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Julie A. Cary and David E. Magill

Whiteness & Meritocracy

disClosure interviews Christopher Newfield

dC: Could you start by summarizing the idea of liberal racism that informs much of your work?

CN: Most basically, liberal racism refers to attitudes and actions that look antiracist or at least race-neutral on the surface but that have racist effects. It opposes explicit discrimination on the basis of race or color, and rejects simple white supremacism of a kind that says members of other racial groups are inferior to whites. But it supports systems that favor whites over most other groups when those systems don't use color but some other factor like "merit" to make their decisions. And since explicit white supremacy is less common today than it was even thirty years ago, liberal racism is becoming a more important way of maintaining racial inequality.

Liberal racism has been around a long time, since 1820 or 1830 at least. One of its crucial sources was abolitionism. Most abolitionists wanted to end slavery for various good reasons but could not imagine that there was any biological or cultural basis for black/white equality. Liberal racism favors the reduction of cruelty and even exploitation while maintaining an understanding of racial rankings in which whites are on top. Abolitionism was of course a courageous and invaluable position, but the attitudes on which it usually rested did not achieve post-slavery racial equality in large part because they didn't want racial equality. Only a small group of "radical reconstructionists" imagined

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social equality between the races. This aversion to full equality is a major reason why we have not yet completed racial reconstruction over 130 years after the end of the Civil War. People always say "getting rid of prejudice takes time." That's true, especially when they're still hanging on to it.

There's another important meaning of the term liberal racism—as a form of what Avery Gordon and I called "white philosophy." Liberals sometimes say to racialized groups, "well, it's not that we think your way of life is deficient, we aren't getting into that question. What's deficient is your belief about your identity, about your status as a socially marked racial group. It's biased and irrational." The liberal racist doesn't claim a cultural superiority to the racialized group. He claims that the group's claim to be a group is a conceptual mistake. This is a managerial position—it manages other groups in the name of reason while claiming its own neutrality; it rejects attempts to correct for racial inequality; it says that race is not only a biological but a social fiction, and a racist one at that. Jim Crow racism was good for keeping black folks out of restaurants and denying them the vote. Liberal racism is good for maintaining racial stratification in integrated corporations.

In at least one way, liberal racism is worse than the old cultural supremacism. The old form may have thought that African American cultures were deficient—to stick with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s example—but agreed that they had the right to identify themselves and define themselves as distinct. The managerial version says they don't have the right to define themselves as a culturally or historically or socially distinct group—that this is an irrational return to biological notions of identity. What Gordon and I call white philosophy—claiming itself to be colorblind and universally rational—asserts the right of its own philosophical arguments not only to evaluate but to deny the existence of these other groups.

Look at the attacks on affirmative action. Many of its opponents say that any kind of awareness of race as a social fact is philosophically wrong and itself racist. They therefore don't have to discuss the social inequality that led to affirmative action in the first place. They don't have to get into a complex conversation about which programs did and didn't work, how much, and for whom. This is liberal racism in both senses I've just described. It consents to racial inequality—says it's a less important problem than race consciousness. And it asserts the right unilaterally to set the terms of debate, to decide what categories are in and out, which identities are allowable and which are not, whose injuries matter more than others, and all this regardless of what other involved people think and want.

The journalist Jim Sleeper has written a book arguing that only

colorblindness, willful blindness to socially-defined race, avoids racism. He calls race consciousness "liberal racism." Don't be fooled by this misuse of the term! Sleeper's position is itself liberal racism, in the two senses I've described—the acceptance of white social superiority, and the assertion of the wholesale superiority of color-blind axioms to the self-understandings of other groups.

dC: In your book, you note that "Emerson adheres to notions of herrenvolk democracy among the best white strains, but he does not only invoke race as a foundation of English superiority for he uses race to install corporate democracy." To what extent do you see Emerson's political ideology as having influenced the current relationship of race and corporate hierarchy in America?

CN: Well, that passage refers to Emerson's understanding of Englishness and intra-white mixing—the mixing of Saxons with Angles, Welsh, Scots, and other indigenous groups, all of whom are "white." The English nation was an amalgamation of conquest, as Emerson observes, and he uses the concept of race as a way to homogenize and unify as "English" what are culturally antagonistic groups of white people. "Race" establishes the whiteness of English people and thereby eliminates internal differences and internal conflict about fundamental cultural practices. The result is that quotation marks are no longer necessary around "English"—it's no longer an artificial construct or accepted fiction but a stable, coherent identity and a unified culture. Emerson can then call his book *English Traits* without apologetics and winking.

English Traits was published in 1856 and went into a second edition that same year. By that time anti-slavery forces—Emerson among them—are facing the prospect of dividing the country. England is an initially divided country that became the most powerful nation in the world. So the principle of English unity would naturally arouse great interest in a United States that is starting to come apart. When Emerson links English race to English nation, he establishes a very flexible, almost cultural understanding of race as the unifying principle of the nation. He makes race in this sense more important as the ground of nationhood and national life than parliament, the public, or the crown itself.

What this means is that a proper nation is a nation that unites around the similar instincts, fundamental values, core impulses, habits of mind and world view that are associated with a particular race. This resonates with all sorts of longings in Americans for a national identity that will survive the slavery controversy by offering a kind of cultural homogeneity, one which is always being confused with racial homogeneity. This idea of the national citizen omits slaves and the later

racialized freedpersons—they can be present, they can work and be paid, but though free they can't become national citizens in the deep psycho-cultural sense.

We still live in the post-Civil War period. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the ruckus about multiculturalism raised the same issue. What if we have several American cultures? People like Schlesinger predicted the "disuniting" of the nation itself. This bad debate has been all such a lost opportunity. We excel at segregation—Indian reservations, barrios, ethnic enclaves. We could have started to figure out how to have some kind of federated system, some interdependent independence for voluntarily self-identified groups. We could explore how mobile and multiple people's group identities are. We could explore how group boundaries overlap and shift. We could work on really bringing in everybody in the multiracial, culturally contradictory, multinational, even multicontinental nation we've always been, or on really leaving them alone. How do you share resources, understand, respect, or include people in a country where, for example, 70 to 100 languages are spoken in the homes of the students of the Los Angeles "Unified" School District? This is an enormous and exciting challenge. The 21st century will turn on our success or failure with it. But instead we've mostly heard versions of the Emerson-like idea that a true nation rests on a quasi-racial cultural unity, and we've heard versions of an idea Emerson would reject—that America is really English. We're quite stuck, I think.

dC: So, if you take out Emerson's idea of race as the unifying principle, then are you saying we don't need any type of primary system of unity or something else that unifies us?

CN: I'm saying unity is overrated. It's not necessary. Cultural and political systems hang together through successful negotiation. All human systems are heterogeneous in fact, and none are actually ruled by a unifying law. People who call for adherence to a unifying law are usually calling for adherence to their law. We know this in personal relationships. Marriage vows don't say "and as you are joined at the altar on this day so shall you be joined unto death." There is no marriage constitution, and the vows are flexible, they are interpreted. She plays golf; he watches movies. Or she gardens and he writes detective novels. The whole idea that difference is anarchy is ridiculous. Oppression, unjust misery, prejudice, exploitation—they can create anarchy, and that is sometimes preferable. But the presence of difference and interpretation do not. We even know this about the law—one of our three branches of government does reinterpretation of the law full-time. The executive, the legislative, the interpretive: these are our three branches. We negotiate in love, in business and in law. Why would negotiating cultures

uniquely bring us to the brink of war?

I think that as demographics change, as economic relationships change, as the economy changes, racial deals have to be able to change. So the deal in the 70s about higher education in California, which is a situation I'm involved in, has to be redone. Now, over fifty percent of the graduates of California high schools are people of color. That means we have to re-imagine what the University of California is going to look like and do. So far, I think the way we're responding is to withdraw. "Well, you know, if Berkeley's freshman class, in 1994, is only 1/3 white, which was indeed the case, then should we, the white taxpayers of California, really be spending so much money on it? Now that its somebody else's University, like all those rich Asians?" I think that's the unspoken, unconscious kind of thought some people have. And if we establish the principle — this isn't going to do it automatically — but if we establish the principle that social relationships are negotiable, and must be re-negotiated from a position of respect and mutual interaction and relative equity in the power of the people at the table, then we can talk about those things without the same kinds of phobias. So I don't argue that if we engage in, recognize renegotiation, we'll get rid of Anglo anxieties about the color of Berkeley, because that is inevitable. But I do think that we can at least acknowledge the racial anxiety and have a more honest discussion about living and sharing resources in a changing world.

dC: You note the civil anxiety of our times. Recent scholarship on the colonial nation has suggested that the unified picture that we see of them is a construct, that there is really a lot of disunity and argument in this attempt at negotiation that you're talking about. Yet your description of Emerson places him as a central figure around which society seems to unify. Is it that by Emerson we don't have that negotiation anymore or does Emerson codify the debate?

CN: Here's the power of Emerson. He codifies the law in the moment of individual emancipation from it. This is the tricky thing. Lots of people came along before and after and said, "authority, hierarchy, listen to your masters, listen to your elders, listen to your ministers, we must have obedience and deference to have a society." This was a truism in the New England that Emerson grew up in. This is the kind of thing that is really easy to rebel against because it's openly controlling, it's openly elitist, it has open contempt for mass democracy, and it openly disavows respect for the masses, who it sees as essentially mediocre. Democracy and mediocrity, for New England's elites, are the same thing.

Emerson wanted to figure out what to do with the people who are not right at the top. That's what democracy is all about — figuring out

how the U.S. is going to be their country. They're the vast majority; they live here; they do most of the work; they're the ones that the country finally has to be able to grow with and for. So, Emerson understood a lot of this; he was extremely shrewd about the problems with that simple deference culture of which his father was part. He hated it on some level, and you know this is part of my real attraction to him, my ongoing attraction to him. He thought it was suffocating and controlling and he really disliked Unitarian church doctrine for having an utterly wishy-washy understanding of freedom. He's the guy from whom I learned the problem with halfway covenants — that's an allusion to the controversies in the 1660s and 1670s where the congregationalist church was opened up to membership for the "non-elect" without allowing the non-elect to have governing power. That's the primal semi-democratic American compromise. We can't just keep them out, so we're going to let them in but we're not going to give them ruling authority.

What Emerson did was recognize that Unitarianism in the early nineteenth century was still a halfway covenant. But then he broke with it. His famous line is, if our heart should guide our interpretation of scripture as the Unitarians believed, if we don't need church leadership to lead our readings, why not go to our own hearts first? That is the great antinomian impulse in America Protestantism that I've always liked. Emerson takes it to the next level. But then he sets up his own compromise. His power comes from saying, have self-reliance, trust thyself, open yourself to your impulses, be all that you can be, free the real power that is you on the inside, and then at the same time, in that same instant, reconnect the liberatory moment to a source in higher law than the liberated individual. Emerson follows a three-step movement: over and over and over he proclaims individual liberation; then he moves to a second step, how this connects up with other people, his democratic stand; then he takes the third step, which folds both of those things, individual emancipation and group emancipation, into a metaphysical and eternal foundation.

The reason I think he's so influential is that he's so great at wedding opposite things. You get emancipation and submission at the same time. Freedom means not full self-direction, but blessed confirmation by a higher power. That's why I call it submissive individualism.

The attraction of this subjectivity is you can feel like you're rebelling, yet you don't actually have to. I think this is the baseline identity of the white collar, white middle class culture that was just beginning to form after the Civil War through new professions and new corporate structures. It produces people like us, like me.

When I was in high school, I was supposed to become a physician,

but I decided I didn't want to do that for various reasons. Mostly the reason was that my biology and physics classes had absolutely nothing to do with me, with emotional turmoil, with this whole level of reality that seemed irrational, psychological, irresistible. It had to be known. I stopped taking science and I switched into the humanities, and for a long time my inevitable destiny was to be a writer. I didn't know what that meant because I grew up in a middle class family where the only viable means of staying in the middle class was to become a professional.

So, I had this weird hybridized dual consciousness about what I was supposed to be. I was this agonistic young Byron, who wrote endlessly in my journal in my bedroom and would get really upset when my mother interrupted me to do chores or to come to dinner because I was making art understood as passionate self-expression. Then, look what actually happened. I went to graduate school, not in creative writing, but to become a teacher, and became profoundly bureaucratized. I became a middle manager; that's what I am today. I am like a line supervisor in a large corporation where the vast majority of my working life is not about passionate self-expression, really funky experience, weird traveling all over the place, living like Tom Waits in fleabag hotels, meeting the restless of the earth and telling great stories about the margins. I deal with the center. I deal with middle class kids who go to a state school and want to become professionals and I teach them how to be good, professional bureaucrats like me, meaning not totally repressed, but at the same time having good skills, good self-discipline, and good self-management techniques. So, I'm still living this double life and that's also what I teach.

In the fifties, we would have called this "the gray flannel rebel." The man had a nine to five job that paid a nice middle class salary so that he could support a family in a really nice house with a back yard and they could take vacations. He would go and push paper during the day, and then every night he would come home, knock back a couple martinis, and complain sardonically about how superior he was to life with the schmucks at the office. Then the next morning, he'd wake up with a little hangover and go back to the office and be one of the schmucks he despised, come back, complain about it. He never quit his job, never actually wrote the great American novel, but perpetually thought about and lived out the contradiction between those two roles. And only one of them existed in the world.

This is part of Emerson's legacy that still needs to be dealt with. This performative yet disavowed conformity is a major psychologized barrier to the kind of racial negotiation and man's democracy we discussed before.

dC: Keeping in mind how Emerson helped construct a socio-political way for us both to admit and ignore things at the same time and the current theoretical move to examine whiteness as an unconsciousness ideology that structures our current socio-political system, how do you believe becoming aware of whiteness as race, as a color, might allow us to attack the liberal racist system?

CN: I don't think awareness of whiteness in itself does anything, one way or the other. The Klan is really aware of its whiteness. Middle-class awareness of whiteness could mean thinking, "I'm really aware that I'm getting screwed by all these affirmative action babies." So, there has to be some awareness of subtler forms of white racial anxiety, of how race structures so many social things. The current context makes that hard. Someone writes a new white backlash book every fifteen minutes. They all say white racism doesn't really exist, except in the form of anti-discrimination programs. Whiteness studies has its work cut out for it.

dC: Right now in the United States, whiteness is the norm and "other" races are invested with color. For example, even the phrase "people of color" as used to designate non-white races reinforces the primacy of whiteness and erases the racial status of "white." So, becoming aware of the subtle yet fundamental ways in which the primacy of whiteness structures our society — recognizing whiteness as property in addition to being a racial affiliation — becomes essential to recognizing white racism.

CN: Yes, I think that's very important. I also think that it has to be coupled with two other things, so it's actually triple consciousness. The first is a critique of subtle racism; the second is the retrieval of historical examples, of multi-racial work; and the third is a more utopian movement beyond precedent toward new forms of non-unifying collaboration.

I think that we have to do more work on retrieving historical moments in which the white working class is not simply racist, in which the Irish resisted becoming white if it meant attacking Black folks, or in which unions did produce cross racial solidarities that were successful for a long time. For example, there's the longshoreman's union that a scholar named David Wellman talked about at the Berkeley conference. It was based in San Francisco and actually did manage to organize a very multiracial, not just black/white, but a multiracial group of longshoreman by submerging white consciousness in labor issues. I think that that sort of memory is really crucial.

I also think that it will involve — and this is going to be a very painful process — thinking about viable forms of white racial identity. I don't think that you can simply replace racial identity with some other form of identity like class consciousness. This was a big desire at the

whiteness conference. Some participants wanted to say, okay, here's the big story of race in America, racial ideology was used to split white working class off from upper class people. They weren't mad at their white betters because they got mad at poor Black people instead. So, what we have to do, this argument continues, is eliminate that false racial consciousness and replace it with a true class consciousness. I don't buy the initial scenario, generally speaking. Most whites were individualistic and pro-capitalist. They had economic views that blocked class consciousness. And they didn't simply swallow racism as a mistake. They were racist for a variety of reasons, including their esteem for white ethnic identity.

I also think that you can't simply take away what is really a complex cultural identity that is variegated and heterogeneous for different kinds of white people and say that you now have to have a class consciousness instead of that. You can work with the multiple identities that people have, with the knowledge that there are many identities that white folks live with on a daily basis and then try to pull out the positive forms of ethnic and racial awareness that exist and couple them up with other identities that you are trying to reinforce, like an identity as a worker. I'm really interested in economic literacy. I think that most people are economically undereducated in the United States and don't — can't — fully analyze what's going on, so I'd like to see how changing that would actually fit with talking through coercive, constrictive racial identities, not into a non-racial identity, a non-white kind of thing, but into a non-racist, economically skeptical and idealistic awareness of one's racial placement in society.

dC: So, you would disagree with David Roediger when he argues for the abolition of whiteness. Would you argue that that is not a viable option or even a productive one?

CN: I totally sympathize with the impulse that lies behind that. I also share his interest in class politics. All groups need to start understanding better when the economy is not being run for them, so that there's a revival of an understanding of what's really going on economically and who's doing it and who's benefiting from it, and so on. I think that's absolutely crucial. I just don't join it to racism in quite the same way. I think post-capitalism and post-whiteness are linked but separate projects. The links need to be constructed. There's no automatic connection. That is, anti-racism and class consciousness interact historically, but they have to be pursued on a double track.

I think the two subjects will always be talked about in sort of interactive way, where for example, you start asking people why they feel that they shouldn't support certain kinds of social programs because they are failures. But why do they think these programs have failed? If

you ask a white person, you almost always get a discourse about undeserving people who abuse lenient programs. If you ask, "Wouldn't you be better off if we had social development monitored by a federal government that would actually support your retraining," for example, and they say, "No, because I don't like social programs," and then you argue that they don't like social programs partly because they think that the people who benefit from these are undeserving, and then you further suggest that they assume that most of those people are Black and Mexican American, you are inevitably intertwining economics with race. But, I don't think that getting people to be more anti-racist makes them anti-capitalist or anti-elite, or more socially democratic. I just don't see a simple connection between those two. That, to me, feels like a wishful displacement of the categories.

I should also say that I don't know what it would mean to abolish whiteness. I don't think that that's even possible. I would like to break whiteness down into these different components and talk about the components. I'm interested in the forms that white supremacy inhabits today, the subtler ones. My own work — partly because of where I am placed socially — concentrates on middle class forms of racial thinking, and professional ones, ones that inhabit my own workplace in universities and corporate structures. If you could say, well, to get rid of whiteness means bolstering white people's desire for interracial and interclass equality, I'd say great, but I don't know that the word whiteness can be used for that. I think you have to talk more directly about things like equality, racial equality. Let's have equality of racial outcomes. Why can't we talk about that?

For me, the question is really simple: let's figure out how we have to structure the economy so that there are not these grotesque differences in economic resources of, say, African-Americans and whites. When you've discovered that the average household wealth for white Americans is \$44,000 and the average household wealth for Black Americans is \$4,000, you can say, okay, this is a problem that we actually have ways to fix. I would like to talk to people more about why they think it's okay for these major discrepancies to exist and then work through the reasons they give, like they are lazy, or less educated, or they're culturally deficient, or whatever. Try to get to some other position. But my goal is not abolishing whiteness, my goal is racial equality.

dC: You've talked in the past few minutes about social programs, and in your 1994 MLA convention talk, "The Genesis of Liberal Racism," you argue that in order to replace liberal racism, "we must sever merit from hierarchy." So, to look at a specific social program, can this be accomplished within the framework of Affirmative Action, or will we need to formulate a new system and, if so, where might we go?

CN: Yes, we do need to formulate a new system. The Affirmative Action that was developed in the University of California and other universities assumes that there is a conflict between Affirmative Action and rigorous meritocracy. The corollary assumption is that there is a conflict between racial integration and rigorous meritocracy. The implicit assumption behind that is a conflict between the admission of people of color and high standards, that whenever people of color are let in, you are lowering the standards. This is based pretty much entirely on aggregate averages for test scores of the different groups that enter. Even in the 60s and 70s, no one tried to build a system based on a broader understanding of the meaning of merit. Affirmative Action is a symptom of a narrow, test-based notion of merit. Affirmative Action actually has — not just the controversy about it, but the nature of that system — delayed the serious reckoning with the hierarchical and narrow understanding of merit that's reigned since the Civil War. So, I think it could be really exciting to rethink what kind of qualities a field or firm really wants to select for. We could start developing a more sophisticated discourse about what we are up to and that in turn would mean much more clarity about the qualities that we want in the people we bring in.

The police are a good example. It's becoming increasingly obvious that the narrow selective service tests that were brought in to eliminate nepotism in police forces don't really tell you who's going to be a good police officer in a particular community. If you are policing a community that speaks both English and Spanish or mostly Spanish, it's valuable for an officer to be able to speak Spanish. If police are evaluated only by their performance on these tests, then you may lose a lot of good Spanish-speaking people; the test may punish the applicant for having the quality you're looking for. If, on the other hand, the physics department needs someone to solve math functions at high speed, give the applicants the GRE! So, it's becoming really obvious to a lot of people that we have to broaden out merit qualifications. I think we should lead the way in the university rather than lagging in that project.

dC: You've been talking about these structures within the university, but what about the ways these structures operate within corporate structures, or the corporate world, as such? The current trend in diversity management stresses individual difference in a way that foregrounds racial and ethnic color, which seems to further reinforce liberal racism by legitimating the minorities without providing them access to power. Minorities are still operating under a power structure in which they cannot participate, but the corporation gets the benefit of saying it is diverse. So, how do we get around that and what do you see going on

in diversity management that might be a more productive model?

CN: Yeah, well, there's bad news and there's good news around this. The bad news is that corporate America has actually lagged behind society in terms of integration. It cannot present itself as a leader in race relations in this way, although more and more people are interested in doing this, because it was first segregated and now is enacting one of the major effects of liberal racism in promoting integration without equality — there are lots of people of color at lower levels and very few at higher levels of most corporations. The Bush-appointed "glass ceiling" commission found that about 96% of the inhabitants of corporate boardrooms are white males; the rest are white women and a few black men.

The good news, though, is that the people that work in human resources are not old style liberal individualists, as are so many academic humanists. They come out of different intellectual traditions. Many of them are trained in the social sciences or business schools and they get Ph.D.s in fields like social psychology, industrial psychology, organizational development, organizational behavior. It sounds obvious to just say it, but they have actually worked group behavior into their thinking. So they have an easier time understanding that somebody's gender, somebody's race, somebody's sexual preference, somebody's first language, somebody's cultural background in complicated ways is always with them on the job. They have an easier time seeing those features not only as inevitable but also as assets that people can bring to a company that would actually help the company or can help the group dynamics. So I think there's less of a conflict in diversity management (and this is the first good thing about it) between individual freedom and group psychology, the private desires and the social factors that make us who we are. There's less of a tendency to reduce us to rational actors, to the artistic solitary, or to his cousin, *homo economicus*, to the kind of political subjects that have served as the ideal of so much race-phobic thinking.

The second good thing is that a lot of the people that work in diversity management are people of color who not only have a lot of experience thinking very carefully and concretely about race experience but who also come out of the Civil Rights movement and are interested in continuing its basic work of racial integration. This is not a radical agenda, but it is still one that has not been accomplished in any sector of American society that I know of. So they have a pretty clear commitment, more so than most academics, to making the business world much more representative of society at large. I think that the corollary of that concern is that as corporations downsize, as society polarizes by economics, there's going to be a tendency for corporations to pull away

from society. That could mean they will become more inaccessible citadels to people of color rather than more open to them. So as they see the market globalize and as they see a kind of shallow interest in diversity taking hold and as they see polarization taking hold as well, some diversity managers want to make sure that there isn't a new lockout as a result of those forces. This is a really hard row to hoe and I don't want to underestimate the difficulty that they have or some of the limitations of their own thinking because I am so aware from my other work of the entrenched nature of racist thinking in middle-class and professional contexts. But I also have been very impressed with how focused, and in some ways even militant, they are about the need to pursue the integration agenda. Where we go from there is a whole separate story, but I would be sorry if left-wing culture people in the academy dismissed these diversity management folk because they are too corporate.

dC: In your essay "What was Political Correctness: Race, the Right, and Managerial Democracy in the Humanities," you talk about how the university needs to replace its current managerial democracy with self-direction and reconnect scholarship to politics. Then, in what you just said, you talk about the ways in which many academics reject corporate thinking because of their lack of certain political directions. What kind of changes do we need to eliminate liberal racism within the university and to allow us to work with the corporate sector to create a more integrated and racially diverse society?

CN: Well, that's complicated because there are a lot of different terms working at once. The first thing I should say is that by this idea of reconnecting scholarship to politics, I don't really mean that all scholarship must be more politically engaged. I don't think that's true. I believe in knowledge for its own sake and I believe that a lot of times you really do have to disconnect your thinking from all sorts of conventional structures in order to make it happen, and by that I mean not just depoliticizing it but trying to break with your conventional wisdom and your own situatedness. But there's also reconnection: we have to be less phobic about this situatedness, and other people's as well. So I would defend intellectual work that sees itself as personally motivated or having political outcomes and implications. I mean, I certainly see my own work on the limited forms of freedom and the unbelievable levels of inequality that we tolerate in the United States as motivated in part by my own general political belief, which is also an intellectual one, that the United States is going to have to get more egalitarian or it's going to go nowhere, it's going to stagnate as a society. So those things are always working with all of us and I would like more honesty about that.

The other part of the answer is implicit in your question, which is

that one way of dealing with forms of liberal racism in the academy is by linking fear of race-coded difference with fear of full democracy. Academics favor a halfway covenant between forms of consent and participation that are simultaneously managed and controlled by people above. As you probably know from your own work in the university, this is the structure of most of our existence. Faculty members are supposed to be on all sorts of committees where they spend huge numbers of hours doing work and participating and being involved and consulted but where they don't really have much power over the actual decision. I think that is psychologically very debilitating. We get used to impotence, used to lack of political sovereignty over even our own local structures, and we don't expect any more. We become very cynical about participation, so we tend to withdraw at the first opportunity, which only accentuates the way the power circulates among cronies and higher-ups in stratified systems.

This is connected to racial attitudes because it habituates people to non-dissent. When you know the final decision is supposed to be made by somebody else, dissent just seems like trouble-making. It rattles people. It doesn't seem like the first step on the way to a new understanding that we're all going to work out as a group. It just seems a shaking of the tree which is supposed to more and less stay the way that it is. Fear of dissent and fear of difference: they need to be confronted at the same time.

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