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COLOR-BLIND PRIVILEGE: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF ERASING THE COLOR LINE IN POST RACE AMERICA

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Abstract: This paper examines the social and political functions colorblindness serves for whites in the United States. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with whites from around the country I argue that colorblindness maintains white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a post-race, colorblind perspective allows whites to imagine that being white or black or brown has no bearing on an individual's or a group's relative place in the socio-economic hierarchy. Starting with the deeply held belief that America is now a meritocracy, whites are able to imagine that the material success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function only of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education. The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political and economic arrangements which privilege whites. This perspective insinuates that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for social inequality. Colorblindness allows many whites to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as they proclaim their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals by the "color of their skin."

Keywords: race relations, colorblindness, white identity, white privilege.

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The young white male sporting a FUBU (African-American owned apparel company "For Us By Us") shirt and his white friend with the tightly set, perfectly braided cornrows blended seamlessly into the festivities at an all white bar mitzvah celebration. A black model dressed in yachting attire peddles a New England, yuppie boating look in Nautica advertisements. It is quite unremarkable to observe white, Asian or African-Americans with dyed purple, blond or red hair. White, black and Asian students decorate their bodies with tattoos of Chinese characters and symbols. In cities and suburbs young adults across the color line wear hip-hop clothing and listen to white rapper Eminem and black rapper 50-cent. It went almost unnoticed when a north Georgia branch of the NAACP installed a white biology professor as its president. Subversive musical talents like Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley and The Who are now used to sell Apple Computers, designer shoes and SUVs. Du-Rag kits, complete with bandana headscarf and elastic headband, are on sale for \$2.95 at hip-hop clothing stores and family centered theme parks like Six Flags. Salsa has replaced ketchup as the best selling condiment in the United States. Companies as diverse as Polo, McDonalds, Tommy Hilfiger, Walt Disney World, Master Card, Skechers sneakers, IBM, Giorgio Armani and Neosporin antibiotic ointment have each crafted advertisements that show an integrated, multiracial cast of characters interacting and consuming their products in post-race, color-blind world (Demott, 1995; Gallagher, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown, 2003).

Americans are constantly bombarded by depictions of race relations in the media which suggest that discriminatory racial barriers have been dismantled. Social and cultural indicators suggest that America is on the verge, or has already become, a truly color-blind nation. National polling data indicate that a majority of whites now believe discrimination against racial minorities no longer exists. A majority of whites believe that blacks have "as good a chance as whites" in procuring housing and employment or achieving middle class status while a 1995 survey of white adults found that a majority of whites (58%) believed that African Americans were "better off" finding jobs than whites (Gallup, 1997; Shipler, 1998). Much of white America now see a level playing field, while a majority of black Americans see a field which is still quite uneven. Best selling books like neo-conservative pundit Dinesh D'Souza's (1995) *The End of Racism* and *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World* suggest the United States is not very far from making color-blindness a social and political reality. The color-blind or race neutral perspective holds that in an environment where institutional racism and discrimination have been replaced by equal opportunity, one's qualifications, not one's color or ethnicity, should be the mechanism by which upward mobility is achieved. Color as a cultural style may be expressed and consumed through music, dress, or vernacular but race as a system which confers privileges and shapes life chances is viewed as an atavistic and inaccurate accounting of U.S. race relations.

Not surprisingly, this view of society blind to color is not equally shared. Whites and blacks differ significantly, however, on their support for affirmative action, the perceived fairness of the criminal justice system, the ability to acquire

the “American Dream,” and the extent to which whites have benefited from past discrimination (Moore, 1995; Moore & Saad, 1995; Kaiser, 1995). This article examines the social and political functions colorblindness serves for whites in the United States. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with whites from around the country I argue that colorblind depictions of U.S. race relations serves to maintain white privilege by negating racial inequality. Embracing a colorblind perspective reinforces whites’ belief that being white or black or brown has no bearing on an individual’s or a group’s relative place in the socio-economic hierarchy.

Data and Method

I use data from seventeen focus groups and thirty-individual interviews with whites from around the country. Thirteen of the seventeen focus groups were conducted in a college or university setting, five in a liberal arts college in the Rocky Mountains and the remaining eight at a large urban university in the Northeast. Respondents in these focus groups were selected randomly from the student population. Each focus group averaged six respondents and were equally divided between males and females. An overwhelming majority of these respondents were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two years of age. The remaining four focus groups took place in two rural counties in Georgia and were obtained through contacts from educational and social service providers in each county. One county was almost entirely white (99.54%) and in the other county whites constituted a racial minority. These four focus groups allowed me to tap rural attitudes about race relations in environments where whites had little or consistent contact with racial minorities.

I used personal contacts and snowball sampling to purposively locate respondents from urban, suburban and rural environments for my individual interviews. The occupational range for my individual interviews was quite eclectic and included a butcher, construction worker, hair stylist, partner in a prestigious corporate law firm, executive secretary, high school principal, bank president from a small town, retail workers, country lawyer and custodial workers. Twelve of the thirty individual interviews were with respondents who were raised in rural and/or agrarian settings. The remaining respondents lived in suburbs of large cities or in urban areas. The individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and coded by thematic topic areas.

COLORBLINDNESS AS NORMATIVE IDEOLOGY

National survey data suggest that a majority of whites view race relations through the lens of color-blindness. A 1997 Gallop poll found that a majority of whites believe that blacks have “as good a chance as whites” in their community in procuring employment (79%). A Kaiser Family Poll (1997) found that a majority of whites believe that blacks are doing at least as well or better than whites in income and educational attainment. The poll found that “almost two-thirds (64%) of whites do NOT believe that whites have benefited from past and present discrimination against African Americans” (Kaiser 1997). In their study on racial attitudes Schuman and associates found that “when white Americans are asked to account for black disadvantage, the most popular explanation is that of black people’s lack of motivation or willpower to get ahead”(Schuman 1997). These surveys suggest a majority of whites view the opportunity structure as being

open to all regardless of color. Not only do whites see parity compared to blacks in access to housing, employment, education and achieving a middle class life style, but where differences do exist, whites attribute racial inequities to the individual shortcomings of blacks.

The perception among a majority of white Americans that the socio-economic playing field is now level, along with whites' belief that they have purged themselves of overt racist attitudes and behaviors, has made colorblindness the dominant lens through which whites understand contemporary race relations. Colorblindness allows whites to believe that segregation and discrimination are no longer an issue because it is now illegal for individuals to be denied access to housing, public accommodations or jobs because of their race. Indeed, lawsuits alleging institutional racism against companies like Texaco, Denny's, Coke, and Cracker Barrel validate what many whites know at a visceral level is true; firms which deviate from the color blind norms embedded in classic liberalism will be punished. As a political ideology, the commodification and mass marketing of products that signify color but are intended for consumption across the color line further legitimate colorblindness. Almost every household in the United States has a television that, according to the U.S. Census, is on for seven hours every day (Nielsen 1997). Individuals from any racial background can wear hip-hop clothing, listen to rap music (both purchased at Wal-Mart) and root for their favorite, majority black, professional sports team. Within the context of racial symbols that are bought and sold in the market, colorblindness means that one's race has no bearing on who can purchase a Jaguar, live in an exclusive neighborhood, attend private schools or own a Rolex.

The passive interaction whites have with people of color through the media creates the impression that little, if any, socio-economic difference exists between the races. Research has also shown that whites who are exposed to images of upper-middle class African Americans, like the Huxtable family in *The Cosby Show*, believe that blacks have the same socio-economic opportunities as whites (Lewis & Jhally, 1994).

The achievement ideology implicit in the color-blind perspective is also given legitimacy and stripped of any racist implications by black neo-conservatives like anti-affirmative action advocate Ward Connerly, Shelby Steele and Clarence Thomas and Asian-American Secretary of Labor Elaine Chou (Ansell, 1997; Winant, 1994; Omi, 2001; Brown, 2003; Gallagher, 2004). Each espouses a color-blind, race-neutral doctrine that treats race-based government programs as a violation of the sacrosanct belief that American society only recognizes the rights of individuals. These individuals also serve as important public examples that in a post-race, color-blind society, climbing the occupational ladder is now a matter of individual choice. Highly visible and successful racial minorities like Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice are further proof to white America that the state's efforts to enforce and promote racial equality has been accomplished.

The new color-blind ideology does not, however, ignore race; it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences that whites and racial minorities can purchase and share. It is through such acts of shared consumption that race becomes nothing more than an innocuous cultural

signifier. Large corporations have made American culture more homogenous through the ubiquitous of fast food, television, and shopping malls but this trend has also created the illusion that we are all the same through consumption. Most adults eat at national fast food chains like McDonalds, shop at mall anchor stores like Sears and J.C. Penny's and watch major league sports, situation comedies or television drama. Defining race only as cultural symbols that are for sale allows whites to experience and view race as nothing more than a benign cultural marker that has been stripped of all forms of institutional, discriminatory or coercive power. The post-race, color-blind perspective allows whites to imagine that depictions of racial minorities working in high status jobs and consuming the same products, or at least appearing in commercials for products whites desire or consume, is the same as living in a society where color is no longer used to allocate resources or shape group outcomes. By constructing a picture of society where racial harmony is the norm, the color-blind perspective functions to make white privilege invisible while removing from public discussion the need to maintain any social programs that are race-based.

How then, colorblindness linked to privilege? Starting with the deeply held belief that America is now a meritocracy, whites are able to imagine that the socio-economic success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education. The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political and economic arrangements which privilege whites. This perspective insinuates that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for social inequality. Colorblindness allows whites to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as they proclaim their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals by the "color of their skin." This perspective ignores, as Ruth Frankenberg puts it, how whiteness is a "location of structural advantage societies structured in racial dominance" (2001 p. 76). Frankenberg uses the term "color and power evasiveness" rather than colorblindness to convey how the ability to ignore race by members of the dominant group reflects a position of power and privilege. Colorblindness hides white privilege behind a mask of assumed meritocracy while rendering invisible the institutional arrangements that perpetuate racial inequality. The veneer of equality implied in colorblindness allows whites to present their place in the racialized social structure as one that was earned.

OPPORTUNITY HAS NO COLOR

Given this norm of colorblindness it was not surprising that respondents in this study believed that using race to promote group interests was a form of (reverse) racism.

Joe, a student in his early twenties from a working class background, was quite adamant that the opportunity structure in the United States did not favor one racial group over another.

I mean, I think that the **black person of our age has as much opportunity as me**, maybe he didn't have the same guidance and that might hurt him. But I mean, he's got the same opportunities that I do to

go to school, **maybe even more**, to get more money. I can't get any aid...I think that blacks have the same opportunities as whites nowadays and I think it's old hat.

Not only does Joe believe that young blacks and whites have similar educational experiences and opportunity but it is his contention that blacks are more likely or able to receive money for higher education. The idea that race matters in any way, according to Joe, is anachronistic; it is "old hat" in a color-blind society to blame one's shortcomings on something as irrelevant as race.

James, a nineteen-year-old college student, expresses a number of the trends found in the surveys cited earlier. After stating, "hey, everybody's got the same opportunity" when asked about what his views were on the idea of white privilege, James countered that:

They say that I have white privileges. Uh, and if they say it's like because where I live, I live in a big house or something like that, they're wrong, because that's not a privilege. That's something my parents worked for. And if they don't live in a big fancy house that's something that their parents didn't work for. And if they want to change that—I've got black people living across from me. **Uh, they're no different than me.** They're different from the black people down here because they worked for what they wanted. These people [blacks in a poor segregated part of the city]—they don't have to live here. **There's no one holding them back.** They can get into school as well as everybody else can. I was lucky my parents could pay for school and I didn't need financial aid You know, the opportunity is there. You've just got to take hold of it.

James suggests that when class background is taken into account whites and blacks are the same. The blacks who are unable to leave poor, segregated neighborhoods reflect individual shortcomings on the part of blacks not structural obstacles. Rob, a returning student in his late twenties, implies that it is hard work and individual merit, not one's skin color that matters. Examining his own mobility, Rob remarks that "I don't know if their situation is any different than mine. I mean, I can only gauge on the fact that I've been busting my ass for the last ten years to get to where I want to be."

Believing and acting as if America is now color-blind allows whites to imagine a society where institutional racism no longer exists and racial barriers to upward mobility have been removed. The use of group identity to challenge the existing racial order by making demands for the amelioration of racial inequities is viewed as racist because such claims violate the belief that we are a nation that recognizes the rights of individuals not rights demanded by groups. Sam, an upper middle class respondent in his 20's, draws on a pre-and post civil rights framework to explain racial opportunity among his peers

I guess I can understand in my parents' generation. My parents are older, my dad is almost 60 and my mother is in her mid 50's, ok? But the kids I'm going to school with, the minorities I'm going to school with, I don't think they should use racism as an excuse for not getting a job. Maybe their parents, sure, I mean they were discriminated against. But these kids have **every** opportunity that I do to do well.

In one generation, as Sam sees it, the color line has been erased. Like Sam's view that the opportunity structure is open there is, according to Tara, a reason to celebrate the current state of race relations.

I mean, like you are not the only people that have been persecuted—I mean, yea, you have been, but so has every group. I mean if there's any time to be black in America it's now.

Seeing society as race-neutral serves to decouple past historical practices and social conditions from present day racial inequality as was the case for a number of respondents who pointed out that job discrimination had ended. Michelle, a nineteen year old from the suburb of a large city, was quite direct in her perception that the labor market is now free of discrimination stating that "don't think people hire and fire because someone is black and white now." Ken also believed that discrimination in hiring did not occur since racial minorities now have legal recourse if discrimination occurs.

I think that pretty much we got past that point as far as jobs. I think people realize that you really can't discriminate that way because you will end up losing.....because you will have a lawsuit against you.

Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg sees this narrative as part of the "continued insistence on implementing an ideal of color-blindness [that] either denies historical reality and its abiding contemporary legacies, or serves to cut off any claims to contemporary entitlements" (1997:55). It also means that whites can picture themselves as victims of reverse discrimination and racism, as Anne a twenty-three year old in a focus group explained

Why is it so important to forget about you know, **white people's rights?** I mean, not that, not being racist or anything, but why is it such a big deal that they have to have it their way or no way? When it should be a compromise between the two and the whites should **be able to voice their opinions** as much as the blacks do.

There is the belief that whites have been silenced by race politics and as Jodie explains "The tables have turned where they're getting more rights than we have. Like it never balanced out."

The logic inherent in the colorblind approach is circular; since race no longer shapes life chances in a color-blind world there is no need to take race into account when discussing differences in outcomes between racial groups. This approach erases America's racial hierarchy by implying that social, economic and political power and mobility is equally shared among all racial groups. Ignoring the extent or ways in which race shapes life chances validates whites' social location in the existing racial hierarchy while legitimating the political and economic arrangements that perpetuate and reproduce racial inequality and privilege.

COLOR AS A CHOICE

Leslie Carr suggests "the roots of color-blind ideology are found in classic

liberal doctrines of freedom—the freedom of the individual created by the free capitalist marketplace” (Carr, 1997:108). Within the context of a free market model, color-blindness has come to mean that ignoring or attending to one’s racial identity race is a matter of individual choice much like the ways in which whites can choose to emphasize their ethnic background. Many whites, for example, claim to be Irish on St. Patty’s Day. Some Italians-Americans feel purchasing a meal at the Olive Garden Restaurant is an ethnic dining experience that reconnects them to their immigrant past or fictive ethnic family tree. Some whites don kilts at Highlander Fairs or dress as medieval artisans or knights at Renaissance Festivals. These individuals experience their ethnicity as an option. There is no social cost to “being ethnic” for a day nor does this voluntary behavior circumscribe life chances. The colorblind narrative holds that affirming racial identity is, like whites who have the luxury of an optional ethnicity, an individual, voluntary decision (Waters, 1990; Gallagher, 2003a). If pride in one’s ethnicity and by extension one’s color is a matter of choice, then race no longer matters as an independent force which organizes social life, allocates resources or creates obstacles to upward mobility (Doane, 1997). In post-race, color blind America one can now consume images and products for, from and about any racial or ethnic group. Racial styles, like clothing fashion, food choices or musical preferences are interchangeable, mix and match commodities for sale at the mall.

The color-blind narrative allows racial identity to be acknowledged in individual and superficial ways but using race to assert group demands violates the cherished notion that as a nation we recognize the rights of individuals rather than group rights. Within the color-blind perspective it is understood that one does not choose one’s race but one should be conscious, or at least cautious, not to make race more than background cultural information. In a post-race, color-blind world, race can be seen but pointing out race-based inequities should not be heard. The idea of identity, race and the fluidity of individual choices was part of Jeff’s explanation of race relations:

It’s just seems like a gaps been bridged, where people don’t have like separate things. You know, like in past generations there were things that each group had to itself but now it’s like there are plenty of things you can find in like, black people that white people do. You know, there’s music, rap music is no longer, **it’s not a black thing anymore...**when it first came out it was black music, but now it’s just music. It’s another choice, just like country music, can be considered like white hick music or whatever, **you know it’s just a choice.**

Tom makes the point that race categories exist but assimilation allows any individual to become an American, if they so choose:

Blacks don’t seem, poor blacks seem like they’re more immigrant than we are. Interviewer: In what way?
Because they try to keep pushing the differences. You know, like I said, the Asians just meld in a little bit better than the blacks...Why do they have to be caught up in being African-American? They’ve been in America all their lives. They were born here. They’re not African-Americans. That’s just separate.

There was the perception that Asians did not embrace identity politics or

use their racial identity to promote group rights. As Mike, a young white man in a focus group told me:

It's just becoming like really, really popular for black students to be black and proud and racist. But with Asians it's not that way. I mean there is a magazine Ebony for strictly black people—I've never really read it. I mean there is no magazine for just Asian people. There's nothing saying, like Asian power.

In a similar exchange Matt makes the point that it is not discrimination which still structures life chances for racial minorities but an unwillingness on the part of racial minorities embrace the cultural styles, mores and values of the dominant group. Tom comments that:

If you look at some prominent black people in society today and I don't really see [racial discrimination] I don't understand how they can keep bringing this problem onto themselves. If they did what society would want them to I don't see that society is making problems for them. I **don't see it.**

Colorblindness as a way of framing race relations allows Matt, from his position of privilege he occupies as a middle class college student, to ignore or not “see” the extent to which race continues shape life chances.

Comedian Chris Rock points to how erasing the color line and colorblindness are linked when he asked rhetorically “What does it say about America when the greatest golfer in the world [Tiger Woods] is black and the greatest rapper [Eminem] is white”. Rock's message is clear; no role or occupation (at least in sports and music) is now determined by skin color. By allowing anyone to claim ownership of racial styles, color-blind narratives negate the ways in which race continues to circumscribe life chances. The color-blind approach requires that these preferences, while racially bracketed, be available to all for purchase or consumption. At its core, the color-blind philosophy holds that racial minorities can succeed if they rid themselves of any notion that their race entitles them to special treatment or race-based entitlements. Racial identity can still be expressed or acknowledged, but one's race should mean nothing more than a tendency towards individualistic expressions like music, foods or clothes.

Within the color-blind perspective it is not race per se which determines upward mobility but how much an individual **chooses** to pay attention to race that determines one's fate.

Within this perspective race is only as important as you allow it to be, as Kevin, a 33 year old white male custodial worker in Colorado told me

I never really look at anyone as a color. You know. Your skin's a color, but that doesn't mean, I don't know, I never look at someone being Black or Chinese. Yeah, you're Chinese because of the way your eyes are slanted but you talk just like me, **you're just like me**, I don't look at you any different than you being me. You know, that's how I've always looked at it. You know.

Implicit in this expression of color-blindness is that color does not matter as long as blacks and Chinese assimilate to the point where they are “just like” Kevin. As a member of the dominant group Kevin has the privilege of defining color-blindness as the expectation that racial minorities will mirror his own cultural and social experiences while denying how racism shapes the experiences of racial minorities (Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

Race Symbols as Symbolic Racism

When racial identity shifts from being an individual expression to one that is used to organize politically or make group based grievances whites view it as racist. Mary links colorblindness to anger that race is used to force whites to think about color and inequality:

I think that **they** are making worse for themselves. I think that anybody can see in this country—I think it’s **you** [blacks]. **It doesn’t matter what color you are.** I mean, sure there are black things but why put it on a T-shirt? Why not just have a plain black t-shirt? Why would you have to make such a big statement that pushes people away, that threatens people. I would never want to threaten anybody.

As Mary’s comments make clear, using racial symbols (like Malcolm X on a t-shirt) socially isolates blacks from whites, constitutes a challenge to the racial status quo and is viewed as a “threat” to the colorblind narrative she believes is (or at least should be) a universal, normative belief. Implicit in this exchange is Mary’s anger at those who would use race to promote a political agenda when race, as she sees it, no longer shapes life chances. However, Mary belies her own racial logic of colorblindness by framing her version of race relations in an “us v. them” dichotomy where the “us” is defined by membership in the dominant group where racial identity can typically be ignored. The rhetoric of “it doesn’t matter what color you are” is inconsistent with the extent to which many whites constantly enforce the norm of colorblindness by policing the attitudes and behaviors of racial minorities (Gallagher, 2003b).

The respondents below were bothered by what they saw as a double standard concerning beauty pageants; blacks could have their own pageant but whites could not. Their anger is, at least based in part, on an understanding that the norm of colorblindness has been violated. What is also important to note in the exchanges below is the privileging of a narrative of colorblindness over one that understands, or at least partially acknowledges, racial inequality in the United States. It is not only that colorblindness is the “common sense” understanding of contemporary race relations for these respondents, but it is clear from these interviews that they are fully unaware of the extent to which group successes vary by and because of race.

Jodie lamented that:

You know, it’s amazing. Like, even, like even, like the Miss American Pageants. There’s a black Miss America pageant. But there’s also black contestants in the Miss America Pageant and then there’s a separate pageant for blacks only. And if we had a separate pageant for whites only I just think that things would be—**more hell would be raised.**

Michelle was also bothered by her perception that the idea of race was taken too seriously by blacks:

You know, it just seems, even for silly things, even the fact that you have to have black women in the Miss America Pageant but then they have their own Miss Black America Pageant. You know, like that type of thing and it's like, come on....

John, a 22-year-old male from New Jersey also felt that whites were held to a different set of social expectations than blacks

I watch Miss America and we've had, what, a black Miss America three out of the last five years, yet they do have a black Miss America (contest). They don't have white contestants, they only have black contestants. Now I'm not saying that a black person can't enter the white contest, but it's just kind of ironic that here a black woman enters a predominately white contest and, you know, usually a Miss America's supposed to be representative of the whole population, yet only 12% of the population is black...It just kind of seems strange that if a white person tried to enter a black contest, forget it, you'd have mayhem.

Viewed within the color-blind perspective the Miss Black America Pageant is a form of institutional racism because it denies all racial groups full access to participation. The Miss Black America Pageant is, as suggested above, racist for excluding whites because of the color of their skin. The long history of racial minorities being excluded from white organizations and institutions as the reason black, Latino and Asian organizations were formed in the first place is now only viewed as irrelevant it is racist towards whites.

Like the anger expressed over what was perceived as a racial double standard concerning the Miss America Pageant, Malcolm X also came to represent challenges to the color blind perspective which were viewed as illegitimate because they advocate group solutions to race based inequities. As one respondent told me about Malcolm X

He got into Buddha [sic] and changed his violence. When he was younger I think that's when he was violent but in the years before he was killed I think he definitely went towards peace, like Martin Luther King, I don't know why they can't wear Martin Luther King hats [instead of Malcolm X hats].

Colorblindness has emerged as America's newest racial mythology because it provides a level-playing-field narrative that allows whites to inhabit a social and psychological space that is free of racial tension. This new era of colorblindness is a respite from the racial identity movements that often result in white guilt, defensiveness or the avoidance of racially charged issues. Not only is any stigma associated with being white removed, but whites are able to both reject racial symbols that evoke racial inequality while adopting those that are culturally valorized (Storrs, 1999).

Colorblindness provides whites with the belief that they live in an era that is free of racism. Convinced that these racist attitudes and practices are over,

whites today are able to define themselves as racially progressive and tolerant. Within this universe where racial differences are now almost meaningless, whites are able to claim that their privileged social position relative to racial minorities reflects individual achievement rather than fruits of white supremacy. The constant barrage of color-blind messages and messengers reinforce and confirm that the egalitarian and meritocratic norms that under gird American culture are intact. Embracing color-blindness allows whites to be blind to or ignore the fact that racial and ethnic minorities lag behind whites on almost every quality of life measure. Colorblindness allows whites to think about contemporary race relations as a clean slate where the crimes of slavery, Jim Crow, institutional racism and white privilege have been ended and the racist sins of their grandparents have been erased.

Reflecting on affirmative action Monica, articulates an all-is-now-equal argument as to why color should no longer matter in hiring decisions or school admissions:

I think all the backgrounds have come a long way to where they don't need it any more. **Basically everyone has equal opportunity to get a certain job**, to get into a certain school and now it should be based on your performance and not for what you are.

Drawing on an ideology of egalitarianism and meritocracy Monica believes, as most white Americans do, that color is no longer a factor in obtaining employment or a quality education. Given the premise that racial equality has now been achieved, Monica is able to argue that achievement and not skin color should shape the allocation of resources. In other words, since the playing field is now level, any group claims to address real or imagined inequities are illegitimate. Joan voiced the anger that whites should in some way be held accountable for past or present racial inequities.

That's what bothers me. They say "we" have been oppressed. They have not. The students here at the university right now have not been oppressed. They did not experience the Watts riot, they didn't experience physically being hosed down by police. Granted, the white population was responsible for that but we are not. We are not responsible. Therefore, we should not be put out because of that. We didn't do it. We're not doing it now, therefore they have no right to say, well, we've been oppressed.

Neither Joan, nor the white race, should be "put out" for past racist practices. The color-blind perspective is ahistorical rendering the actions of the near and distant past as events that are disconnected from contemporary racial inequality.

COLORBLIND OR BLIND TO COLOR

The beliefs voiced by whites in national survey data and my own interviews raise an empirical question; to what extent are we now a color-blind nation? If educational opportunity, occupational advancement, health, upward mobility and equal treatment in the public sphere can be used as indicators of how

color-blind we are as a nation, then we have failed. U.S. Census figures present a picture of America that is far from color-blind. In 1999 over 73% of white households owned their own homes compared to 46% for blacks, 45% for Hispanics, 53% for Asians and 56% for American Indians (U.S. Census 1999). In 1993 whites had about ten times more in assets than blacks or Latinos (U.S. Census 1993). Media family income in 1998 was \$42,439 for whites, \$25,351 for blacks, \$27,330 for Latinos and \$46,637 for Asians. In 1997 almost 25% of whites over the age of 25 had four year of college or more compared less than 14% for blacks and Latinos. In 1997 8.6% of whites compared to 26.5% blacks, 27% of Latinos and 14% of Asians lived at or below the poverty line (U.S. Census 1997). A national study found that even after controlling for individual credit history, blacks in 33 states were charged more for car loans than whites (Henriques 2001). Health statistics tell a similar tale. Whites have lower rates of diabetes, tuberculosis, pregnancy related mortality, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and are more likely to have prenatal care in the first trimester than blacks, Latinos or Asians. In 1997 15% of whites did not have public or private health care coverage compared to 21.5% for blacks, 34% for Latinos and 20.7% for Asians (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1998).

In 1998 blacks and Latinos are under-represented as lawyers, physicians, professors, dentists, engineers and registered nurses. A Glass Ceiling study commissioned by the federal government found that when one reaches the level of vice president and above at Fortune 1000 industrial and Fortune 500 service industries, 96.6% of the executives are white males. Nationally white men comprise 90% of the newspaper editors and 77% of television news directors (Feagin 2000). In 1999 the Department of Justice found that blacks and Latinos were twice as likely as whites to be subject to force when they encounter a police officer, were more likely to be subjected to car searches during a traffic stop and were more likely to be ticketed than whites. Although blacks and whites are just as likely to use drugs almost two-thirds of those convicted on drug charges are black (Gullo 2001). The 107th Congress does not represent the racial and ethnic diversity of this country. In 2000 blacks were 13% of the population; Asians and Pacific Islanders 4%; and Latinos 12%. Yet the House of Representatives was only 9% black, 4% Latino and 0.9% Asian. The U.S. Senate was 2% Asian and 1% American Indian. The Senate is 97% white with no black or Latino members (Abrams 2000). There are currently no black or Latino governors. If you are black and in live in Florida you were four times as likely as whites to have your ballot invalidated in the 2000 presidential election (Parker and Eisler 2001). We are not now, nor have we ever been, a colorblind nation.

THE COST OF RACIALIZED PLEASURES

Being able to ignore or being oblivious to the ways in which almost all whites are privileged in a society cleaved on race has a number of implications. Whites can believe that the current system for allocating resources is fair and equitable. Creating and internalizing a colorblind view of race relations reflects how the dominant group is able to use the mass media, immigration stories of upward mobility, rags-to-riches narratives and achievement ideology to make white privilege invisible. Frankenberg argues that whiteness can be “displaced,” as is the case with whiteness hiding behind the veil of colorblindness. It can also be made “normative” rather than specifically “racial,” as is the case when being

white is defined by white respondents as being no different than being black or Asian (Frankenberg, 2001). Bobo and associates have advanced a theory of laissez-faire racism that draws on the colorblind perspective. As whites embrace the equality of opportunity narrative they suggest that

laissez-faire racism encompasses an ideology that blames blacks themselves for their poorer relative economic standing, seeing it as a function of perceived cultural inferiority. The analysis of the bases of laissez-faire racism underscores two central components: contemporary stereotypes of blacks held by whites, and the denial of societal (structural) responsibility for the conditions in black communities (Bobo et. al., 1997:95).

As many of my respondents make clear, if the opportunity structure is open ("It doesn't matter what color you are"), there must be something inherently wrong with racial minorities or their culture that explains group level differences.

Leslie Carr argues a "that colorblindness is not the opposite of racism, it is another form of racism..."(1997, p.x). I would add that the form colorblindness takes as the nation's hegemonic political discourse is a variant of laissez-faire racism. Historian David Roediger contends that in order for the Irish to be absorbed into the white race in the mid-nineteenth century "the imperative to define themselves as whites came from the particular "public and psychological wages' whiteness offered" these new immigrants (1991). There is still a "wage" to whiteness, that element of ascribed status whites automatically receive because of their membership in the dominant group. But within the framework of colorblindness the imperative has switched from whites overtly defining themselves or their interests as white, to one where they claim that color is irrelevant; being white is the same as being black, yellow, brown or red. Some time ago Ralph Ellison asked this important question about race relations that continues to go unanswered

What, by the way, is one to make of a white youngster who, with a transistor radio glued to his ear, screaming a Stevie Wonder tune, shouts racial epithets at black youngsters trying to swim at a public beach....? (Cited in Roediger, 1993)

My interviews with whites around the country suggest that in this post-race era of colorblind ideology Ellison's keen observations about race relations need modification. The question now is what are we to make of a young white man from the suburbs who listens to hip-hop, wears baggy hip-hop pants, a baseball cap turned sideways, unlaced sneakers and a oversized shirt emblazoned with a famous NBA player who, far from shouting racial epithets, lists a number of racial minorities as his heroes? It is now possible to define oneself as not being racist because of the clothes you wear, the celebrities you like or the music you listen to while believing that blacks or Latinos are disproportionately poor or over-represented in low pay, dead end jobs because these they are part of a debased, culturally deficient group. Having a narrative that smoothes over the cognitive dissonance and oft time schizophrenic dance that whites must do when they navigate race relations is an invaluable source of pleasure.

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