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AMERICAN STORIES: HOW NARRATIVES OF INDIVIDUALISM UPHOLD WHITENESS

IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

American Stories: How Narratives of Individualism Uphold Whiteness in the Post Civil-Rights

Era

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**Abstract**

In the cultural eye of much of the American public, systemic racism is a matter of the past that was largely overcome during the civil rights movement. And yet, massive racial inequality still persists in housing, criminal justice, employment, education, and much more. Much research has been done on the ways that racism still persists, but many white Americans think of racism as an individualized, not a systemic issue. This research seeks to examine how narratives about American life, particularly those that emphasize individualism, continue to uphold institutionalized racism. I examine how these narratives surrounding race continue to perpetuate whiteness and systems of dominance, while seemingly eliminating the need for overt racial prejudice. By casting systemic injustice as a matter of individual action, these narratives obscure America's racist reality. This is particularly relevant considering widespread calls to ban critical race theory in education in numerous states.

## Introduction

By the beginning of July 2021, nearly two and a half centuries following the creation of the United States, seven states had passed legislation banning the teaching of critical race theory, with fifteen other states considering similar measures.<sup>1</sup> In Ohio, where I write this research, over half of Republicans in the House of Representatives have cosponsored H.B. 327, which would ban schools from teaching “divisive concepts.”<sup>2</sup> Critical race theory has become a new buzzword for right wing pundits and politicians, who claim that it teaches that all white people are racist oppressors. This legislative push came on the heels of February 2021, during which anchors for Fox News mentioned the term “critical race theory” on air twenty nine times. By June, that number skyrocketed exponentially, reaching a new high of over 900.<sup>3</sup> The twisted irony of the attack on critical race theory is that in many ways CRT seeks to deindividualize racism by examining the structural and institutional ways in which racism is upheld, rather than viewing racism as a result of individualized prejudice. Nonetheless, critics of critical race theory misrepresent it as an attack on white people en masse.

In the contemporary worldview of many white Americans, the civil rights era of the 1960s and accompanying legislation spelled the end of racism, and the narrative of a meritocratic, individualistic liberal democracy reigns as the dominant story of American life in the cultural mind’s-eye of white America. But these cultural and political changes did not eliminate racism; they just caused its evolution. Explicit and purposeful legal and social discrimination have largely been replaced by self-concealing narratives about race and American

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<sup>1</sup> Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning critical race theory?,” *Brookings*, August 2021,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ohio General Assembly, House, H.B. No. 327, 134th General Assembly.

<sup>3</sup> Lis Power, “Fox News' obsession with critical race theory, by the numbers,” *Media Matters*, June 15 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-news-obsession-critical-race-theory-numbers/>.

society, which has created a new landscape of racial discrimination in America. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which racism remains a dominant force in American society, while white Americans consistently seek to downplay and obscure its true effects.

I argue that historically, racism has been a process of legal and structural discrimination in which all levels of government and society have contributed to institutionalizing racism. Contemporarily, white America employs “color-blind” narratives, especially appeals to liberal individuality in order to obscure and diminish the realities of racism, thereby upholding white hegemony despite a shifting racial landscape. I will break this paper into four major sections. The first section will examine the history and legacy of racism in America from the Great Depression onward and explain how it has been embedded into American political life through legal, social, and economic discrimination. I will rely on *Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein and *When Affirmative Action Was White* by Ira Katznelson to show how government policies in the early and mid 20th century established persistent institutional racism. The second section will examine racism following the civil rights era, and look at how racism has become embedded in institutions, yet concealed by widely perpetuated narratives about race and American political life. This section will help draw links between racism and the ways in which it has become institutionalized, before looking at how dominant narratives about race have masked these effects. I will use theories from George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* and Cheryl C. Harris’ *Whiteness as Property* to show the material value of whiteness, and then look to Clarissa Rile Hayward’s *How Americans Make Race* for her framework on how narratives create institutions. The third section will be a dive into what these dominant narratives actually are, particularly relating to “color-blindness” and appeals to liberal individualism. As guidance, the section will look at Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists* and Ian Haney Lopez’s

*Dog Whistle Politics*. The fourth section will help tie everything together by showing how these narratives have been perpetuated into an invisible system of racism that continues to pay dividends and perpetuate a system that advantages whiteness.

### **Racism's historical and institutional roots**

To understand and discuss the persistence of racism in America, it is important to first examine the time period in which racism transitioned from slavery and segregation to an era of institutionalized inequality. This section will focus on the social and political landscape from the Great Depression until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This period saw a drastic expansion in American social policy, which theoretically should have ameliorated the condition of Black Americans. Yet, the work of a broad range of scholars shows plainly that while federal, state, and local programs sought to aid the white working, lower, and middle classes, they explicitly excluded Black Americans. I will first consider housing as a clear case study, and then expand to look at broader national policies in the Great Deal era of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Real estate has historically been one of the easiest and most common ways that everyday Americans have accumulated wealth. According to data from the Federal Reserve Bank, the bottom 90% of American households held 55.3% of the nation's real estate wealth in quarter one of 2021.<sup>4</sup> This may not sound impressive, but it is a far cry from their 11.4% in corporate equities and mutual fund shares or their 15% in private business wealth. Despite massively inflated wealth, real estate is one avenue in which families outside of the top 10% have been able to build wealth. This is due in part to efforts by the United States government throughout the 20th century to encourage home ownership as a tenet of American life, which they accomplished

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<sup>4</sup> Federal Reserve, "Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989," <https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/chart/>.

through a wide range of initiatives and programs. But, as Richard Rothstein argues in his book *The Color of Law*, for decades Black Americans have been cut out of these programs, and intentionally prevented from becoming homeowners.

Rothstein's goal is to shift the paradigm of thinking about housing discrimination and segregation away from being the result of *de facto* decisions by homebuyers, real estate agents, and neighborhood politics. Instead, his book focuses on the reality that America's endemic segregation is a consequence of *de jure* segregation - it has been deliberately established into law by various levels of governments and political, economic, and cultural institutions operating within the United States. In the early decades of the 20th century with the protections of Reconstruction long gone, Black people were largely forced out of rural communities, masses of metropolitan areas scrambled to make sure that communities remained segregated. To do this, many cities established segregated zoning ordinances, beginning with Baltimore in 1910.<sup>5</sup> These ordinances, in line with many Jim Crow era policies, explicitly discriminated against Black people specifically.

By the time of the Great Depression, the federal government had begun to foray into implementing policies that appeared to hold some degree of race neutrality at face value, rather than depending on explicit discrimination as many prior policies did. Instead of segregation ordinances, New Deal era housing policy instead excluded Black Americans through other measures. In 1933, the Roosevelt administration established the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to help rescue households from defaulting. The HOLC was tasked with assessing risk in these home loans, but they were also tasked with upholding residential segregation. The HOLC accomplished this end through the practice widely known as "redlining." As Rothstein writes, "The HOLC created color-coded maps of every metropolitan area in the nation, with the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rothstein *The Color of Law* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 44.

safest neighborhoods colored green and the riskiest colored red. A neighborhood earned a red color if African Americans lived in it, even if it was a solid middle-class neighborhood of single-family homes.”<sup>6</sup> This policy not only maintained residential segregation, it almost entirely prevented Black Americans from receiving HOLC loans. Notably, redlining as a practice purported to assess risk of various neighborhoods, a task which is not racial at face value. However, the HOLC was clearly motivated to uphold segregation. This example offers a taste of what was to come - policies that have racist implications or purposes, but are justified by purportedly race neutral narratives.

Housing was far from the only avenue of social policy that excluded Black Americans during the New Deal era. At the time, Southern Democrats held the power to make or break the Democratic party. While some Democratic lawmakers were more progressive on racial justice, most “put other priorities ahead of civil rights,” according to Ira Katznelson in *When Affirmative Action Was White*.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, New Deal policies which sought to achieve gains for poor and working class white people found methods to exclude large shares of Black people. While many policies related to the Great Depression sought to improve conditions in the short term, no policy was more long-term oriented than the Social Security Act of 1935. With Black Americans more likely to work into old age and higher unemployment rates, social security seemed like a promising long term source of poverty relief and social welfare. There was no explicit discrimination written into the law, but there was one key detail that was widespread throughout legislation at the time - it excluded agricultural and domestic workers. Following the end of Reconstruction in the late 19th century, a significant majority of Black people still lived in the South. Many were forced into predatory jobs as tenants or sharecroppers, and Black Americans

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<sup>6</sup> Rothstein, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), XX..



were disproportionately affected by exemptions affecting agricultural workers. During the 1930s, 85 percent of Black women in the labor force were agricultural workers or domestic servants, with a large majority working as maids, a job marked by a “complex and demeaning etiquette of inequality” in the South.<sup>8</sup> These exemptions excluded 65 percent of Black workers nationwide, reaching between 70 and 80 percent in some parts of the South.<sup>9</sup>

Some scholars believe the decision to exclude farmworkers and domestics was a consequence not of racist intentions, but that it was commonplace worldwide to exclude farmworkers from insurance for the elderly, or that administering social security to maids would be too infeasible. Katznelson dismisses this view, instead asserting that unless “occupational disabilities were inserted in the legislation, the program’s inclusive and national structure would have powerfully undermined the racialized low-wage economy on which the South still depended and on whose shoulders Jim Crow stood.”<sup>10</sup> Exemptions for farm workers and domestics excluded a large portion of the White population, too, but the proportion was much greater for Black workers. Though the exclusions included in social security may have appeared race neutral enough to dupe some contemporary scholars, the legislative politics involved in creating the law indicate not-so-subtle racist intentions. Southern Democrats, many of whom controlled important committee chair positions, were clear about wanting to help their poverty stricken regions while still upholding Jim Crow. The version of the Social Security Act that was passed into law went against the recommendations of both President Roosevelt’s Committee on Economic Security and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The

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<sup>8</sup> Katznelson, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Katznelson, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Katznelson, 44.

latter categorized the act as being “like a sieve with holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The institutionalization of whiteness as a material interest**

In the retrospective world view of many White Americans, the civil rights movement and the passage of civil rights legislation, namely the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, marks the endpoint of racism in American history. In a public opinion survey published by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal in July 2020, 48% of white respondents felt that it was more accurate to say that racial discrimination “comes from individuals who hold racist views,” compared to 42% who felt that racism is better described as being ingrained in institutions.<sup>12</sup> While not overwhelming, more white Americans believe that individual discrimination is the root of racism. But, as this section seeks to demonstrate, both sides do not hold water. The effects of racism have been deeply ingrained in American society and institutions, and there is material value vested in whiteness and the maintenance of racist institutions.

In 1993, critical race theorist Cheryl Harris published her massively influential article *Whiteness as Property*, which details how whiteness has been transformed into a form of property throughout American history which has been recognized and protected in American law. According to Harris, giving whiteness legal status “converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest.”<sup>13</sup> The term “vested interest” rings similar to Lipsitz’s concept of a “possessive investment.” Harris uses

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<sup>11</sup> Katznelson, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Hart Research Associates, “NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey.” <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6998891-July-Full-Results.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Cheryl I. Harris. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993), 1725.

three main frameworks to consider whiteness as property: whiteness as a traditional form of property, property as defining social relations, and property as the basis of expectation. The first, as a traditional form of property, refers to whiteness as the “right to white identity as embraced by the law.”<sup>14</sup> The second, a more modern approach, views property through its “function and the social relations reflected therein.”<sup>15</sup> The last framework refers to the law’s validation of the mere expectation of rights as a form of property.<sup>16</sup>

As with any other form of property, those who possess whiteness are granted a set of legal protections and benefits. These benefits have each been recognized in the law, with Harris outlining specific examples. The first of these benefits is the right to “use and enjoyment” of the property. Whiteness can be used when the holder takes advantage of the privileges accorded to them by virtue of their whiteness, and white privilege “became usable property, the subject of the law’s regard and protection.”<sup>17</sup> The second benefit is whiteness as a form of “reputation and status property.” This refers to the value associated with being perceived as white. The law has consistently treated whiteness as being important to the reputation of an individual, and it is manifested clearly in the legal doctrine that to call someone Black is a form of defamation.<sup>18</sup> The last benefit is the right of a property owner to exclude. Whiteness has rarely been defined by a shared characteristic, but it is instead defined largely by the othering and exclusion of those deemed to be nonwhite. Those who possess whiteness were given the authority to determine who is to be excluded from the privilege of having it. This right can be easily witnessed in the way

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<sup>14</sup> Harris, 1726.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, 1728.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, 1729.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, 1734.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, 1734-36.

which certain white ethnic groups such as the Irish eventually entered the fold of whiteness in large part through discrimination against other racial groups.<sup>19</sup>

Another useful framework for considering how whiteness holds value in modern society is George Lipsitz's concept of the "possessive investment in whiteness," from his book of the same name. Lipsitz explains that "whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others."<sup>20</sup> What this means is that whiteness carries tangible monetary value through a network of unequal and exploitative institutions. Housing and social security as mentioned in the prior section are good examples, but they are merely a drop in the bucket. Importantly, whiteness as considered by Lipsitz is not a matter of interpersonal choices and attitudes; it is about structural, collective power. The hegemony of (white) American social and political life is not something that participants willingly sign on to; it is a system which encourages passive participation through a series of hierarchies and rewards. As a result, racism is not about personal interactions and feelings; it has tangible material value.

What Lipsitz and Harris' analysis shows is that whiteness has a *goal*. The goal of whiteness is, to put it in Lockean terms, self-preservation. By rooting itself in law and continuing to determine who can profit from its advantages, whiteness upholds itself. Both Lipsitz and Harris are examining how whiteness becomes institutionalized, which is a key function of its survival. Lipsitz is attempting to expand on the work of Harris by showing the broader explanation for the property investment in whiteness, being the grander possessive investment in whiteness. Once institutions can maintain whiteness, it eliminates the need for effort on the part of individuals.

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<sup>19</sup> See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*

<sup>20</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), viii.

There is a clear disconnect between the view held by many white Americans that racism is a thing of the past or not a serious issue, and the reality of systemic racism. So how did this come to be? The answer lies in the use of narratives, which serve to create and eventually recreate institutions (what those narratives actually are is the focus of the next section). The way in which many Americans understand race and racism is not built upon hard facts, but upon an intertwining web of narratives that inform a particular worldview. They relate to questions about race, how American society works or should work, and a plethora of other moral and political considerations. In her book *How Americans Make Race*, political scientist Clarissa Rile Hayward looks at the way that racial identity is defined by narratives, particularly in the form of “stories” that inform people of their place in the world.<sup>21</sup> Hayward is principally concerned with how people produce and reproduce racial identities. She argues that narratives reproduce identity when they become institutionalized and objectified. It is through this process of establishing stories about identity into norms, law, and other institutions, as well as through transforming them into literal material forms that these stories are perpetuated in American political and social life.

Narratives lie at the heart of the tension between the views of most white Americans on racism, and the reality of systemic racism. Narratives help define someone’s worldview, so they are often much more influential in shaping how someone considers an issue than facts and reasoning can be. This is what enables whiteness to thrive - the stories surrounding race that dominate American society do not need to be logical to be influential. Hayward clearly illustrates this idea by saying that “dominant racial identity stories, in short, are bad stories.”<sup>22</sup> The dominant stories about race in America lack coherence, credibility, and legitimacy, but they do

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<sup>21</sup> Clarissa Rile Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Hayward, 35.

not need any of those characteristics in order to be influential. Because they've been ingrained in institutions, the process of learning dominant racial narratives is not one that people can easily recognize. Elementary school teachers do not show children picture books about how race works in America. Instead, people pick up on social cues and are influenced by the institutions as well as physical space around them, learning and forming these narratives through a persistent, lifelong process.

These narratives described by Hayward are a useful tool in establishing and perpetuating whiteness as examined by Harris and Lipsitz. As whiteness becomes institutionalized, it eliminates the need for overt individual racism to continue to justify systems. As the ways in which Americans think about race and racism shift, new tools become necessary to continue the possessive investment in whiteness. Narratives can help justify the institutionalization of whiteness, which it does by covering its own tracks. In a time period where overt racism has come to be perceived as generally unfavorable in the public eye, whiteness continues to perpetuate itself through other means.

### **Individualism and “colorblindness” as key narrative tools**

Political philosopher Charles Mills offered perhaps one of the best and most succinct ways of understanding whiteness and its corresponding narratives - as an “epistemology of ignorance.” Originating in his book *The Racial Contract*, Mills defines the epistemology of ignorance as a “pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions... producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”<sup>23</sup> This is clearly the circumstance in American society. While past and present racist actions and institutions within a white-dominated American polity have created the

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

institutionalized racism that exists presently, in many circles it is more common to hear white people complain about “reverse racism” than racism itself. Narratives about race and society clearly play a major role in maintaining this epistemology of ignorance. A full accounting of what those narratives are could fill countless anthologies, but this section will take a look at two main factors: “colorblind” narratives and policies, and an overemphasis on individualism in political and social life.

Color-blindness as used here has nothing to do with the cones of one’s eyes, but rather refers to the racial ideology that racism should not be a factor of consideration, or should be generally ignored. While color-blindness may present as the ideal of a post-racial society, it comes up short in a system where racism is still incredibly prevalent and harmful. This mode of thinking is essential to the maintenance of whiteness and its privileges, as it effectively seeks to obscure the reality of systemic racism in favor of a false, race-neutral narrative. In *Racism Without Racists*, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva outlines four main frames of thinking about race that he identified through conversations with white college students and adults: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. The frames are “set paths for interpreting information” which grant white people a sort of “intellectual road map” to navigate the present landscape of domination.<sup>24</sup>

Bonilla-Silva’s first frame, abstract liberalism, refers to appeals to political and economic liberalism, using ideas such as equal opportunity and economic meritocracy to explain racial inequality. This frame is heavily connected with an emphasis on individualism, and allows those who use it to make seemingly moral arguments about equality that actively inhibit practical measures to combat systemic racism. A common example would be those who oppose

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<sup>24</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014), 69.

affirmative action on the basis that it gives “preferential treatment” to people of color, which violates white people’s right to equal opportunity. This mode of thinking disregards the historical and systemic barriers facing people of color, especially Black Americans, while flipping the script to instead make white people appear the object of discrimination. A polling review published by Gallup indicated that while the majority of White people support affirmative action in the abstract, when asked about specific policies the level of support is much lower.<sup>25</sup> This is congruent with the findings of Bonilla-Silva’s interviews. In many instances, respondents purported to support affirmative action or other related policies when polled, but gave incoherent or contradictory answers when interviewed that indicated they did not support affirmative action policies in practice. For example, in a 2019 Pew poll 78% of white respondents believed that a company should only consider candidates' qualifications, even if it results in less diversity.<sup>26</sup> The frame of abstract liberalism heavily encourages supporting meritocracy, a principle which ignores the institutional advantages accorded to white people. Most appeals to meritocracy consider race and experiences on an individual level, such as with a candidate being hired for a position. As such, it is easy to discount any structural challenges that face that person, as individual experiences cannot effectively be predicted or measured.

The other three frames— naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism— also offer methods of obscuring racial realities. Naturalization suggests that racial phenomena occur naturally. A common narrative that falls within this frame is the idea that people of different racial groups naturally prefer to keep to themselves. The implication of this claim, however, is that it misrepresents an outcome as an input. Consider Rothstein’s *Color of Law* once again; as he demonstrates, segregation is the outcome of deliberate government policy and

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<sup>25</sup> Frank Newport, “Affirmative Action and Public Opinion,” *Gallup*, August 7, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Juliana Menasce Horowitz, “Americans See Advantages and Challenges in Country’s Growing Racial and Ethnic Diversity,” *Pew Research Center*, May 8, 2019.



practices. People who use the frame of naturalization are either perceiving *created* segregation as a natural phenomenon, or they are projecting the pattern-seeking nature of humans onto race - something far more complex, and a result of social construction.

The third frame, cultural racism, refers to the argument that cultural differences are responsible for differences in condition. Instead of recognizing structural injustices, appeals to cultural racism instead blame inequality on marginalized communities themselves through imagined cultural factors. During slavery and Jim Crow, racists would use the alleged biological inferiority of racial minorities to justify their oppression. That rationale has largely been replaced by cultural racism, which still argues that there is something innate in people of color that makes them inferior.<sup>27</sup> Cultural racism was a key factor in the opposition to welfare policies that was prevalent during the 1970s through 1990s, peaking during the Reagan and Clinton presidencies. Law professor Ian Haney Lopez details the progression of cultural racism and similar rhetoric in his cleverly titled book *Dog Whistle Politics*.

Haney Lopez uses the analogy of a dog whistle to describe the coded racial appeals used extensively by politicians and pundits from the civil rights era onward. The analogy of a dog whistle asserts that “racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily denied in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another.”<sup>28</sup> Dog whistle narratives play on underlying prejudices and broader injustice to uphold systems benefiting white people, but they are clouded by seemingly color-blind points, many of which are examples of or utilize cultural racism. These narratives have transcended region or party - they have been used by Democrats and Republicans alike ranging from Barry Goldwater to Bill Clinton and beyond, and they have been used across decades and across regions. With this in mind, there may be no figure who

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<sup>27</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Haney Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

exemplifies the dog whistle narrative more clearly than former president Ronald Reagan. One narrative that has been used widely is an appeal to states rights. Reagan launched his presidential campaign in 1980 outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi, a small town known for little other than the murder of three civil rights activists a mere sixteen years earlier.<sup>29</sup> During his speech, Reagan espoused his support for states rights, which had been a continuation of the Republican Party's Southern Strategy, which had been an effort to appeal to Southern voters by playing on racial fears and prejudices. In many ways, states rights was a narrative that echoed the segregationists' desire to maintain a southern "way of life" during the Jim Crow era, but presented in a way that offered plausible deniability.

Another way in which Reagan expertly exploited dog whistle narratives was in relation to welfare policy. While the Great Society programs and legislation surrounding the civil rights era saw an unprecedented growth in social services and welfare programs (that saw to aid black Americans rather than exclude them as policies of FDR and others did), by the latter decades of the 20th century public opinion had turned against welfare programs in force. Reagan expertly wielded narratives that melded cultural racism with appeals to American individualism and meritocracy. A prime example is his usage of the "welfare queen," a fictional archetype of a woman who exploits the welfare system in order to live lavishly on the taxpayer's dime. This narrative was clearly enveloped in racial stereotyping, and the welfare queen was undeniably presented and viewed as a Black woman in the eyes of the American public, but Reagan was careful to never mention race explicitly in his narratives.<sup>30</sup> The welfare queen narrative presented a twofold story: on one side there was the cultural racism of presenting the Black community as lazy and draining society's resources, and the other side presented white people as the

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<sup>29</sup> Haney Lopez, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

hardworking individuals taxpayers who were suffering as a consequence. Together, these views repainted welfare policy as a threat to the property interest in whiteness.

Bonilla-Silva's final frame, minimization of racism, suggests that discrimination is no longer relevant or that racism has been overblown by people of color. This frame is pretty straightforward, but is a clear result of the narratives which have been discussed thus far. In order to justify a world in which success is determined by individual action, the importance of systemic racism must be downplayed by those in positions of power. Some common examples of minimization of racism include accusing people of color of "playing the victim" or "playing the race card," or arguing that racism is a thing of the past.

All four of Bonilla-Silva's frames serve as building blocks for narratives that uphold racial hierarchy. While they are not an exhaustive list of narratives, they are four examples of narratives that are frequently combined and utilized to justify dominant racial narratives. These frames tell a story of American life in which social outcomes are individualized, and in which racism is a consequence of individual racists and not systems. Abstract liberalism encourages capitalism based individualism, in which those who are most individually qualified should and would receive the rewards of the market. Under this framework, cultural racism runs rampant. If American society is a meritocracy as abstract liberalism assumes, then groups with the worst social outcomes are assumed to have responsibility for those outcomes. Naturalization and the minimization of racism both add to the narrative by further discrediting the importance of systemic injustice, a view which prevents racial equity from being pursued. In all, the dominant, liberal individualist narrative presents an argument against social progress that seems to be based in "American" principles and values, but the true purpose is to uphold whiteness, all while keeping people unaware through the epistemology of ignorance.

### **Racist narratives and the 21st century**

Why is it that now, in 2021, decades after critical race theory saw its inception in academia, the framework has become so widely disavowed by right wing politicians and pundits across the United States? Before considering that question, it would be useful to consider recent events pertaining to national narratives and discussions around race, namely the widespread Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, which were largely catalyzed when police murdered a Black man named George Floyd. Shortly after Floyd's death, at the beginning of mass protests, white Americans' support for the Black Lives Matter movement peaked at 43%, which was also the first and only time that their support outweighed their opposition. By a year later, support was almost back to where it was before the protests began, with white Americans' opposition for BLM greatly outweighing their support.<sup>31</sup> The protests, which garnered the most media coverage of any protest since the Kent State killings in 1970, managed to make a dent in the racial ideology of white Americans that lasted only a matter of weeks.<sup>32</sup> In the long run, white support for racial justice movements have remained stagnant, with the majority in opposition to them. What this may show is that racial attitudes for white Americans are not based on events, but are a product of more deeply rooted institutions and narratives.

When potential solutions to systemic racism are proposed (such as reparations, affirmative action, or welfare policy, among others), an incredibly common narrative by white Americans is that they did not own slaves, or that their ancestors did not own slaves. Therefore, in their eyes, they should not be held responsible for the wrongs of racism, even when

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<sup>31</sup> Alex Samuels, "How Views On Black Lives Matter Have Changed — And Why That Makes Police Reform So Hard," *FiveThirtyEight*, April 13, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Michael T. Heaney, "The George Floyd protests generated more media coverage than any protest in 50 years," *Washington Post*, July 6, 2020.

recognized. There are two major flaws in this mode of thinking; one, that only those who directly caused injustice are responsible for fixing it, and two, that they do not stand to benefit from systemic racism, nor do they perpetuate the system. Each of these flaws are directly related to the emphasis on individualism in dominant racial narratives. The first flaw is rooted in a conception of social responsibility that is inherently individualist. If those who created the wrong are responsible for fixing it, then once those people who are perceived as individually racist (i.e. slave owners) are dead, then no one is responsible. This works wonders when dominant racial narratives have been altered to remove the need for individual prejudice. The issue is, as Rothstein, Katznelson, Harris, and Lipsitz and many others show, structural racism was never an issue of individual prejudice to begin with. As they all detail, racism has been intentionally institutionalized by the government and legal system. As such, even under the individualized logic, it is then the job of the government and legal system to remedy the wrongs that they have created. Rothstein offers a relevant quote from NAACP Legal Defense Fund president Sherrilyn Ifill. In response to those who ask why they should have to contend with racism when they had nothing to do with the creation of segregation, she responded “your ancestors weren’t here in 1776, but you eat hot dogs on the Fourth of July, don’t you?”<sup>33</sup> The point here is twofold. For one, white Americans need to recognize that they share both the benefits and the burdens of the country they live in, regardless of when their family moved here. That is part of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. The other point is directly related to the second flaw discussed earlier: while many white people’s families did not legislate segregation or own slaves, the benefits of whiteness still exist in force.

The economic language used by theorists like Lipsitz and Harris is not just a matter of using trendy terminology, but is a reflection of the very real monetary value that whiteness

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<sup>33</sup> Rothstein, 222.

carries today. It doesn't take much searching to recognize the massive racial wealth gap that exists in American society. Talking heads in elected offices, newsrooms, and at dining room tables may blame parent absenteeism, choices about education, or spending habits on this divide, but the research proves otherwise. Attending college does not bridge this gap. Having two parent households does not bridge this gap. Neither does working full time, or spending less money.<sup>34</sup> No matter what factors are controlled for, the racial wealth gap persists and it is powerful. Racism has undeniably granted significant financial gains to white Americans, and there have been many attempts to quantify the monetary cost of America's racist past, with many estimates numbering in the trillions. Calculating the cost of racism is one challenge, but convincing the American public, many of whom do not even believe racism to hold a lasting impact, is another beast in itself.

### **Conclusion**

Narratives around individualism are as old as our country itself, but they have found a new role to play in how the American public thinks about race and racism. At stake is a question of intent versus impact. While racist intent may be on the decline, the impact is very real. And when racism challenges American principles such as justice and equality, and has the power to threaten the wellbeing and lives of millions of Americans, then impact is all that truly matters. Colorblindness is a dangerous frame of thinking when racism is such a powerful force in the American past and present.

The purpose of this research is not to analyze the extensive history and impact of racism, though that is an important part of understanding the story. Nor is it to prescribe a specific

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<sup>34</sup> Amy Traub, et. al., "The Asset Value of Whiteness: Understanding the Racial Wealth Gap," *Demos*, February 6, 2017.

solution to the complicated and multifaceted dimensions of structural racism. Instead, it seeks to explore a dimension of the problem which has often gone underappreciated - the link between the stories we tell as a nation, and the racist reality in which we live. In writing this, I hope to connect the ways that our stories, particularly surrounding individualism, have helped to perpetuate a centuries long process of racism. Our stories have been profoundly effective in hiding racist realities, instead giving seemingly race-neutral arguments for racist policies and institutions, all while remaining consistent with stories about American life.

The American story contradicts the story of America. The American story is one of rugged individualism, where people pave their own paths and build their own success as singular entities. But the story of America is one in which law, practices, and institutions have been designed to uphold whiteness and institutionalized racism. To see this true story requires us to read between the lines of our past and of our present. Racism is a difficult and uncomfortable thing to talk about for many white Americans. But this discomfort is no coincidence. To think on a structural level is to subvert narratives that transcend generations. But there is hope. In July 2021, 55% of polled Americans believed that Black people had equal chances in the job market as White people if they were similarly qualified. While the majority may still believe in a colorblind meritocracy, this is the lowest percentage since 1963, with the civil rights movement in full swing.<sup>35</sup> But even now, the future of racial justice is at a tipping point, with calls to ban the teaching of “divisive concepts.” It is critical that Americans who are in support of fulfilling an ideal of liberty and justice for all continue to push for conversation and education, and recognize the ways in which racism is very real and relevant, and how it continues to impact our society. After all, justice has always been a divisive concept.

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<sup>35</sup> Gallup, “Race Relations,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1687/race-relations.aspx>.

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