

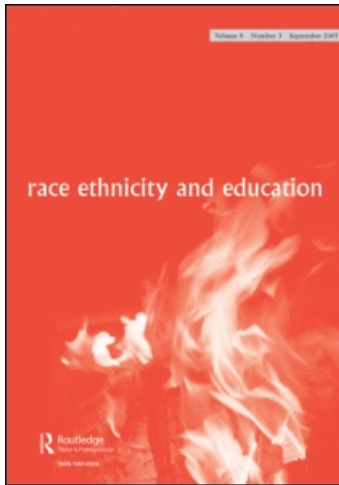
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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 902376019]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Race Ethnicity and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713443511>

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Online Publication Date: 01 September 2008

To cite this Article Akom, A. A. (2008) 'Ameritocracy and infra-racial racism: racializing social and cultural reproduction theory in the twenty-first century', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 11:3, 205 — 230

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13613320802291116

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613320802291116>

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Ameritocracy and infra-racial racism: racializing social and cultural reproduction theory in the twenty-first century

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This article argues that narratives forecasting spectacular mobility for Black people/people of color along with the growth of the Black middle class function as proof that America ‘works’ and that the American dream is obtainable for all. However, what is concealed within this ‘meritocratic’ discourse is that full acceptance into this society is restricted on the basis of racial identity and other forms of social difference. I term the illusion of egalitarianism as ‘Ameritocracy’. By combining two separate words – American and Meritocracy – I use the idea of ‘Ameritocracy’ to demonstrate how race intersects with other forms of social oppression such as class, gender, religion, nationality, sexuality, phenotype, accent, immigration status, and special needs. Thus, informed by the intercentricity of racialized oppression, I use the concept of Ameritocracy to racialize social and cultural reproduction theory and illustrate how traditional claims of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, and race neutrality often mask self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in the United States’ opportunity structure and beyond.

Keywords: race; racism; social and cultural reproduction theory; colorblindness; merit; intersectionality; declining significance of race

Introduction

The academic indignation, student agitation, and public outrage resulting from my 25 October 2005 incarceration by three university police officers was extraordinary. And correctly so. I was the victim of racial profiling. An unarmed Black man in my mid-thirties, with two children, ages five and seven, waiting in the car, incarcerated for going to my university office to pick up books. Apparently the security guard and the police officers had a hard time believing that a dark-skinned, half-Ghanaian/half-African American male with dreadlocks, standing 6’ 2”, was a college professor entering his office at approximately 10.30 p.m. at night in the only college of ethnic studies in the United States of America.¹ For a brief period, my incarceration received significant local media coverage, sparked local protest, and garnered some national attention. These protests, occurring sporadically over the course of the academic year, were led primarily by students, staff, faculty, and grass-roots activists demanding investigation into what was perceived as continuous police brutality against Black people/people of color in the Bay area and beyond.

Some in the Black community correctly read this incident as another in a long line of structural impediments negatively impacting the Black community. Other Black folks/people of color,² as well as white liberals, countered that my false arrest had more to do

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with my ‘aggressive behavior’ than the color of my skin.³ This line of thinking – one that blames Black people/people of color for our own victimization – can be traced to the ‘culture of poverty’ thesis introduced by Oscar Lewis and later popularized by the likes of Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and various other social scientist and policy makers (Lewis 1959; Pierre 2004). The central claim of the culture of poverty thesis is that a pathological set of behaviors exists for Black people/people of color that sets us apart from ‘the American mainstream’. The ‘dysfunctional culture’ that the thesis insists exists among Black people/people of color is characterized by a sense of resignation, nihilism, an inability to delay gratification, low educational motivation, low social and economic aspiration, a trend toward female-centered families (matrifocality), and an inadequate moral preparation for employment (Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965; Pierre 2004, 141). As Jemima Pierre, Robin Kelley, and a host of other academics have demonstrated, ‘the “culture of poverty” thesis has generated an industry of scholarship on the “ghetto”, the “underclass”, and the “inner city”, all of which construct poor people of color – particularly the Black poor – as a ‘reservoir of pathologies and bad cultural values’” (Kelley 1997, 16; Pierre 2004, 141; see also Valentine 1968).

As we enter the twenty-first century, a recycled (yet new) version of the culture of poverty thesis is gaining visibility and credence through a number of neoconservative authors, including Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom (1997, 2003), Shelby Steele (1990, 2006), John McWhorter (2000, 2005), Ward Connerly (2000), and John Ogbu (2003), to name a few. The major thread connecting these scholars is the notion that the attitudes and behaviors of Black people/people of color are responsible for large disparities in the realms of education and employment. For example, the *New York Times* in its 26 March 2006 edition published a short piece entitled ‘A Poverty of Mind’ by Orlando Patterson (2006). The central question of the article was: ‘What makes young Black men behave so self-destructively?’ Patterson offers a number of different explanations – not surprisingly, all centered around Black cultural pathology. According to Patterson, ‘a cultural explanation of Black-male self-destructiveness addresses not simply the immediate connection between their attitudes and behaviors and the undesired outcomes, but explores the origins and changing nature of these attitudes, perhaps over generations, in their brutalized past.’ Patterson does not stop here. He goes on to detail the lack of cultural values in Black men and asserts, ‘It is impossible to understand the predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering behavior of young Black men without going back deep into their collective past.’

These recent and arguably influential studies and the ideology behind them deserve special attention here because they begin to illuminate the extent to which discourses of Black cultural pathology are being repackaged in ways that perpetuate and extend culture of poverty ideologies irrespective of gender or social class (Gomez 1999). Moreover, embedded within these analyses is what appears to be an alarming abhorrence for African Americans (even though many of these authors are Black themselves), a rudimentary understanding of African American history and culture; and a lack of understanding of contemporary processes of racialization and their impact on the Black community (Pierre 2004, 254). For example, in Patterson’s ‘Poverty of Mind’, he asks, ‘What are some of the cultural factors that explain the sorry state of young Black men?’ His solution is not jobs, an overhauling of our educational system with an emphasis on urban teacher development and critical pedagogy (see Foster 1997; Darder, Torres, and Baladono 2002; Noguera 2004; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008), increased investment in the green economy for low-income youth (Jones 2006), youth development programs (see Ginwright, Noguera, and Cammarotta 2006), rethinking Black mentorship (see Akom 2006), better living conditions (Bullard 1993), or radical prison reform (Fine et al. 2003; Torre et al. 2007). Rather,

instead of even probing for solutions, Patterson insists that the reason for Black male failure, particularly in the realm of public education, is what sociologists refer to as the ‘cool-pose culture’ – ‘hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture ... it’s almost like a drug for these young men.’⁴

The alarming aspect of ‘Poverty of Mind’, besides its title, which suggests Black intellectual inferiority, is that Patterson is not alone. Many neoconservative and not-so-neoconservative authors paint pejorative pictures of Black Americans – that we do not want to ‘achieve’, that we have an ‘oppositional culture’, that we are ‘violent’ and ‘aggressive’ – as if these views have not been continuously challenged, contested, and for the most part thoroughly discredited (Pierre 2004). For example, ‘Robin Kelley, in his masterful *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional!* (1997), debunked the notion of United States Black culture as undifferentiated and as always already “oppositional”. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993), Thomas Sugrue (1996), and Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1995) have all shown how the so-called “urban crisis” is the result of complex and intertwining factors, such as segregation, unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, and racism, that have made this country so anti-Black’ (Pierre 2004, 254). And Asa Hilliard and Theresa Perry, in *Young, Gifted, and Black*, argue that over generations African Americans developed important philosophies of education that were tied to liberation and racial uplift (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard 2003). This is not to say that concerns about Black-on-Black violence, the failure of urban education, and increasing teen pregnancy and drug use are not justified. However, what is amazing is how little discussion there is about the availability of guns, differential sentencing, and the socio-political conditions that define the contours of United States racism.

Therefore, using my case as a point of departure, I want to suggest that there are subtle, hidden, and profound ideologies lurking just beneath the surface of my incarceration that speak volumes to the common credo that there is a declining significance of race in America, that discrimination is no longer a serious and widespread problem, and that whatever blatant anti-Black hostility remains is mostly that of isolated white bigots and Klan-type groups (Feagin 1991). I contend that contemporary race relations work through what Bonilla-Silva refers to as a ‘racialized social system’ – a sophisticated, covert, and apparently ‘nonracial’ system whereby ‘actors in superordinate positions (dominant race) develop a set of social practices (a racial praxis if you will) and an ideology to maintain the advantages they receive based on their racial classification’ (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 22). According to Bonilla-Silva, the concept of a racialized social system is veiled within a larger ‘meritocratic’ discourse that is based upon the narrative of the American Dream – a popular Hollywood trope that signifies that individuals do not inherit their social status, they attain it via their own ambition and ability. Stories of spectacular mobility ranging from Horatio Alger’s to the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) resonate in the American psyche and hold a treasured place in our national folklore (Macleod 1987/1995). However, these rags-to-riches stories are often produced and reproduced without detailed attention to the present effects of past discrimination, or, more specifically, without a discussion of the complex interplay of United States racial hierarchies on social class formation in the Black community (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pierre 2004).

I label the illusion of egalitarianism ‘Ameritocracy’. I invented the word Ameritocracy to illuminate dimensions of social reproduction deeply embedded in our American social system (Akom 2004). By combining two separate words – American and meritocracy – I use the idea of ‘Ameritocracy’ to demonstrate the ways in which race intersects with other forms of social difference such as class, gender, religion, nationality, sexuality, phenotype, accent, immigration status, and special needs; and to account for the uneven distribution of

resources behind development and underdevelopment in Black urban communities (Sullivan 1997). Ameritocracy, therefore, refers not just to a geographical or temporal site but to a conceptual lens which brings together questions of race in relation to power in local, national, and international contexts. In this sense, Ameritocracy is not a unit of analysis, but a theoretical approach that will potentially revitalize discussion about race relations, urban poverty, and social mobility in Black urban communities while simultaneously theorizing the political and social uses of racial identity and other forms of social difference to maintain and reproduce repressive systems of social control. Race is, after all, often the primary ideological battleground in contests of immigration and citizenship as well as the primary target for the growing prison industrial complex (Davis 2003). Race, then, should be at the center of discussions of 'Americanization'. However, rather than pushing for a rightful centering of race relations, I demonstrate that the study of race relations itself has much to teach us about the representation (and thus production and reproduction) of urban poverty, about which bodies and which discourses are privileged, and about which minds and which communities are marginalized, or conveniently overlooked (Gillborn 2008).

The purpose of this article, then, is to take a step towards redressing the under-theorization of race and show how theories of reproduction and their offspring – often articulated under the guise of culture of poverty, cultural difference and oppositional culture, to name a few – are increasingly used by the media, social scientists, and social commentators from both ends of the political spectrum to deny the continuing significance of race and to denigrate (while at the same time culturally appropriating) racial and cultural attributes associated with 'Blackness' in the context of white supremacy (Omi and Winant 1986; Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Specifically, reproduction theories in their current academic deployment are deeply engaged in a project of 'racial myth-making' whereby racially explicit experiences and practices are recoded as cultural or social with little or no attention to the role of institutionalized racism in the construction of social inequality (Pierre 2004; Akom 2006). By downplaying the importance of race and racism, reproduction theories offer little hope for challenging and changing the most repressive features of our public educational system. By ignoring or minimizing race and gender these theories unknowingly provide a rationale for not addressing the concrete needs of Black people/people of color in educational settings. By claiming 'any thing but race', reproduction theories miss the opportunity to seriously challenge the lived experience that not all racial identified groups occupy the same socio-political position in society, that our respective cultures have different meanings, and that racially identified groups occupy different spaces in the American psyche (Thomas 2000; Perry, Steele, and Hilliard 2003).

This article builds on several areas of sociological and educational research and theory. Most importantly, I use the culture of poverty thesis as an analytical tool to bridge social and cultural reproduction theory. Theories of Black educational achievement typically tell contradictory stories. Culture of poverty theories are characterized by nihilism and low educational aspirations. Reproduction theories reveal how social positions are invisibly reproduced in a manner that makes the inequality appear to be the result of meritocratic and democratic practices (Lewis 2003, 5). Although two sides of the same coin, these theories converge in their attempt to explain how class relationships are reproduced from one generation to the next; yet, surprisingly, there is very little analytical language for thinking of them relationally. To consider them relationally is not just to explore their interconnections but to rethink the theories themselves (Self 2003).

In that vein, this article is divided into five sections. The first section is a brief examination of the origins of Ameritocracy, the discovery of infra-racial racism, and the post-World War I disinvestment in Black urban communities. In section two I show that an

important aspect of reproduction theory is its link to Marxism and capitalism, with a flaw of Marxist scholarship being its inclusion of race primarily as an outcome or afterthought (McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen 2000; Allen 2001; Leonardo 2005). Even in the brilliantly nuanced work of Pierre Bourdieu we find the disturbing tendency to recode racial processes as cultural, to conceal important differences – such as financial net worth – between racial groups within the same social class, or to subsume racio-political dynamics under the potentially benign language of ‘cultural capital’.⁵ In section three I continue to racialize reproduction theory by re-examining the idea of a declining significance of race in twenty-first-century America. Originally introduced by Wilson (1978), the trope of a ‘declining significance of race’ has gained popularity and is now one of the paradigmatic ways that cultural and class constructs are used to ‘both reaffirm the United States racial hierarchy and perpetuate the pathologizing of African American life and culture’ (Pierre 2004, 151). The fourth section uses my own qualitative research with Black middle- and working-class families to examine the paradoxes of negotiating the United States’ racial terrain. Finally, the conclusion calls for a reformulation of theories of reproduction as they are currently conceptualized and suggests the need to ground interpretations of Black social mobility within a more race- and gender-conscious framework that acknowledges both the material and psychological benefits of skin-color privilege and patriarchy in the US opportunity structure (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Nobles 2006).

The origins of Ameritocracy and the discovery of infra-racial racism

One need not go back to the days of slavery to discover the antecedents of contemporary white racial advantage. The origins of Ameritocracy are embedded throughout the laws and policies that spurred post-World War I economic growth in the United States. Three federal laws passed by Congress in the mid-1930s and 40s were instrumental in underwriting the current pattern of white accumulation and Black disinvestment: the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, and the Federal Housing Act.⁶ These three laws in combination with additional factors helped to create suburban gardens and urban plantations. More than a metaphor, gardens and plantations represent concrete racial, spatial, political and economic formations that help to develop some communities while under-developing others (Self 2003). These modern government racial preferences form an important yet neglected part of Black American political history.

The purpose of this section, then, is to sketch out the contours of Ameritocracy in a way that renders visible some of the hidden propositions, policies and politics that have allowed white people to maintain racial privilege without overtly claiming racial superiority. Here I am indebted to scholars who work on the African Diaspora, especially critical theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1952, 1963), Gayatri Spivak (1987), Edward Said (1978), Philomena Essed (1991), Stuart Hall (2003), Eduardo Bonillia-Silva (2001), Joyce E. King (1991) and Beverly Tatum (1997), to name a few. Fanon, Spivak, Said, Hall, King, Bonillia-Silva, Tatum, and other proponents of subaltern studies maintain that subtle forms of racism have a greater psychological and material impact on Black people than overt forms of racism. Together, I argue that the subtle forms of racism created by institutions, initiatives, and individuals constitute what I refer to as infra-racial racism – a term I use to describe the ways in which contemporary anti-Black racism, or other forms of racism, whether deployed through private practices or state sponsored legislation, often makes no mention of race yet reproduces a system of racially structured inequality that, like infra-red rays gets embedded in the body, penetrates beneath the skin, to such an extent that it negatively impacts the health, well-being, and social mobility of Black people/people of color beyond the visible end of the

spectrum. As James Scott says, ‘That it should be invisible ... is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power’ (Scott 1992).

I stumbled upon the concept of infra-racial racism when I found myself at a loss to answer the following questions: (1) Why do middle class African American youths not do as well on standardized tests as working class white youths? (2) Why do African American women at every socioeconomic level have higher rates of pre-term birth and infant mortality than white women who haven’t finished high school or Black women who immigrated to the United States from other countries? And finally, (3) How is it that a racist event can happen thousands of miles away yet Black people/people of color often feel as if that event took place in their space, to their community, to their loved ones? In other words, how do Black people/people of color have personal connections to racist actions even though the action themselves did not happen to them? And what term in our current social science lexicon can be used to describe these sociological phenomena?

As I struggled with this disembodied notion, I began to research a variety of terms used to describe modern racism: ‘enlightened racism’ (Jhally and Lewis 1992), ‘dysconscious racism’ (King 1991), ‘inferential and referential racism’ (Omi 1989), and ‘interactional racism’ (Brandt 1986), to name a few, yet none of these terms could adequately address these questions. The French sociologist Michel Wieviorka’s term ‘infra-racism’ defined as acts or racism that are minor or just below racism or disjointed and erratic forms of discrimination (Wieviorka 1996); Fordham and Ogbu’s concept of ‘collective identity’ – defined as ‘people’s sense of who they are, their “we-feeling” or “belonging”’; and Spivak’s ‘epistemic violence’ – defined as the historical production of the knowledge of others, come close, and all are part of the way that infra-racial racism gets operationalized (Spivak 1987; Ogbu 2004, 3). Yet the emphasis Wieviorka’s term ‘infra-racism’ places on minor forms of racism and discrimination is quite different from my emphasis on the ‘supra’ dimensions of racism and their impact on: (1) collective identity and memory; (2) health and well being; and (3) social mobility. More specifically, ‘infra-racism’, ‘collective identity’ and ‘epistemic violence’ do not adequately address how racism gets embedded in our bodies to such an extent that African Americans have a higher incidence of coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, infant mortality at every socio-economic level or why by the end of high school, African American students have math and reading skills that are virtually the same as those of 8th grade white students (Education Trust 2003). It was at this time that the term infra-racial racism announced itself and proceeded to challenge my imagination for the next several years.

Perhaps the best way to think of infra-racial racism, then, is as a set of linked dimensions that are both material and discursive always in practice and interconnected (Frankenberg 1994). The first dimension extends the work on ‘micro aggressions’ and accounts for the ways that racism gets underneath the skin, disrupts our biology as surely as germs and viruses do, to such an extent that it negatively impacts birth outcomes, educational outcomes, and a number of different indicators of health and well-being (Massy and Denton 1994; David and Collins 2007; James, Hartnett, Kalsbeek 1983; Pierce 1995). The second dimension focuses on discourse – the meaning, perception, and ‘ontological implications’ of different ways of thinking and knowing about racism. This dimension explains, for example, how a racist event can happen in Jena, Louisiana, yet have racial reverberations that, like the ultra-violet rays of the sun, are felt in Ghana, West Africa, Berkeley, California, New York City, and Bahia, Brazil, to name a few. In other words, infra-racial racism is a form of covert racism, but it is more than that, because all forms of racism have infra-racial effects that have heretofore been largely unaccounted for.

Naming infra-racial racism ‘displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed, status that is itself an effect of its dominance’ (Frankenberg 1994, 6). Among the effects on Black people/

people of color are worse jobs, schools, neighborhoods, hospitals, health care, and legal outcomes, to name a few. Infra-racial racism adds an important new dimension to our sociological understanding of racism by going beyond empathy to describe the actual mental, physical, epistemological, and ontological harm, beyond the visible end of the spectrum, that racism does to Black people/people of color in everyday life; as well as accounting for how cumulative advantages are gained by whites and lighter skinned people. In this manner, infra-racial racism's ability to be both a form and an affect make it more theoretically powerful and nuanced as a sociological frame than previous definitions of racism and institutional forms of racial discrimination.

Following Scott, then, I use the concept of infra-racial racism to describe how evolving racial narratives, rhetorical strategies, knowledge production, and racist actions have impacted people of color in the past as well as contemporaneously in the colorblind era, and how these rhetorical strategies and racial praxis often become the 'master narratives' against which all racial actors must compete (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Snow and Benford 1992). I do not suggest that the realm of infra-racial racism is any more or less important than what we traditionally consider overt forms of racism. Rather, I argue that the history of racial inequality in America and beyond cannot be understood without reference to infra-racial racism. Using this revised framework for understanding achievement, mobility, and power, the following explores three New Deal policies that are not associated with social reproduction, but indeed determine how class relationships are reproduced to this day: the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, and Federal Housing policy.⁷ My remarks are meant to be interrogations that may lead to a more nuanced way of understanding the ways in which race, power, and privilege are reproduced from one generation to the next.

Defining Ameritocracy: how the hidden transcript of race impacts social reproduction theory

Several scholars have begun to investigate the daily, evasive, and seemingly invisible forms of infra-racial racism that form an important yet neglected part of Black working history. They have established that one of the central ways that whites are able to maintain racial privilege without overtly claiming racial superiority is through what Herbert Blumer (1958) refers to as race as a sense of group position. Borrowing and extending the work of Blumer, Ameritocracy as a conceptual lens suggests that the construction of racial hierarchies is the result not of whites' individual feelings, but of whites collectively defining a group position: (1) through remote (*and* face-to-face) interracial association; (2) in the 'public arena,' such as legislative assemblies, public meetings, the media; (3) by controlling images and discourses that raise fundamental questions about race and gender relations; (4) through renowned individuals or intellectuals irrespective of skin color; (5) under the direction of strong interest groups;⁸ (6) through the normalization of racial inequality and the realization that civil rights gains can be and are being eroded and reversed over time (Bell 2004); and (7) through the plasticity of racism – a frame which suggest that global white supremacy and the reproduction of racial inequality are continuously being rearticulated and not necessarily declining (Omi and Winant 1986).

Drawing examples from African American social and political history from the 1930s and 1940s, in the rest of this article I sketch out the contours of Ameritocracy in a way that renders visible how the hidden transcripts of race impact social and cultural reproduction theory. To understand the impact of infra-racial racism on social and cultural reproduction among Black working people, we first need to examine how seemingly progressive laws and policies were neither universal nor race neutral. Such a reassessment of Black social

mobility also requires us to rethink the relationship between race, space, merit, and access to institutional resources and privileges.

Using the United States as a case study, we might return, for example, to the landmark Social Security Act of 1935. The Social Security Act of 1935 provided a safety net for millions of workers, guaranteeing them an income after retirement. But the act specifically excluded: agricultural workers and domestic servants – those occupations predominantly occupied by people of color who could not get higher paying wages due to overt racial discrimination in education and the labor market (Brown et al. 2003). According to Charles Houston, Dean of the Howard University Law School, ‘It [the Social Security bill] looks like a sieve with the holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through.’⁹ Indeed, almost three-quarters of the Black labor force was denied coverage of the federal law and Black women, who comprised 90 percent of the domestic workers at the time, were especially disadvantaged by these occupational exclusions. It follows that social security laws were neither universal nor race neutral. Rather, social security from the outset was loaded with infra-racial dimensions that serve to transfer income from Black workers into pockets of white workers by allowing Blacks to receive lower benefits than whites while paying a higher proportion of their income into social security taxes (Brown et al. 2003). Because people of color usually had low incomes they also had the least opportunity to save for retirement. Consequently, many Black families could not pass wealth on to their children. Instead, many children of color had to support their parents during old age.

Like Social Security, the 1935 Wagner Act is another important example of infra-racial politics that Ameritocracy seeks to illuminate and make visible. In theory the act prohibited unfair labor practices by employers and granted unions the power of collective bargaining. In practice, however, the law helped millions of white workers gain entry into the middle class by allowing unions to exclude non-whites and deny people of color access to better-paying jobs and union benefits such as health care, job security, and pensions. By allowing organized labor to exclude Blacks (and other people of color) who did not belong to unions from employment, the Wagner Act was a crucial step in establishing ‘American Apartheid’ – America’s unique form of racial segregation which still persist to this day (Massey and Denton 1993).

But perhaps nowhere was infra-racial racism more evident in institutionalizing white racial advantage and Black disadvantage than in the federal housing and urban renewal legislation. These revolutionary urban and suburban renewal programs made it possible for millions of average white Americans – but not people of color – to own a home for the first time. Thus, between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion of home loans of which more than 98% went to whites. In northern California these racial disparities were even more pronounced. For example, out of 350,000 new homes built between 1946 and 1960 with federal support, fewer than 100 went to African Americans (Alderman 2003). Thus, government programs made possible the newly segregated suburbs that sprang up after World War II. New freeways and government subsidies further helped to develop highly racialized and color-coded public and private spaces that often cut through and destroyed the vitality of non-white neighborhoods in central cities, creating what Self (2003) refers to as suburban gardens and urban plantations. Yet, in part because most scholarship fails to privilege the ‘hidden transcript’ of race and racial production over the ‘official transcript’ of racelessness and social and cultural reproduction, racialized state-sponsored strategic asset accumulation is an area of sub-altern scholarship that has not been sufficiently explored.

The racial wealth gap, then, is an important element of the reproduction of class status that social reproduction theory fails to capture (Conley 1999).¹⁰ More specifically, without an infra-racial analysis, reproduction theory tends to ignore the ways in which ‘racial

preferences' have tipped the playing field and given whites a head start early in life, with systematic advantages throughout life. By broadening our focus to include an infra-racial analysis it becomes increasingly clear that theories of reproduction have become normalized around a discourse that privileges class as the principal determinant of social and political life, while assigning race to a subordinate position (Allen 2004).

Instead of naturalizing social reproduction's fixation with class, I suggest that a closer examination of its initial assumptions is needed. We need to delve into the implications of basing theories of reproduction upon class rather than race. For example, what would social reproduction theory look like 'if it had been founded upon the belief that white supremacy, not capitalism, is the central problem facing humankind' (Allen 2004, 122)? What would its main tenets be if, say, Fanon, Spivak, Tatum, or Essed had been its originator rather than Marx, Durkheim, Bowles and Gintis? 'Can a discourse that pays so little attention to race be anti-racist?' (Allen 2004, 122). For social reproduction theory to gain greater acceptance among people who are concerned with the globalization of white supremacy it will need to seriously engage the ways in which infra-racial racism impacts people of color around the world and move beyond the comfort and confines of a Marxist Eurocentricity (Allen 2004, 122).

How reproduction theory became white

The concept of class in western culture is almost universal. Like the concept of race, it is a term widely used without much agreement on its meaning (Pattillo-McCoy 1999).¹¹ However, unlike race, social class in the era of colorblindness is increasingly becoming the most politically acceptable means by which academics and non-academics describe social difference. The popularity of social class as an analytical tool began when scholars such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and especially Karl Marx developed theories of reproduction to analyze how class status is transmitted from one generation to the next (Macleod 1987/1995). The theory gained popularity in the mid-twentieth century when the likes of Althusser (1970), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Willis (1977), Apple (1979), and Anyon (1980) attempted to challenge the dominant narrative 'that public education offers possibilities for individual development, social mobility, and political and economic power to the disadvantaged and dispossessed' (Giroux 1983, 257). According to this narrative, any individual who works hard, gets an education, and assimilates to 'middle-class' behavioral norms can and will achieve class mobility (Allen 2001). Against the prevailing belief in 'meritocracy', 'radical scholars have argued that the main functions of schools are the reproduction of the dominant ideology, its forms of knowledge, and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor' (Giroux 1983, 257). The result, Levinson and Holland (1996) argue, is that by the end of the 1970s reproduction theory had emerged as the one of the most important theories of class mobility in the field of education and beyond.

Although theories of reproduction have been a dominant paradigm guiding scholars of urban poverty and class mobility since the 1970s, what is less obvious is how these theories have been invisibly influenced by the enormous influx of European immigrants into the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. European immigrants through processes of 'assimilation', 'accommodation', and 'Americanization' were able to escape the oppressive elements of feudalism and industrialization in Europe and take advantage of racial, income, and property privileges not available to darker-skinned peoples immigrating from other parts of the colonized world (Allen 2001).¹² Jemima Pierre explains:

By shedding their racial and cultural distinctiveness ... the ability of European immigrants to become incorporated into United States society was directly linked to their ability to 'become

white' (or assert whiteness) in a White supremacist society (Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995; Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1999).¹³ This point effectively demonstrates the significance of race and racialization processes in United States society. Becoming 'white' entailed a subsuming of European 'ethnic' identity for the privilege of a racial one. (Pierre 2004, 146)

It follows that the racialization of identity and the racial subordination of Black people/people of color provided the ideological and material basis for economic domination and processes of social stratification (Harris 1995). In the labor market, the material benefits of racial exclusion functioned to ameliorate class tension among whites. White working-class laborers perceived that they had more in common with white middle-class owners and professionals than with fellow Black working-class laborers. W.E.B. DuBois, in his classic study of race and class, *Black Reconstruction*, documented the ways in which white racial identification became crucial to how white working-class workers thought of themselves, and maintained their class interest (DuBois 1935). In order to understand the social significance of interracial/intraclass conflict, one need look no further than white wages which far exceeded those of Blacks which were high even in comparison to international standards. Moreover, there were additional advantages not directly related to income. According to DuBois, 'whiteness yielded a "public and psychological wage" vital to white workers' (Harris 1995, 325). Specifically, DuBois discussed how whites

were given public deference ... because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people, to public functions. To public parks ... the police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with ... leniency ... Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect on their personal treatment ... White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. (Harris 1995, 700–1)

Indeed, a central mobility strategy for many white laborers lay in their ability to converge 'white' and 'worker' in a way that evaded rather than confronted class exploitation, while at the same time protecting their racial privilege. Although not afforded the same economic and social privileges of the white ruling class, white workers reconciled their lower rank in the class hierarchy by erecting an equally virulent racial hierarchy and championing themselves as 'not Black' (Harris 1995, 325). By fashioning their American identity as oppositional to the Black 'other', Andrew Hacker and Cheryl Harris suggest that 'the question was not so much "who is white" but, rather, "who may be considered white", for the historical pattern was that various immigrant groups of different ethnic origins were accepted into white identity "shaped around Anglo-American norms"' (Hacker 1992, 155; Harris 1995, 325). Despite appearing as a choice, evasive and complicated forms of resistance and accommodation such as 'passing' painfully illustrate the power of whiteness in the reproduction of racial hierarchy. Harris explains:

The decision to pass as white was not a choice, if by that word one means voluntariness or lack of compulsion. The fact of race subordination was coercive, and it circumscribed the liberty to define oneself. Self-determination of identity was not a right for all people but a privilege accorded on the basis of race. (Harris 1995, 285)

The overarching effect of this hyper-valuation of whiteness was that 'the White European immigrant experience soon came to serve as the controlling model for understanding' the social mobility of all racio-ethnic groups in the United States (Pierre 2004, 524). Omi and Winant (1986) label this as the European 'immigrant analogy' and it has invisibly

guided social reproduction theory in the past as well as in the contemporary period (Pierre 2004, 524).

From social to cultural reproduction: the work of Pierre Bourdieu

While the first wave of critical studies used the tropes of social and economic reproduction to characterize the formation of class structures in a capitalist economy, Pierre Bourdieu created a highly original theory that highlighted the role of culture in the logic of domination. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), what facilitates social inequality are the subtle ways in which schools reward the general background, knowledge, cultural styles and cultural competencies of middle-class students while devaluing the cultural competencies of lower-class students. As a result, by embodying class interests and ideologies, schools reproduce social inequality while making them appear to be the result of meritocratic and democratic processes.

The four main points of Bourdieu's theory are as follows: First, neutral academic standards are laden with culture class resources which reflect the interests of the dominant classes. Second, working- and lower-class students must acquire the social, linguistic, and cultural competencies that middle- and upper-class students acquire by virtue of their birth, and subsequent socialization into the dominant classes. Third, working- and lower-class students are penalized in the race for academic credentials because of what Michael Rose (1989, 6) refers to as 'information poverty' – that is, poor and working-class students are systematically denied forms of social and cultural capital that are recognized as signs of intelligence by schools. And finally, because differences in academic performance are normally explained by differences in intellectual ability and cultural and social resources transmitted through the family, home, etc., differences in privileges between upper- and lower-class students are legitimated by academic credentials, and translated back into economic wealth through labor market transactions, which honor the credentials earned by the dominant classes (Macleod 1987).

Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital¹⁴ in its totality is far more complex than this, involving certain 'taste' for cultural products (art, literature, film, music), manner of speech, style of dress, consumption of goods and services, and the like (Bourdieu 1984; Levinson and Holland 1996). However, the theory of power underlying cultural capital remains consistent throughout – emphasizing the fact that 'only those particular tastes and skills possessed by elite classes are recognized as signs of intelligence by schools' (Levinson and Holland 1996, 6). Schools with high-paid tutors, access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, participation in parent-teacher associations and other seemingly neutral academic mobility processes privilege the success of those who already possess mainstream forms of capital. Those who do not stand a good chance of not doing as well in school, having depressed aspirations, becoming discipline problems, failing classes, or dropping out altogether (Fine 1991; Levinson and Holland 1996). Put simply, Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction attempts to explain how and why the United States can more accurately be depicted as a place where the 'rich get richer and the poor get prison' than as 'the land of opportunity' (Macleod 1987/1995, 7; Reiman 1990).

Although Bourdieu's account of cultural reproduction is a major contribution to the sociology of education, it does have important limitations. First, working-class cultural production and its relationship to resistance, agency, and political contestation are generally ignored by Bourdieu, resulting in the false representation of cultural production as a one-directional process of domination (Giroux 1983; Yosso 2005). Second, Bourdieu's conceptualization of social classes is flat, which conceals the conflict occurring both within and

between different social classes, while obscuring the structural and historical differences between Black people/people of color and white people within the same social class. The homogenization of these crucial differences amounts to turning a blind eye to both structural racism and the reality that class mobility is circumscribed within processes of racial formation (Pierre 2004). Third, as a result of Bourdieu's lack of racial analysis and one-sided emphasis on ruling-class cultural domination, the concept of cultural capital tends to be treated as a neutral, impersonal, and static social category, unconnected to systems of racial power and gender privilege. What we are left with is theory of reproduction that displays little connection to the material, psychological, and spiritual conditions in which Black people/people of color live, work, learn, survive, and thrive.

In the rest of this article, following Pierre, I argue that despite new developments in social and cultural reproduction theory, much of the social science literature on urban poverty and Black social mobility continues in the tradition of the 'culture of poverty' thesis to perpetuate notions of Black intellectual and cultural inferiority for working-class and poor people 'that ultimately work to reinforce the negative racialization and subordination of all Blacks' – poor, working class, and middle class alike (Pierre 2004, 149).

Re-examining the declining significance of race¹⁵

Much of the current literature on urban poverty, particularly in the United States, is framed in ways that describe Black social mobility as separate and distinct from contemporary racism and discriminatory social processes. The influential studies by William Julius Wilson – arguably America's best known sociologist and author of two of the most cited and debated publications in academia in the past thirty years, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) – have played an important role in the retreat from race and the politics of its denial in the urban poverty literature and beyond. In fact, with the notable exception of his first book – *Power, Racism, and Privilege* (1973), clearly his most cogent analysis of racism in America and South Africa – each of Wilson's subsequent texts, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), and *When Work Disappears* (1996), are illustrative of the paradigmatic ways that structural changes in the labor market are used to support and 'reaffirm the United States racial hierarchy and perpetuate the pathologizing of African American life and culture' (Pierre 2004, 151).

Despite Wilson's claim of explaining 'racial change in America within a macro-historical-theoretical framework' (Wilson 1987, vii), each of his studies documents changes in the 'black class structure and the composition of inner-city neighborhoods'¹⁶ (Pattillo 2003, 1049). Wilson does this in three analytically distinct, yet overlapping ways: (1) He treats racism as a 'legacy of the past'. According to Wilson, past discrimination created the Black underclass which continues today primarily because of non-racial factors such as structural changes in the national economy (Thomas 2000). (2) Wilson argues that race is declining in significance in relation to social class as the most important determinant of well-being for Blacks (Thomas 2000). Wilson states that 'class has become more important than race in determining social class in the modern industrial period' (Wilson 1978, 150). (3) Wilson treats 'underclass' as a collection of behaviors that signify a unique set of cultural practices for Black low-income communities. This is where Wilson's analysis begins to unravel. That is, he rejects the term 'culture of poverty' to describe 'ghetto values' while substituting his own phrase, 'social isolation' (DeParle 1988). The key difference, according to DeParle, is that the culture-of-poverty thesis emphasizes the extent to which bad values take on a life cycle of their own,

whereas socially isolated behaviors are the direct result of a truncated economic system (DeParle 1988). In other words, Wilson suggests that as the economy gets better, positive values in Black low-income communities will emerge. Apparently, for Wilson, the economy and cultural values are casually related to each other for Black people. But what about for white folks?

Obviously, it is in his discussion of Black lower- (or under-) class people as culturally distinct from the Black middle class that Wilson begins to construct a narrative around collective behavior and values that need to be challenged. In particular, he makes the case for a unique set of cultural practices employed by low-income Black people that prevent us from adhering to mainstream cultural practices (read white middle class). Wilson, in turn, stresses that Black middle-class families have cultural attributes that allow them to value work, responsibility, honesty, and integrity more than the so-called Black underclass.¹⁷ 'Yet underlying this assertion,' according to Pierre (2004, 154), 'is the assumption that the Black middle class has become upwardly mobile precisely because it has rejected "ghetto" culture and has adopted American (read White middle class) cultural practices. The use of the Black middle class in this way, however, does nothing but bolster the "culture of poverty" discourse that uses the notion of lower (or under) class as a signifier for the cultural inferiority of all Blacks' (Pierre 2004, 154).

What is most disturbing in these discussions is the ways in which white identity goes unproblematic as the correct identity to adopt or to aspire towards, while African American culture is socially exoticized and characterized through atypical negative behaviors and stigmatized cultural practices (Wacquant 1997; Pierre 2004). In such narratives of Black middle-class cultural distinctiveness, in comparison with the lower (or under) class, we find the re-articulation of the 'culture of poverty' thesis by using 'culture' to explain the lack of progress of low-income Black people. The problem with this analysis is twofold. First, urban poverty and race relations scholars need to spend more time in Black low-income and middle class communities. If/when we begin to do so we will find a heterogeneous Black community that displays a range of behaviors including: hard work, responsibility, planning for the future (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Duneier and Hasan 2000), high educational motivation (Mickelson 1990; Akom 2003; Carter 2005), and high economic aspirations (Cose 1993) existing hand in hand with issues and problems that all American and immigrant communities struggle with to varying degrees – dysfunctional families, crime, drugs, and so on. As it stands now, too many urban poverty theorists want to know what's wrong rather than what's really going on in Black urban communities (Kelley 1994). In their search for violence, anger, nihilism, and emotional instability, they miss genuine love, humor, academic achievement, non-traditional families, positive relationships towards men, women, and children, and all kinds of social capital that is alive, well, and thriving in Black urban communities that is presently flying under the radar (Sullivan 1997; Akom 2006). The second problem with Wilson's analysis is the narrow definition of culture as values or norms rather than Swidler's (1986, 273) definition of culture as a 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and lifestyles from which people construct 'strategies of action'.

The language of 'values' used to perpetuate class and cultural distinctiveness among Black people, whether it is descent/street (Anderson 2000); inner-city/mainstream, or underclass/middle class (Wilson 1978, 1987) not only obscures important racialized cultural practices (such as code-switching) that connect the Black middle class to the Black poor; but also reveals a subtle re-articulation of racism cloaked in the language of culture where, in effect, class/cultural distinctiveness becomes a vehicle to creatively circumvent, while actively reinforcing, racial difference (Pierre 2004, 155). What is unfortunate about this situation is that social scientists, along with the media, are often the ones leading the

campaign to perpetuate culturally racist assumptions about Black people in the United States (Pierre 2004).

Indeed, Wilson even states that it would be ‘dogmatic’ to rule out the possibility that ‘some cultural traits may in fact take on a life of their own for a period of time (Wilson 1987, 138). Used in this way, the Black lower (or under) class is simultaneously racialized and inscribed as culturally deficient. A paradox that develops here is important to point out. Black social mobility couched in the language of cultural and class distinctiveness has the effect of reproducing the culture of poverty discourse (Pierre 2004). ‘But since all Blacks are racialized, and since the stereotypes of Black cultural dysfunctionality are based upon a race and culture conflation’, the Black middle class, including the social scientist I have named, and the ones I have not, are ultimately constructed by and interpellated into this same pathological discourse (Pierre 2004, 159). The irony of this point is lost in the analysis of social scientists such as Wilson, Steele, Patterson, and McWhorter, and as a result, they do not make connections that are obvious to a whole host of poor, working-, and middle-class Black people. Perhaps former mayor of New York David Dinkins best sums up this sentiment when he states: ‘A white man with a million dollars is a millionaire, and a Black man with a million dollars is a nigger with a million dollars’ (Cose 1993, 28) – and thus, just as susceptible to global white supremacy and racial hierarchies (Cose 1993; Pierre 2004). How else do we account for a college professor being incarcerated for retrieving books from his own office or another professor (Black male) at a nationally renowned university having guns drawn on him while working in his office at night?

Negotiating racism in the heart of liberalism

Exposing one’s private experiences to public debate can be difficult, especially when those experiences reveal visible and invisible pain and suffering about the ways in which racial discrimination permeates our everyday existence as Black people/people of color in America and beyond. According to Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996), present-day incidents of racial discrimination have a cumulative impact on Black people/people of color because these incidents are shared among family and friends, and are ‘laden with individual and group memories of centuries of racial oppression’ (23). The cumulative impact of anti-Black discrimination has a profound effect on the way that many African Americans view the world around them. Feagin (1991) explains:

Particular instances of discrimination may seem minor to outside white observers when considered in isolation. But when blatant acts of avoidance, verbal harassment, and physical attack combine with subtle and covert slights, and these accumulate over months, years, and lifetimes, the impact on a Black person is far more than the sum of the individual instances. (115)

Ruben A. Buford May (2000) suggests elsewhere that African Americans, ‘through narratives about their negative experiences with whites, develop a collective memory of racism and discrimination that is broadened with each additional story told ... this collective memory gives a “compounding effect” to the negative interracial experiences discussed among African Americans’ (202).

Accordingly, the following narratives grapple with the continuing significance of race and racism in the lives of Black people. Despite the growth of the Black middle class, my interviews with Black middle- and working-class individuals and families in San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley, California revealed to me the contradictions and complications of negotiating race in what is arguably the most liberal region in the United States of America

– the Bay area. Over the course of the last three years I have spoken with young people and adults – some financially successful, others academically accomplished, some struggling to make ends meet, others ‘living on easy street’ – all sharing various versions of the same declarations discussed in Elise Cose’s *The Rage of a Privileged Class*:

I have done everything I was supposed to do ... gone to the right schools ... worked myself nearly to death ... What more do they want? Why in God’s name won’t they accept me as a full human being? Why, when I most want to be seen, am I suddenly rendered invisible? (1)

What exactly do such questions tell us about race in the twenty-first century? Why, over fifty years after the passage of some of the most important civil rights legislation in the history of our country, are Americans still struggling with fundamental questions of racial fairness? The following narratives, in the tradition of John Gwaltney’s (1980) *Drylongso* and more recently Mary Pattillo-McCoy’s *Black Picket Fences* (1999), begin to address these questions by illuminating the continuing significance of race and racism in the heart of liberalism, and the ways in which research on the Black experience can serve as important windows towards gaining a greater appreciation of the human experience (Drake and Cayton 1945). The purpose of presenting first-person case studies follows in the tradition of critical race theory which argues that counter storytelling is a significant part of social change, and that disenfranchised people(s) have different stories and different ways of telling them than enfranchised people(s) (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Dixon and Rousseau, 2006). In this manner, Derrick Hightower and Sheila Ravenswood are ‘organic intellectuals’ whose personal accounts infuse theoretical perspectives on race, class, and gender with the emotion and analysis that can only come from lived experience.¹⁸ What follows is a ‘guided tour’ of some of the ways in which race has penetrated their everyday lives (Gramsci 1975).

Derrick Hightower

My name is Derrick Hightower. I am a 6’ 2” Black male and a college student ... Today I’m gonna share my experience with police brutality ... It was the day of the funeral for a police officer that was killed in Hunter’s Point by a young Black man ... I expected the police to be out in full force patrollin’ and harassin’ the people cause that’s what they do in my neighborhood ... Since I knew they’d be out I decided not to drive around because I didn’t want to get pulled over and beatin’ up because one of their own just got killed ... So I decided to walk everywhere ... And I did ... Around the middle of the day I was standing outside with some of my friends hanging out, laughin, havin fun ... It was a small group of us ... not doin’ much of anything except talkin’ and laughin ... but the police don’t like crowds in our neighborhood so we felt like they might harass us based on the color of our skin and the part of town we live in ... Sure enough a couple of cops rolled up and told everyone to turn around and put their hands above their heads ... I did as I was asked ... They then asked me to reach in my pocket and get my wallet ... I didn’t want to get shot for goin’ in my pocket because I read the newspaper everyday and you would be surprised at how many people get shot and killed because they reachin’ in their pocket ... I remembered somethin’ I had learned in school; that a police officer cannot just search you without a probable cause ... My dumb ass told him that and it seemed to set him off ... I didn’t swear on nothin’ ... I just said ... ‘sir, do you have a reason to search me???’ Without saying a word he tightly handcuffed me and threw me against a fence and ripped open my lip ... He then threw me to the ground where I banged my head against the concrete several times ... scratchin up my face pretty good ... He then placed his knee in my neck and stopped me from breathing momentarily ... My friends were yellin’ for him to stop ... that he was doin’ too much ... but while all of this was goin’ on the other police officer held my friends at gun point ... After they arrested me for ‘resisting arrest’ the officer reported that I jumped into the fence and split my own lip open and fell on my head tryin’ to escape in handcuffs ... I spent six days ... count em ... six days in jail ... I missed all of my finals that semester ... In the end, all the charges were dropped after an old man who lived

across the street reported seeing and hearing the entire incident. I was lucky ... I was lucky that there were actually witnesses willing to testify that I wasn't lying ... They dropped all charges when I told them I was goin' to sue them ... The judge realized I was a college student with no criminal record and granted me factual innocence and my record is erased because they did not have a reason for arresting me in the first place ... But I still wonder to this day ... how many young Black men have records because there were no witnesses, or at least no one willing to come forward to testify, as most cases like mine end up being the young Black mans' word against the system ...

In trying to understand the peculiar position that Black males occupy in the social fabric of Ameritocracy it is important that we reference what urban ethnographer Elijah Anderson refers to as the dilemmas of the 'Black male in public' (Anderson 1990). According to Anderson:

Anonymous Black males occupy a peculiar position ... the fear and circumspection surrounding people's reactions to their presence constitutes one of the hinges that public race relations turn on. Although the Black male is a provocative figure to most others he encounters, his role is far from simple. It involves a complex set of relationship to be negotiated and renegotiated with all of those sharing the streets. (164)

'Two general sociological factors underlie the situation' that Derrick Hightower and other Black men find themselves in (Anderson 1990, 165). The first is what Hughes (1945) refers to as the 'master-status determining characteristics of race'. Becker's (1963) application of Hughes is particularly relevant here:

Some statuses, in our society as in others, override all other statuses and have a certain priority. Race is one of these. Membership in the Negro race, as socially defined, will override most other status considerations in most situations; the fact that one is a physician or middle class or female will not protect one from being treated as a Negro first and any of these other things second. (33)

Here the second element comes into play – the normalization of color-coded public and private environments. In the minds of the police, who, along with the military, represent society's most formal and legitimate means of social control, 'the master status of the young Black male is determined by his youth, his Blackness, his maleness, and what these attributes have come to stand for in the shadow of the ghetto' (Anderson 1990, 166; see also Goffman 1986). In the context of racism the negative status determining characteristics of race, skin color, and gender assigned to Black males undermines our ability to be taken for granted as law-abiding and civic participants (Anderson 1990, 167). Contrary to the experience of white folks, for whom public space has evolved into a kind of 'democratic space' where people of different class backgrounds can share movies, theaters, parks, and cafés (Kelley 1994, 56), for Black people, irrespective of social class, public space has been historically and contemporaneously undemocratic, potentially dangerous, and life threatening (Kelley 1994). The case of Sheila Ravenswood serves to illustrate the point that even though the Black middle class has grown, it presently amounts to roughly a third of the population; Blacks still must negotiate infra-racism in multi-national corporations based on the negative status determining characteristics of race and gender.

Sheila Ravenswood

My name is Sheila Ravenswood ... I am a 'shapely' African American women with brown skin and shoulder length dreadlocks ... I am 41 years old ... and I am here to tell you the truth about

how racism works inside of corporate America ... It all started with me being recruited from Connecticut ... I had been a marketing executive for a number of Fortune 500 companies and I had been heavily recruited from Connecticut to come to work for a Fortune 500 company in Silicon Valley ... The position was a leadership position as an executive marketing manager ... I was interviewed by a young white male, who was 'up and coming', what we call a 'high flier' ... He was being groomed to be a high ranking executive officer in marketing but he had very little management experience and particularly with senior level people ... He thought I was great during the interview process and I looked great on paper ... However, a short time after I was hired, problems started to surface ... Basically we didn't click ... I thought his management style was too personality driven rather than success driven ... Managers who reported to him had more of a friend kind of a relationship ... rather than a professional kind of relationship ... And I felt because of the way I presented myself ... for example having dreadlocks and a more ethnic look, I began to notice a number of what I call micro-inequalities based on race ... I noticed that the other white female managers would flirt with him ... incidentally everybody in corporate America is white ... or I should say most of the of people in positions of authority, power, and influence in corporate America are white and are very unconscious of how race and culture operate and yet there is a very strong white culture that cuts across everything ... And so they prefer people who understand that corporate means 'white' and culture means 'white' ... and corporate culture means being fluent in white middle class culture and that is not necessarily the same thing as African American middle class culture ... I mean we can do it but we have to code-switch to do it ... So there were these women that would like kinda flirt with him and laugh at his jokes ... I didn't do this ... Therefore, he would do subtle things like leave me out of critical discussions ... He would allow people to do what they called an 'end-run' around me which invalidated my authority by circumventing the chain of command ... He really started to pick on me about my schedule and started to document all this negative feedback about me ... And things started to spiral downward from there to a point where he started to tell my co-workers and team that I was really unorganized and not detailed orientated, and other characteristics that are highly subjective ... And granted I admit that I am not perfect and I could have done some things better ... But instead of trying to understand who I was and help me perform my job better he started documenting everything ... He started writing me up and putting me on a performance plan ... When I talked to the human resource manager ... Who, thank God was Black ... he said that this is not generally how directors deal with their staff, especially at a management level ... They would usually want to find a possible solution ... By the time I went to human resources, I felt that the real issue was not that we don't get along ... that was the surface issue ... the real issue was race ... I felt like he was terrorizing me, he was only looking for my mistakes ... trying to manage me out as they say ... And you know if you look hard enough you can find that anybody makes mistakes ... So why did I think that his actions and the actions of this corporation were racially motivated? Well for two reasons: First, it turned out that this golden boy was not perfect either ... In fact, another employee had filed a claim against this director for some serious offenses like making inappropriate jokes that were picking on people because of their medical conditions ... and sending out emails with sexually inappropriate content in them ... But the way that his mistakes were viewed and reviewed were very different than how my mistakes were viewed and reviewed by senior management ... His punishment for his mistakes was a verbal conversation with the VP of the group who warned him that if he did anything like that again it would be a problem for him ... Then ... get this ... he was placed into a more strategic role in the company and given a promotion ... I, on the other hand, got a performance plan that got written up, which is pretty much a mark for deletion after you get one of those ... In particularly for an executive, it's almost impossible to pull out of it ... So that was the first sign that race and racism were at work inside of this Fortune 500 company ... The second sign was even more clear and disturbing ... The HR manager had told me confidentially about another white female in the company who was also a director (like me) and having issues with her manager ... She had been written up for having a negative attitude ... being late ... not being organized ... very similar issues as mine ... Except I was never written up for having a negative attitude ... but the other issues were similar ... and we had been with the company around the same amount of time ... In her case, the job requirements had grown and she was unable to fill them. However, instead of scheduling her for termination as had been done in my case ... the company was willing and able to find her another role within the

company ... That's racism in corporate America ... That's the reminder that one person's humanity is valued more than another person's humanity ... that's the reality of one person going on and making more money and another person having to go look for a job ... That my pain is invisible doesn't mean that it is not killing me ...

A major triumph of America's civil rights movement of the 1960s was the incorporation of large numbers of Blacks into the corporate occupational structure (Anderson 1999, 25). However, within this structure Black women are often marginalized, alienated, and isolated, based upon race and gender. A recent study found that when it comes to key benchmarks such as pay and boardroom representation, women are still lagging far behind men. For example, in 2005 only seven Fortune 500 companies were headed by a female CEO, and less than 16 percent of the officers at these corporations were women. When we disaggregate the data by race the numbers become even more alarming. Women of color held only 1.7 % of corporate officer positions and were 1% of all Fortune 500 top earners (Huffington 2003; Laff 2007). Thus, while it is clear that the Black middle class has grown with respect to the white middle class, the reality of the white Barbie doll syndrome and the Ken CEO continues to relegate many Black women to the corporate ghetto on the lowest rung of the corporate ladder (Anderson 1999).

Given the nature of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy as a system shaping culture and beliefs, Sheila and Derrick's comments are important reminders that education, income, and other resources do not entirely eliminate the effects of racial discrimination, although these resources do help to soften the blows (Collins 2001, 28). The reality is that until full racial equity is achieved in and outside the workplace, "progress" may mean that one set of racial vulnerabilities is simply exchanged for another' – a double bind that an infra-racial approach seeks to illuminate and expose (Collins 2001, 28).

Conclusion

I want to bring together the strands of this article by making three specific points about intersections of race, class, and gender in twenty-first century America. First, I have argued in this article that theories of reproduction in their current academic deployment are deeply engaged in a project of 'racial myth-making' whereby racially explicit experiences and practices are recoded as cultural or social with little or no attention to the role of institutionalized racism in the construction of social inequality (Steinberg 1981; Pierre 2004; Akom 2006). Specifically, class and cultural distinctiveness are used to advance racist ideologies about Black lower- (or under-) class people and then extrapolated to encompass all Black people in general irrespective of class standing. Second, narratives that forecast spectacular mobility for Black people/people of color along with growth of the Black middle class function as proof that America 'works' and that the dream of a Black picket fence, a white house, two cars, and two kids is obtainable for all (Hsu 1996, 39; Hochschild 2003; Pierre 2004, 160). However, what is concealed within this 'meritocratic' discourse is that full acceptance into this society is still restricted on the basis of racial identity, skin color, gender, culture, class, religion, sexual orientation, immigration status, special needs, and other factors linked to processes of assimilation, incorporation, and the whims of a white supremacist capitalistic patriarchal hetero-normative society.

Thus, despite that national discourse on equal opportunity and social mobility for all, racial identity is a crucial factor impacting who has access to key institutional resources and privileges, including the neighborhood we live in (Massey and Denton 1993), the food we eat (Robinson 2005), the schools we attend (Kozol 1991, 2006) how we are treated in

the schools we attend (Steele 1992, 1999; Delpit 1995), as well as our ability to become President of the United States (even if Obama wins), head of a major corporation (that is not sports or entertainment related), and so on. This illusion of egalitarianism I term Ameritocracy. In this article I have used 'Ameritocracy' as a potent tool of cultural analysis to describe a social order peculiar to the United States – a social order in which the category of merit is treated as neutral and impersonal, outside of social power, and unconnected to systems of racial, gender, and other forms of privilege.

Third, race and gender have intersected in this article in complex and subtle ways. Gender has been at work in the very public displays of Black middle-/upper-class male 'intellectuals' and 'entertainers' ranging from Patterson, Wilson, and McWhorter, to the likes of Bill Cosby trashing poor Black men or poor Black communities on the pages of the *New York Times* or in best-selling *New York Times* books.¹⁹ But shouldn't we take a moment to ask: Where are the women at? Many of us need to be reminded that gender does not refer just to the roles of men and how those roles are constituted, but to the roles of women, men, and children and the relations between us all. The very notion of spectacular mobility has been raced, gendered, 'spectacularized', and represented by white men for the most part when it happens. What is spectacularly disappointing about this discourse is that the desired and undesired qualities of women – for example, as mothers, daughters, wives, maids, anything and everything except public intellectuals and community leaders – are enacted and perpetuated through our social institutions and in our everyday practices (Smith 1999). And thus, perhaps the most important, yet hidden dimension of this article is how gender distinctions and hierarchies in conjunction with racial and class hierarchies are deeply embedded in our Ameritocracy and reified through discourse of spectacular mobility.

Finally, it is important to close by stating that we should not totally dismiss theories of reproduction because of their failure to include processes of race, gender, and other forms of social difference. Rather, theories of reproduction have offered important and radical alternatives to functionalist theories. They have helped us to resist, and make sense of the normalization and dehumanization of educational institutions while complicating the relationship between capitalism and the commodification of culture. They have exposed the hidden curriculum. And although these efforts are small, they are important steps on the road towards creating anti-racist schools, communities, cities, and countries (Allen 2004). However, reproduction theory could do so much more if it would embrace the belief that white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and hetero-normativity are central problems facing humankind rather than capitalism alone. Criminalization, mass incarceration, and environmental racism are far more dangerous and pervasive than reproduction theory ever imagined (Akom 2007). And thus reproduction theory itself needs to be re-imagined.

What reproduction theory needs is a new wave of research that utilizes the following five elements to form its basic core: (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination (Hill-Collins 1990); (2) challenging white supremacy, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, and making the reproduction of dominant and non-dominant ideologies visible; (3) a critical reflexivity that addresses how various formulations of whiteness are situated in relation to contemporary formulations of Black/people of color identity formation, politics, and knowledge construction; (4) de-centering whiteness by examining it in relation to other racial identities in more nuanced and locally specific ways that emphasize the situational, relational, and historic contingencies that are reshaping and repositioning racial identities within the context of contested racial hierarchies (Twine and Gallagher 2008); and finally (5) a racial elasticity that identifies the ways in which white racial power is continually reconstituting itself in the colorblind era and beyond (see Akom in press). Although none of these elements are new in and of themselves, collectively they represent a challenge

to many of our existing models of social and cultural reproduction theory (Yosso and Solorzano 2002, 27). As it stands now, the challenge for future scholars will be to continue to recognize the ways in which race and merit shift across time and space and intersect with other axes of social difference (Lewis 2003), as well as to continue to illuminate the ways in which past and contemporary global white supremacy can be challenged and overcome instead of reproduced and maintained. As always, I am hopeful.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kriss Guitierrez, and Beth Leonard for participating in the seminar 'Contested Terrain: Institutional Racism and Social Justice Within and Outside of the Academy' at the 2006 American Anthropological Association meetings. I thank Jemima Pierre, Pedro Noguera, Elijah Anderson, Douglas Massey, Howard Winant, Michele Fine, Garrett Albert Duncan, Shawn Ginwright, Lisa Delpit, Amanda Lewis, Adrienne Dixon, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Rodney Hopson, Matthew Shenoda, Larry Soloman, Lemlem Rijio, Sabaa Shoraka, William Ayers, Anthony Brown, Lila Jacobs, Margo Allen, and Andrew Jolivette for their assistance at various stages of this project. I am also grateful for research support provided by the Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University. A very special thanks to David Gillborn for his generous feedback, continuous mentorship and support.

Notes

1. San Francisco State University was the first university in the United States to militantly struggle for ethnic and working-class emancipation through the development of culturally relevant pedagogy. These struggles for a culturally relevant pedagogy resulted in the creation of the first Black Studies Department in the country and the only college (not department) of ethnic studies in the United States.
2. Through out this article I alternate between using Black people/people of color and African American fully aware of the complexities associated with racial identity. My reason for choosing to do this is to begin to shift the conversation of race in the United States and beyond from one of solely race and racism towards racism/colorism and pigmentocracy in the context of global white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist hegemony.
3. For the record, I was not physically aggressive in any way, shape, or form. I was never asked for my ID. I was handcuffed and taken to jail, with my two children left in the car waiting for their mother. A horrific situation for any parent, to say the least.
4. Majors and Billson 1992.
5. Shirley Brice Heath provides an archetypical example of such racial recoding in her ethnographic classic *Ways with Words* (1983). Although her work is brilliant, nuanced, and insightful, she too conceals important differences such as financial net worth between racial groups within the same social class. More specifically, although Heath focuses on schooling, social class, language, and race in the Piedmont Carolinas, she does so within a multicultural (i.e. Black/white) Marxist (i.e. working class vs. middle class) framework that subsumes racio-political dynamics under the benign language of 'linguistic cultural capital'.
6. New Deal policies were started in 1933 by Franklin D. Roosevelt in order to help America recover from the depression.
7. See Note 6.
8. I borrow this framework from Herbert Blumer (1958).
9. US Congress, Senate, Committee on Finance, *Economic Security Act Hearings* on S. 1130, 74th Congress, 1st Session, 1935, p. 641.
10. One of the results of generations of racial preferences for whites is that a typical white family in 2005 had on average ten times the net worth of a typical African American family (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005). Even when families of the same income are compared, white families have more than twice the wealth of Black families (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Much of that wealth can be attributed to the value of one's home, and how much one inherits from one's parents.
11. According to Mary Pattillo-McCoy, 'Sociological conceptions of class include occupation and education along with measures of income. Studies of the Black middle class in particular have used white-collar employment as the marker of middle-class position' (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 14).

- Social scientists also use the income-to-needs ratio which divides total family income by the federal poverty level based on the family's size (Pattillo-McCoy 1999).
12. Milton Gordon refers to this assimilation process as 'Angloconformity', to explain the process whereby at the birth of our nation, largely white and Anglo-Saxon communities absorbed the many culturally distinct European populations. Angloconformity assumes the 'desirability of maintaining English institutions (as modified by the American Revolution), the English language, and the English-oriented cultural patterns as dominated and standard in American life' (Gordon 1971, 264).
 13. In Guglielmo's (2003) *White on Arrival*, he challenges the 'becoming white' thesis of European immigrant incorporation into the United States. He suggests instead that Italian immigrants, like other Europeans, 'did not need to become white; they always were in numerous, critical ways' (2003, 7). What is significant for Guglielmo, then, are the different definitions given to 'color' and 'race' in the early years of the twentieth century, where an Italian could be considered 'white' by color and 'Italian' by ethnicity and still maintain 'whiteness' as her or his 'most prized possession' (Guglielmo 2003, 10; Pierre 2004, 164).
 14. In an effort to highlight the role of schooling in cultural and social reproduction, Bourdieu developed the concept of 'capital' as a social, cultural, economic, and symbolic resource through which social hierarchies are created, developed, supported, and maintained.
 15. In 1978 Wilson published *The Declining Significance of Race (DSR)*. Many read the title to mean that race no longer mattered in America. To be clear, this is not exactly what Wilson meant. His argument was a bit more subtle, as well as less precise. In *DSR* he argues that the life chances of individual Blacks have more to do with our economic class positions than with our day-to-day encounters with whites. He cites a wealth of evidence that more Black folks are moving into white-collar jobs (Cose 1993). He also argues in *DSR* that although race was declining in significance with regard to the occupational and economic life chances of Blacks, it was still important in the realms of housing, education, and interracial encounters (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 232). However, the flaws in his argument (as I show) are twofold: First, he has little to say about what happens once Black folks get into these so-called white-collar jobs. Do we move up the ladder? How does race/racism impact our ability to lead and manage even if/when we are in positions of relative authority? In other words, the question is not whether race is declining but what is the continuing significance of race and its impact on Black advancement and Black social mobility? You cannot ask one question without addressing the other. And second, and there is no denying this: Wilson pathologizes African American life and culture, particularly the urban poor. As I show, his reproduction of the culture of poverty thesis has dire consequences for all folks racially designated as Black.
 16. Scholars who take a macro-economic approach are more appropriately known as 'structuralists'.
 17. According to Wilson, Black unemployment 'has eroded the work ethic and discipline of the underclass, leading to behaviors that allow employers to justify not hiring them' (Kelley 1997).
 18. The qualitative data used in this report are the results of my comparative urban ethnography of forms and mechanisms of racial domination in the Bay area.
 19. Cornel West's totalizing deployment of the concept of nihilism in *Race Matters* is deeply flawed. However, Cornel West and William Julius Wilson are extraordinary scholars who support and advocate for the urban poor and I deeply respect and honor their work as well as many of the other authors whom I have critiqued in this article.

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