

LIBRARIES & MEMORIES: BEYOND WHITE PRIVILEGE 101

by George Lipsitz

Red Cliff Lake Ojibwe activist Walter Bresette found it remarkable that white Americans had such great libraries but such poor memories. He felt that with the Ojibwe it was the reverse, that they had virtually no libraries, but possessed great memories. Bresette's observations grew out of his valiant efforts to implement the spearfishing rights guaranteed to the Ojibwe people in a treaty signed in 1847 but not honored until the 1980s. He wondered how a people with some of the best libraries in the world could know so little about the past, while the impoverished Ojibwe knew their history very well.

Of course, the Ojibwe gift for memory was no better or worse than that of whites. Native Americans remembered their treaty rights because they were essential to their survival as a people. White Americans with good libraries conveniently "forgot" about the rights ceded to the Ojibwe and others because they profited from refusing to implement them. Race and racism are matters of interests as well as of attitudes. They concern property as well as pigment.

As Cornel West observes, it is fundamentally depressing to confront the degree to which race still matters in our society. Although the civil rights movement of the 1960s secured important and lasting victories, people from different races still confront starkly unequal access to housing and health care, to education and employment. As much as one might hope to find gradual and ever increasing progress for social justice, in many ways things have stayed the same. Malcolm X used to say that if you stick a knife nine inches in my back and then pull it out nine inches, you cannot call that progress. It would not even be progress if you pulled the knife all the way out, because the wound would still have to heal. Moreover, Malcolm added, some people do not even admit that the knife is there.

Biologists and anthropologists now agree that dividing humanity into different races is fabricated and fraudulent; racial categories are scientific fictions. Yet scientific fictions can become social facts with deadly consequences. Malcolm used to say that racism was like a Cadillac, they make a new model every year. Just as it is impossible to fix a 1990s Cadillac with a 1960s owner's manual, we will not address the racism of the 1990s and beyond with a 1960s philosophy and approach. Our challenge is to

develop a civil rights vision appropriate to our own time, to the challenges presented to us by the injustices inscribed in our everyday lives through racial inequality.

A broad range of private prejudices and public policies keep racism alive and functioning in our society, not so much through the direct, snarling, and referential racism of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, but more through the indirect, institutional, and inferential racism encoded within what I call the possessive investment in whiteness. In my view, the possessive investment in whiteness creates the racialized hierarchies of our society. It determines which families receive home loans and which families remain renters, whose children attend well-funded schools and whose children go to overcrowded underfunded institutions with inexperienced teachers and inadequate equipment. It determines which people breathe polluted air, ingest lead in their blood streams, or eat fish poisoned by mercury and which people are by and large protected from environmental hazards. It determines who can rely on inside information and personal networks to secure one of the eighty-five percent of all available jobs that are never listed in the classified ads and who will remain unemployed or underemployed. It helps shape the tax code in such a way as to give favored treatment to precisely the kinds of income that rest upon the fruits of past and present discrimination, allowing white parents to pass on unearned advantages to their children.

The persistence of residential segregation, educational inequality, environmental racism, and employment discrimination makes a mockery of the promises of fairness and equality inscribed within civil rights laws. It means that members of aggrieved racial groups experience their racial identities through impediments to the accumulation of assets that appreciate in value. People of color confront disproportionate obstacles to acquiring education, marketable skills, and job training. They face unparalleled exposure to health risks. Their racial identities confine them to the segments of the labor market where it is most difficult to bargain over their wages and working conditions. They face scrutiny and discipline from law enforcement officials, educators, and cultural brokers intent on restricting their cultural and political expressions. They are not so much disadvantaged as taken advantage of. At the same time, their unearned disadvantages structure unearned advantages for whites.

The possessive investment in whiteness is not simply a product of the past, the legacy of conquest, genocide, slavery, and segregation. Rather, it is a reality renewed every day through a broad span of practices ranging from urban renewal and freeway construction to discriminatory zoning and home loan policies, from the weaknesses and non-enforcement of civil rights laws to tax laws that give favored treatment to money made from past and present forms of discrimination while inhibiting inter-generational transfers of wealth within communities of color. The possessive investment in whiteness is about assets as well as attitudes; it is about property as well as pigment. It does not stem primarily from personal acts of prejudice by

individuals but from shared social structures that make some people's lives worth more than other people's lives.

In many ways, these grim realities confirm the wisdom of that great Willie Nelson song "Three Days" where Willie sings that we have only three days in our lives filled with tears and sorrow. Yet those three days are yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Our problems did not start yesterday and no matter how hard we work, they will not be solved tomorrow. St. Louis community organizer Ivory Perry used to say that being for social justice in this society was like being in love with someone who is not in love with you. You see how it could all work out, but the object of your love is just not buying it. This can be depressing indeed. Yet it is not depressing to realize that there are people of all races committed to social change, people who believe that there is important work to be done and that it is up to us to do it.

Yet we need to confront the enormous depth, dimensions, and duration of white supremacy. Catherine MacKinnon observes that change is not slow, it is resistance to change that takes a long time. When it comes to the possessive investment in whiteness, resistance flows from an epistemology of ignorance. It is not just that people do not know what is easily available to them in all of our good libraries, but that they do not want to know.

For the most part, white people appear ignorant of the privileges they derive from the possessive investment in whiteness. Seventy percent of white respondents to one public opinion poll claimed that "African Americans have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites." A National Opinion Research Council Report in 1990 disclosed that more than sixty percent of whites felt that Blacks suffered from unemployment and inadequate housing because of their own lack of will power. There is reason to believe that even these figures are too optimistic, that white responses to poll takers reveal more generosity than the actual behavior of whites in everyday life. Leonard Steinhorn points to one poll where eighty percent of whites asserted that they have close personal friends who are Black. Yet for this to be true it would have to mean that "every American black, even those most isolated from whites, has five or six close white friends," certainly an unlikely prospect. Similarly, another poll found that only six percent of whites identified themselves as prejudiced against Blacks. Yet nearly half of African American respondents reported direct experiences with racial discrimination within the previous thirty days. As Christopher Doob notes, if both responses are reliable "that small percentage of whites must have remained very busy solidifying their racist reputations."

The possessive investment in whiteness can be combated, but only by changing our way of thinking about civil rights. For the most part, racial injuries in our society do not stem from aberrant acts by individual racists, but rather they originate from the indirect, inferential, institutional,

and systemic skewing of opportunities and life chances along racial lines. Whiteness is the most subsidized identity in our society; the most powerful identity politics are those that protect the value of whiteness. White advantages come from favoritism, not fitness, fortitude, or family formations.

In her exemplary study of racial attitudes among white college students, Karyn McKinney documents the tactics that whites use to deny that privileges accrue to them through the possessive investment in whiteness. She reports that when her students read Peggy McIntosh's generative work on the taken-for-granted privileges that white people enjoy daily because of their race, the students zero in only on the micro-level privileges McIntosh identifies. They agree that it would be annoying to be unable to find "flesh colored" bandages that match their skin tones and that they would not like being followed by suspicious security personnel when they enter a department store. Yet they do not address the structural side of McIntosh's examples, evading their privileged access to employment, education, housing, and health care. Instead, they complain that "reverse discrimination" against whites makes their race a liability, and that the society in which they live delivers unfair gains and unjust rewards to communities of color.

McKinney's students should not be blamed for their unwillingness to face facts. As James Baldwin noted in another context, the entire history of the Republic has conspired to keep the truth from them. Ignorance has its costs, however. By failing to reckon with the rewards that come to them as a result of racial privilege, whites prevent themselves from seeing how privilege actually works in this society, how increasingly undemocratic and unequal their country has become. White workers and professionals eager to police the boundaries of whiteness against challenges from aggrieved communities of color do not see the systematic nature of inequality in their own lives. Whites who feel compelled by self-interest and ideology to defend racial inequality are poorly positioned to understand or critique class, gender, and regional inequalities that disadvantage them.

Most African Americans know all too well something that the students do not know, that past and present structural forces shape their lives. Blacks are not likely to number themselves among the forty-six million Americans today who can trace the origins of their family wealth to the Homestead Act of 1862, because almost all of that land was allocated to whites through restrictions expressly designed to deny access to blacks. They cannot include themselves among the major beneficiaries of the trillions of dollars of wealth accumulated through the appreciation of housing assets secured by federally insured loans between 1932 and 1962 because ninety-eight percent of FHA loans made during that era went to whites via the openly racist categories utilized in the agency's official manuals for appraisers. Most blacks know that past discrimination continues to influence contemporary struggles to accumulate assets because wealth is inherited and passed down across generations. In recent years, moreover,

changes in the tax code have further skewed opportunities and life chances along racial lines by giving favored treatment to those forms of income most likely to represent the fruits of past and present discrimination like inheritance income and capital gains, while lessening the value of income gained through work. The living legacy of past discrimination combines with the impact of contemporary discriminatory practices in mortgage lending, real estate sales, automobile credit financing, and employment to impose artificial impediments against asset accumulation among African Americans.

Racism itself is an injury. Unequal access to home ownership has important health consequences. Access to a limited housing market makes members of aggrieved racial groups more likely than whites to live in communities with toxic hazards and less likely to have access to medical treatment. Whether insured or not, people of color receive fewer preventive medical services than whites. They do not get flu shots, cancer screening, heart bypass surgery, angioplasty, or eye care to the degree that they would if they were white. One out of every four African American mothers in 1999 received no prenatal care during the first trimester. Only twenty-six percent of elderly Blacks were vaccinated against pneumonia in 1998, while fifty-two percent of elderly whites received the pneumonia vaccine. One out of every four African American children between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five months did not receive their recommended vaccinations in 1999. African Americans suffer onerous consequences – like limb amputation or radical cancer surgery – from this pattern of delayed medical attention to a much greater degree than is true of members of more privileged groups. The Office of Minority Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that the death rate among Blacks due to diabetes is more than double the rate for whites, that African Americans face a thirty percent greater likelihood of dying from heart disease compared to whites, that whites are forty percent less likely to die from strokes as Blacks are, that Blacks have a thirty percent greater chance of dying from cancer than whites. Black men have the highest age adjusted incidence of cancer and mortality of all groups of men, and life expectancy overall is six years less for Blacks than life expectancy for whites.

Moreover, being on the receiving end of racism creates intense and constant stress, boosts the risks of depression, anxiety, and anger, producing or aggravating heart disease. A British study found people who suffered from discrimination were twice as likely to develop psychotic episodes. Harvard researchers calculate a 1% increase in racist incidents translates to an increase of 350 deaths per 100,000 African Americans. Investigators at the Rush University Medical Center in Chicago contend that repeated exposure to discrimination can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease for African American women. Camara Jones of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that during childhood blood pressure rates of Blacks and whites show no differences. But as adults, Black blood pressure increases. It drops at night for whites but not for blacks. Jones attributes this pattern to the stress caused by racism. Her research shows that nearly

fifty percent of Blacks report that they think about race at least once a day, but whites rarely, if ever, think about race. “It’s the little things that count,” Jones observes, “like being treated differently by a store clerk. Each event may be insignificant, but the repetition builds up.”

Race also affects the quality of medical care. Members of “minority” groups get sicker and die younger than whites, regardless of social class. Black men in the U.S. can expect to die 7.1 years earlier than white men, to be 2.5 times more likely to die of heart disease than white women, to be twice as likely to die of cerebro-vascular disease as white men or white women. Increases in income do not necessarily produce increases in health; middle class African American men and women are more likely to suffer from hypertension and stress than those with lower incomes.

Impoverished African American children in cities across the country live in dwellings with lead-based paint on interior and exterior walls, exposing them to the dangers of developing toxic levels of lead in their bloodstreams. National studies reveal that poor Black children have a far greater degree of contracting lead poisoning than poor white children. Among the working poor, Black youths are three times as likely to develop lead poisoning compared to their white counterparts. Medical authorities in St. Louis in 1998 discovered 1,833 new cases of childhood lead poisoning, and estimated that somewhere between twenty and twenty-five percent of local youths had toxic levels of lead in their bloodstreams – nearly six times the national average. In some Black neighborhoods the figure was closer to forty percent. Yet the city of St. Louis has only enough money to screen fewer than half of the children who need to be tested every year.

At every level, African Americans face systematic obstacles to asset accumulation, wealth, and health. Inheritance helps whites secure unearned advantages in the form of transformative assets that increase the wealth gap between the races. These workings of whiteness reveal the systemic and structural contours of inequality in the United States. Yet Karyn McKinney’s white college students discern no particular advantage to them for being white, and instead present a torrent of complaints about reverse racism and the penalties they imagine they confront for being white.

In this society, whiteness is not so much a color as a condition. It is a structured advantage that channels unearned gains and unjust enrichments to some people while imposing unfair impediments against the accumulation of assets that appreciate in value and can best be passed down across generations to others. Although not all whites benefit from the possessive investment equally, even the poorest of the poor among whites do not face the concentrated poverty and level of exposure to environmental hazards that routinely confront Blacks. To paraphrase James Baldwin, whiteness means that when you pledge allegiance to your country, you can rest assured that your country has pledged allegiance to you. Claire Jean Kim shows that whiteness persists even when white people are not present. In her study of conflict between Black residents of Brooklyn and the owners

of a grocery store owned by Korean immigrants, Kim shows how the national racial order pits these groups against each other to the benefit of whites.

If we are to address and redress the cumulative, collective, and continuing consequences of the possessive investment in whiteness, we need to have both great libraries and great memories. We need to acknowledge that decisions about what libraries collect and how they make their collections available play an important role in what people know and what they do not know. We need to recognize that the privileges and exclusions that permeate U.S. society pervade the practices of libraries as well. We need to see that we have important work to do and that it is up to us to do it.

It is depressing to confront the degree to which race still matters in this society. Yet it is not depressing to join in the struggle for racial justice. We may not look or sound like the people who come to us pre-packaged as experts on race in the corporate media or the political system, but we have a role to play in deciding what will be remembered and what will be forgotten, who will be included and who will be excluded, who will speak and who is silenced. None of us chose our parents, but all of us are free to choose our politics and our principles. None of us chose our color, but all of us are free to choose our commitments. This is our time. We need to be on time, even if those around us seem to be late.

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