born, about two-thirds of all persons locked up in the nation's jails and prisons were white, while a third were persons of color, mostly African American. By the early 1990s those numbers had essentially flip-flopped, so that today, nearly two-thirds of persons locked up are persons of color while only a third are white,⁵⁹ a number that has persisted into the twenty-first century.⁶⁰

There are only two possible theories to explain this inversion of incarceration data. The first would be that sometime around 1965, white folks awoke from a deep criminal slumber, in which, in a sleepwalking state we had been committing all kinds of crimes, and said to ourselves that the time had come to retire from our criminal endeavors. Corollary to this theory, one would also have to imagine that around the same time, black and brown folks, hearing the news that whites were getting out of the crime business, decided to fill the gap left open by the white decision to walk the straight and narrow. In other words, white folks shaped up, while folks of color went on a criminal spree unparalleled in the history of humankind. The second theory would be that although the percentages of crimes committed by whites or by folks of color remained roughly the same throughout this period, law

enforcement resources tilted heavily in favor of catching, prosecuting, and incarcerating people of color. Indeed, a look at the evidence makes quite clear that the latter is far and away more accurate than the former as an explanation.

Nowhere is this truer than with regard to the so-called war on drugs: so-called because rarely is the war fought on the front lines of where the drugs actually are. Contrary to popular perception—popular that when asked to envision a drug user, upwards of 95 percent of whites say they picture a black person⁶¹—most drug users are white, and indeed, on a per capita basis, whites actually have an equal or higher rate of use than either African Americans or Latinos.⁶² This means that if you were to randomly drug test 1,000 whites, 1,000 blacks, and 1,000 Latinos, in most years you would end up with at least as many, if not more “hits” in the white group. This is especially true among the youth where drug use is typically far higher among whites than youth of color.⁶³ And yet, when it comes to who is being searched, arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated for drug activity, the picture looks far different than the usage rates would justify. So, in spite of whites comprising more than seven in ten drug users, and despite blacks and Latinos combined representing less than 25 percent of all users, the latter comprise nearly 90 percent of all persons locked up in a given year for a drug possession offense, while whites represent less than 10 percent of drug possession incarcerations annually. Nationally, black youth are forty-eight times more likely than whites to be incarcerated for a first-time drug offense, even when all factors surrounding the crime are the same.⁶⁵ In all, black drug users are nearly twenty times more likely than anyone else to spend time in prison for their use, and in fifteen states, the rate of black incarceration for drug offenses is anywhere from twenty to fifty-seven times greater than for whites, despite equal or greater rates of drug law violations by whites.⁶⁶ When all other factors surrounding an arrest are the same, black cocaine offenders are twice as likely to be sent to prison and will serve, on average, forty months more than white offenders.⁶⁷

Partly, the disproportionate incarceration of folks of color for drugs stems from the racially biased practices of law enforcement in terms of who is searched in the first place. According to Justice Department reports dating back almost a decade, black and Latino motorists are far more likely than whites to have their vehicles stopped and searched for illegal contraband, even though whites, when searched, are typically more likely to be found with drugs or other illegal items in their possession. Likewise, a study by the General Accounting Office early in the decade found that although black women were nine times more likely than white women to be searched for drugs coming through airport customs checkpoints, white women were roughly twice as likely to actually be caught with drugs in their possession!⁶⁹ Most recently, a study of stops and searches by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) found that blacks are three times more likely than whites in L.A. to be stopped by police, and significant racial disparities remain even after things like differential crime rates and neighborhood demographics are taken into consideration. Interestingly, those whites searched by the LAPD were actually more likely to be found with drugs or other illegal items in their possession, suggesting that cops there have a higher threshold for suspicion when observing whites, and are quicker to suspect people of color, on much weaker evidence or probable cause. In all, blacks frisked by police were 42 percent less likely to be found with a weapon than whites, while Latinos frisked were a third less likely to have a weapon on them. In consent searches, blacks were one-fourth less likely to have drugs in their possession than whites, while Latinos were a third less likely to possess narcotics.⁷⁰

In other words, racial profiling is real, it's racist, and it's not particularly intelligent as a method of law enforcement. At least, that would be the case if the purpose of the war on drugs were really to get drugs off the street. But given the apparent ineptitude with which the battle has been waged, one has to seriously wonder if that were ever really the purpose at all.

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