SECTION 2

RACISM

Introduction

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As we write this introduction, Barack Hussein Obama, the first person of color elected President of the United States, is running for re-election. Obama's presidency is a momentous achievement for a nation fraught by a history of colonization, slavery, exploitation, segregation, and the marginalization of numerous communities of color, such as Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, South East Asians, Asian Pacific Islanders, Arab Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. For many people, this achievement has been interpreted as signifying a "post-racial society"; that is, a society free from racial prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

We question that interpretation and ask whether the election of President Obama has in itself achieved substantive progress toward racial equality for people of color. On the contrary, many commentators point to the continuing racial disparities in education, health care, criminal sentencing, and employment, a lack of achievement influenced by the combined effects of neoliberal economic policies, the economic downturn triggered by the Wall Street financial debacle, and a legal and judicial system that increasingly marginalizes people of color. Despite the election of a black U.S. president, people of color in the United States continue to be disproportionately poor, unemployed, underemployed, segregated in poorly resourced communities and on reservations, and psychologically and physically threatened by stereotyping, bigotry, and hate crimes. A further example: scholars have documented racial disparities in the rates of incarceration of people of color compared with white people—eight to one—as a result of our racially stratified social system (Haney-Lopez, 2010).

The lack of substantive improvement in the lives of people of color in the United States has been well substantiated. Racial disparities in unemployment are roughly two to one for Blacks and one and a half to one for Hispanics in relation to Whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In education, the National Center for Education Statistics in 2009 and 2011 found that black and Latino/a students perform at a lower rate than their white peers "by an average of more than 20 test-score points on the NAEP math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades, a difference of about two grade levels" (Education Week, 2011). Similar trends have been reported by the Achievement Gap Initiative in almost every measure: NAEP math and reading test scores, high school completion rates, college enrollment, and college completion rates (The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, 2011). Many factors contribute to this achievement gap, including the fact that Blacks and Latinos/as continue to be disproportionally more poor, unemployed, underemployed, and

living in segregated under-resourced urban or rural communities in relation to white communities (Alexander, 2012; Delpit, 2012; Gándara, 2010; Madrid, 2011; Wise, 2012).

In this section, we challenge commonly held assumptions that the United States is living in a "post-racial society" and instead set out frameworks and definitions for examining the continuing evidence and historical legacies of race, racism, and white supremacy in an inclusive and nuanced way. We introduce readers to key concepts in our approach to racism and provide an overview of the readings we have selected to illustrate theoretical, conceptual, and personal ways to understand, critically analyze, and challenge contemporary racism in the United States.

RACE AS A SOCIOPOLITICAL CONSTRUCTION

Race is a sociopolitical, not a biological, construct, one that is created and reinforced by social and institutional norms and practices, as well as individual attitudes and behaviors. Like other constructed social identities addressed throughout this book, race emerged historically in the United States to justify the dominance of peoples defined as "white" (colonists/settlers) over other peoples defined as racially different or inferior, such as, first, Native Americans and enslaved Africans and, later, Mexicans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, South Asians, and other marginalized racial groups. Motivated by economic interests and entrenched through law and public policy, we see this process of racialization of subordinate groups as a process that has its roots in historical legacies and is continually reinvented in response to current social, political, and economic circumstances to perpetuate social advantages for peoples racialized as white. We call this process and the system it sustains *white supremacy.*

Racism is the set of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal patterns and practices that create advantages for people legally defined and socially constructed as "white," and the corollary disadvantages for people defined as belonging to racial groups that were not considered Whites by the dominant power structure in the United States. While the construction of disadvantage and subordination of different communities of color has been enacted in historically specific ways for differently racialized groups, we call attention to the overarching patterns and practices that illustrate racism across groups as well as the distinctive ways that racism plays out for particular peoples of color at different points in U.S. history. Thus, the frequently unstated assumption that race is a matter of black/white relationships obscures a far more complex, historically rooted, racial *system* that impacts differently racialized peoples in historically and regionally distinctive ways. Indeed, we talk about *racism(s)* to connote the many different forms racism has taken throughout U.S. history. A critical analysis of racism(s) should thus include how perceived racial phenotype, ethnicity, language, immigration status, and culture impact a people's experience of racism. Further, the analysis of racisms becomes intersectional when we acknowledge that people from all racialized groups—whether advantaged or disadvantaged by racism—are also differently gendered, classed, sexualized, and aged and that these intersections differentially shape their experiences and the impact of racism on their life chances and opportunities.

We challenge the notion that the United States has become a "post-racial" society in which race no longer matters (because racism is presumed no longer to exist) and argue that this notion reflects the desire to ignore the many ways in which race and racism continue to create and reinforce inequality. As long as patterns of racial inequality persist, we are not a post-racial society. To value diversity and equality, "transcending race" should not be our goal. Instead, we should account for past practices of dominance and marginalization and work assiduously to eradicate the disproportional life circumstances created by racism, devise reparation for its effects in contemporary life, and transform our society into an inclusive and just democracy in which differences are respected and valued and people from all groups are treated fairly and equitably.

HISTORY OF RACISM: A BRIEF SNAPSHOT

The history of racism in the United States reaches back to before our origins as a nation—through the colonization and attempted extermination of the Native peoples whose land was stolen by conquest, broken treaties, and deception; the enslavement first of Native Americans and then kidnapped Africans to provide coerced and unpaid labor to develop agricultural and capital wealth for the early European settlers; the displacement of Mexican and Native American people, appropriation of their land, and redefining them as "foreign," as borders moved through war and conquest. It continued with the recruitment and then abuse and exploitation of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino laborers who worked the mines and built the railroads that enabled the expansion of U.S. wealth and power to other parts of the globe (Takaki, 1993). Rationalized by Manifest Destiny and a "civilizing" mission, people of European Christian descent determined early on who could attain citizenship and its corresponding benefits in the U.S. (Haney-Lopez, 1997).

Migrants racialized as "white" in the context of the United States expanded and then consolidated a system of racial advantages based on "whiteness" to eventually include successive waves of European immigrants. Some northern Europeans were absorbed easily while others considered "not quite white" (e.g. Italians, Irish, Jews) took longer but were assimilated as "white" over time (Brodkin Sacks, 1994; Gaultieri, 2001; Guglielmo, 2003; Roediger, 1991). In so doing, those who could claim whiteness reaped the benefits of an economic and political system consolidated under white supremacy. Other advantages flowed from the attainment of citizenship and incorporation as Whites, such as property and voting rights, that enabled them to further accumulate wealth and to control the political system as well as write a version of history that glorified and normalized their dominance as legitimate and natural. This "colonization of the mind" enabled a writing of history that portrayed Latinos/as and indigenous peoples as "immigrants" and "foreigners" with no claim to the Americas, while "European Americans were constructed as the natural owners and inheritors of these lands" (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, p. 421). Non-elite Whites illustrated another form of colonization of the mind—trading the potential of cross-race class alliances against elite Whites for the benefits of belonging to the "superior" white group, often against their own economic interests.

Nativism, supporting the interests of "native-born" people over "foreign-born" people, combined with racial animus toward (mainly non-Protestant) migrants of color to shape restrictive anti-immigration laws and populist white sentiments (Spickard, 2007). Immigration laws of the 1800s restricted immigration as rising nativist sentiments combined racism with the traditional hostility of U.S.-born, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants toward newer immigrants from Catholic Ireland and Catholic Southern Europe, and East European Jews. Immigration laws tightly restricted immigration from China, Japan, the Philippines, and other parts of the world. Nativism intermingled with race, religion, and class interests to sustain the dominance of white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant elites while restricting access for other groups. These policies continued to shape political and social life across the United States and to entrench and increase white economic and political advantage until the Immigration Acts of 1965 relaxed barriers to immigration and the Civil Rights Acts of the same era opened up political and civil rights to people of African, Asian, Latino/a and Native American descent. Over the past few years, legislators have exploited a general anti-immigrant public sentiment to propose and pass anti-immigration laws in a number of states, including Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah. Arizona's prototypical legislation, SB 1070, was passed in 2010. This law mandates police officers to stop and question people about immigration status if they suspect they may be in this country illegally, criminalizes undocumented workers who do not possess an "alien registration document," allows U.S. citizens to file suits against government agencies that do not enforce the law, and criminalizes employers who transport or hire undocumented workers (Sinha and Faithful, 2012). More recently, the governor of Arizona banned the public schools from teaching

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ethnic studies classes, particularly the teaching of the Mexican American studies program in Tucson's public schools (Arizona Ethnic Studies Network, 2012; Sleeter, 2012).

RACIAL IDENTITIES, RACIAL HIERARCHIES, AND WHITE SUPREMACY

White supremacy and racism rationalize inequality (as natural and given) and homogenize experience by compressing social diversity into binaries and dividing racialized groups into artificial hierarchies. For example, the one-drop rule that defined as "Black" any person with blood quantum of a certain percentage (that varied by state and region) exemplifies this binary system. Established during the period of legal slavery, the one-drop rule ensured that anyone who had a remote relative of African descent, even if this heritage was not visible, could be kept in slavery (and later segregated under Jim Crow laws). This not only protected the interests of a small group of propertied Whites who reaped the benefits of the system but created a relatively large pool of self-reproducing cheap labor. Conversely, federal standards for who could be considered Native American used "blood quantum" rules to eliminate most "mixed-bloods" from tribal nationality rolls as a device to decrease Indians' claims for tribal land rights. In both cases, the goal was to perpetuate a system of advantages benefiting white wealth and ownership.

The realities of people's lives under this system are far more complex than a racialized binary suggests. We can see the contradictions in the widely varying ways that people describe President Barack Obama, a man whose ancestry includes Kenyan, Irish, German, and Native American. In his autobiography, he identifies himself as black, as do many other dark-skinned people of varying heritages, to acknowledge that they are and have historically been viewed and treated as Black by the larger society and to proudly claim and affirm that identity as an act of resistance to white supremacy. Others insist on naming Obama as biracial or multiracial, challenging a black/white binary that renders invisible other ethnic, national, tribal identities and heritages. The fact that people read Obama's "racial" identity in varying ways based on acceptance or resistance to racial binaries illustrates social construction of race in action.

The braided nature of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, and other social categories further complicates our understanding of social identity. As members of multiple social identity groups, experiences of privilege and oppression are also mediated by cross-cutting issues of status, rank, power, and value linked to class, gender, sexuality, and age. Social identities are not themselves oppressive; they are often sources of self-understanding, pride, and sustenance. Rather, systemic practices of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, adultism/ageism, transgender, and religious oppression create hierarchies that devalue people based on social group membership.

CONTEMPORARY AND INTERSECTING MANIFESTATIONS OF RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Certainly, there have been periods in the history of the United States when progress on racial issues has seemed to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Many would like to think that institutionalized racism suffered its demise with the civil rights movements of the mid-1960s and the laws passed in their wake. Yet, almost 250 years since the abolition of slavery and more than 50 years since the end of legalized segregation in the United States—although important changes have taken place—racist practices endure. The legacies of racism continue through entrenched and continuing economic, political, and social disparities. For instance, racist practices are reproduced

through pervasive gaps in wealth and income between Whites as a group and groups of color (see, for example, Oliver and Shapiro, selection 27). Racism, sexism, and classism intersect to create huge health disparities for women and their children (see "National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health Statement on Healthcare for All," selection 72). Racism combines with religious oppression to suppress the cultural expression of indigenous groups' religious beliefs and practices (see Echo-Hawk, selection 50, and Grinde, selection 51, in the "Religious Oppression" section).

Contemporary manifestations of racism and nativism are seen in the relentless criminalization of immigration status and use of incarceration, particularly in border communities and in how immigration policing continues to impact women, children and youth, Indigenous, Mexican, African, and South Asian communities and workers (see NNIRR, selection 15). It is alive in the incarceration without evidence or legal warrant (under the Patriot Act) of Arab Americans following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Racism is at work in racial and religious profiling of immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, in the widespread immigrant raids in homes and workplaces, particularly, of immigrants from Latin America, and the poor working conditions of undocumented workers that labor in rural and urban centers. Recognition of the unique and multifaceted ways that individuals encounter racism simultaneously with gender, class, national origin, religion, and other forms of discrimination is necessary for understanding how diverse individuals and groups experience, resist, and organize to dismantle systems of oppression.

While the election of President Obama offered some hope for racial justice, it has become apparent that we cannot relax our efforts to push for change in a system that has institutionally embedded racism in all areas of social life, be it immigration, job opportunities, health-care practices, housing, or education. Racism impacts the quality of all our lives because it resides within all significant structures of society. Hence, by no measure are we in a *post-racial* era as many news and political commentators assert.

Pervasive historical legacies and deeply entrenched economic, political, and social factors continue to shape the experiences of people of color from diverse racial/ethnic groups in both shared and unique ways, as the readings in this section delineate. We hope this introduction and the selected readings that follow will encourage students to develop a sophisticated and complex understanding of race and racism to enable readers to build strong, multiracial coalitions for change. It is up to us to transform historical legacies and current manifestations of racism and white supremacy to create a society with justice for all.