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Racism and Responsibility

LADELLE McWHORTER

Forty years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and fifty years after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, members of racial minority groups are still disproportionately disadvantaged in American society. Despite official civic integration, despite a massive shift in the terms of public discourse, despite a publicly avowed moral and cognitive reorientation on the part of a significant number of whites, neighborhoods and schools are more segregated than ever, whites still control an overwhelming percentage of this country's wealth and hold a virtual monopoly on elite corporate and governmental positions, the distribution of income and health care is still dramatically unequal, and a disproportionate number of people of color live in poverty.¹ Something is wrong. But what, exactly?

Back in the 1950s, when most of these disparities were even greater, what seemed to be wrong was that white people had intentionally placed barriers in the way of people of color to prevent them from acquiring education, jobs, property, or political representation. After the Civil War, blacks had made strides forward politically and economically: some held national public office; some had started businesses; many had acquired land. Whites took systematic steps at the end of the nineteenth century to reverse that trend, inventing elaborate systems of segregation to hamper blacks' (and other nonwhites', most notably Native Americans' and Chinese Americans') participation in government and commerce. Some whites engaged in these efforts to frustrate minority advancement because

they had political and economic interests that were threatened by this new source of competition. Perhaps others did so out of resentment over their losses in the aftermath of the war. Many probably did so at least in part because they believed the scientific theories of the time that suggested that minority races were plagued with various forms of physical degeneracy that made them prone to disease and crime and thus were potential health and safety hazards for whites. Whatever their motives, for the next seven decades, whites readily admitted that they wanted such barriers, and as minorities challenged them, whites used every means at their disposal to maintain them. Under those circumstances, it was easy to account for disparities along racial lines. The obvious culprit was blatant racism. But these days, with racist biological theories discredited and generally forgotten,² with segregation legally dismantled, and with most white people agreeing that racial discrimination and racist attitudes are morally wrong, how can we account for these stubborn disparities? Could something other than racism be the cause?

I am well aware that even raising this question opens a person to the charge of racism, regardless of what answer one ultimately suggests. Many people assume that if you ask the question, you have rejected what they take to be apparent, namely, that racism is the cause of inequalities and if you do not blame racists for it, then the victims—disadvantaged racial minorities themselves—must be the ones you blame. Questions of race, it seems, almost always lead to judgments of guilt or innocence. Asking these questions invites moral discourse, even if one would prefer to engage in a discourse of another kind, and it very often also invites moral censure. That fact—the fact that race cannot readily be discussed outside the bounds of what I will call here post-Enlightenment moral discourse—in itself seems worth examining. In this essay I want to put forth a suspicion that it is this very insistence on keeping questions of racial disparity squarely within the boundaries of contemporary moral discourse, securely tied to subjective choice and individual responsibility, that prevents us from adequately addressing racial injustice and effectively eliminating it.

Before going further, I should make clear what I mean here by *racism*. I take racism, as discussed and critiqued in race-theory discourses both in sociology and in feminist and cultural studies, to be the name of a conglomerate of *mental phenomena*—beliefs, feelings, attitudes, values—that can motivate acts of racial discrimination and violence. Racism thus understood may or may not show itself at any given moment, for though it can display itself in utterance or deed, its true residence lies hidden in the mind. Consider the classic definition of ethnic prejudice put forth by Gordon Allport in 1954: “Ethnic prejudice is an antipathy based upon a

faulty and inflexible generalization”³—in other words, it is cognitive. And likewise a somewhat more recent definition of racism offered by W. J. Wilson: racism is “an ideology of racial domination or exploitation that (1) incorporates beliefs in a particular race’s cultural and/or inherent biological inferiority and (2) uses such beliefs to justify and prescribe inferior or unequal treatment for that group.”⁴ Some people’s racism may be a purely cognitive matter; they may believe that it is a verifiable fact that people of color are morally or intellectually inferior to whites. Such people have been taught that these claims are true, or they have generalized from limited experience. Further experience or empirical evidence can disconfirm and thus alter their beliefs, and racism can dissipate. However, as many researchers have noted, some racism seems not to be amenable to alteration on the basis of new evidence. Some racists apparently do not hold their racism in the manner of an empirical belief but rather in the manner of a metaphysical conviction. Their racist beliefs are merely cognitive expressions of a deep affective orientation to the world. No amount of evidence will ever “correct” these “beliefs,” and if such people’s racism does dissipate at some point, they will undergo that dissipation not as a change of opinion but as a conversion experience. Nevertheless, whether it is of the first or the second type, racism is a fundamentally mental phenomenon; its source and location is human subjectivity.

If racism is a mental phenomenon, then the assumption that all instances of racial injustice are the products of racism means that all instances of racial injustice are the effects of behavior generated by the mental states of individual (usually, though certainly not always, white) people.⁵ Thus, one widely held assumption underlying much of race theory at present is that racial injustice persists in our society because individual people make it so. Racial injustice, like racism itself, has a subjective origin.⁶

But what about the fact that most white Americans nowadays claim not to harbor any racist beliefs or attitudes? In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of researchers heralded this new disavowal of racism as a sign of progress, and it certainly was a change from four or five decades before, when whites vociferously avowed racist beliefs. Over time, however, as the number of avowed racists seemed to decrease much faster than the number of nonwhites living in poverty, researchers began to think instead that their survey questions were flawed.⁷ Whites really did continue to harbor racist beliefs and attitudes. They *must*; otherwise, there was no way to account for continued racial injustice.⁸ Perhaps because of widespread moral condemnation of racism, whites were just unwilling to say so. The survey questions had to be changed.

Researchers Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera found that, indeed, if you ask the right questions, white racism will display itself even in subjects who at first disavow racist attitudes and values. With some encouragement, many white people will make comments that clearly indicate belief in the inherent inferiority of people of color, and many more will make ambiguous comments that could be interpreted to indicate such a belief.⁹ Feagin and Vera conclude, "Conviction about some type of white superiority is a key part of the racial thinking of many whites."¹⁰

If we accept Wilson's definition of racism, which holds that racist attributions of inferiority may be ascribed to cultural as well as biological factors, many white respondents are easily classifiable as racist. Lawrence Bobo, James R. Kluegel, and Ryan A. Smith found that significant percentages of whites believe that blacks are lazy, violent, and unpatriotic (among other allegedly negative characteristics), just as in previous decades. In contrast to the past, however, today's whites typically assert that these characteristics are the results of black culture—which they take to be monolithic and which supposedly encourages irresponsibility, dependence, and self-indulgence—rather than the results of genetics or racial biology.¹¹ The stereotypes function just as before: whites assume that all blacks or most blacks fit them; they make decisions about interaction and the distribution of goods in their control on the basis of them; and they vigorously oppose government programs designed to offset centuries of discrimination as "special rights" or "handouts."¹²

It comes as no surprise to me that researchers discover racism among white Americans despite the elimination of biological essentialism from public discourse. No doubt the repeated sight of solemn, composed civil-rights marchers confronting savage segregationists did undermine the racist belief that whites hold a monopoly on dignity and moral rectitude among those whose racist beliefs were empirically rather than metaphysically based. But racist ideologies did not collapse in the 1960s; there was no mass conversion experience. All that collapsed at that time was a tacit national consensus about how racial difference should be managed. Segregation had failed as a management strategy, and the discourses that permeated it had lost credibility as early as 1946.¹³ White racists could no longer assume, as they had for decades, that all whites would assent or at least acquiesce to their views baldly stated, so they stopped stating them baldly. As some people of color got jobs and took leadership positions that enabled them to occupy seats of authority with powers of surveillance over whites, that reticence redoubled. To protect one's material interests, one might have to be tight-lipped about race, but that was certainly not the same thing as changing one's mind.

There *are* real changes, though. According to researchers like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, many white people at the beginning of the twenty-first century—perhaps in contrast to most white people twenty-five years earlier—are not just cynically hiding their racism from researchers, their employers, their neighbors, and the courts; when they look at themselves, they honestly do not see racism.¹⁴ Nevertheless, says Bonilla-Silva in his provocatively titled book *Racism without Racists*, they are racists in fact. Bonilla-Silva suggests that many whites manage to persist in racism by justifying racially biased decisions and discriminatory actions on the basis of convictions other than the inherent biological or cultural inferiority of nonwhites. Their motive, he holds, is to maintain and benefit from the systematic disadvantage of people of color, but their racism is disguised as color-blind, abstract liberalism,¹⁵ and it is disguised so well that the whites themselves no longer perceive the racism they implicitly espouse. Bonilla-Silva investigates these mechanisms of disguise and reveals how cognitive frameworks like color-blind liberalism really do just recode racist assumptions and permit the uninterrupted practice of racism as usual. As he puts it, “Whether actors express ‘resentment’ or ‘hostility’ toward minorities is largely irrelevant for the maintenance of white privilege.”¹⁶ Racism is alive and well.

Most sociological studies of white racial attitudes seem to assume with Bonilla-Silva that white people commit acts that perpetuate racial injustice because they want to maintain a racially unjust political and economic system; whether whites admit it or not, we all know at some level that we benefit from racial disparities, and the vast majority of us desire to continue receiving those benefits. Hence we want nonwhites to suffer, not because we necessarily believe that they are inferior, although in fact many of us do, but because we know that their suffering is a prerequisite for our gain. Of course, wanting somebody to suffer who does not deserve to suffer is evil, so the less sure a given white person is that people of color are inherently morally inferior, the stronger the incentive is to lie to cover up the racism (and the selfishness) that motivates one’s decisions and actions.

In contrast to sociology, however, the race theory coming out of feminist and cultural studies since the mid-1990s—the subfield that has come to be called whiteness studies¹⁷—does not typically assume that whites whose behavior perpetuates racial injustice necessarily want people of color to suffer, even indirectly. The discourse of “white privilege” affords whiteness-studies theorists a means of reorienting discussion of racial injustice away from racism per se and thus of talking about the ways in which white people, without actively choosing to hurt people of color,

participate in practices that result in racial injustice.¹⁸ Many of these theorists believe that if whites are brought to recognize that such practices are unfair to people of color, they will desist and injustice will decrease.

As far as I have been able to determine, the earliest writings on white privilege are those of the feminist theorist Peggy McIntosh, who published papers in 1988 and 1989 entitled “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” and “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” respectively. McIntosh defines white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets”¹⁹ analogous to the unearned assets that feminists had already begun to call “male privilege.” She goes on to list forty-six such privileges, from “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” to “I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin.”²⁰ She does not claim that her list is exhaustive; in fact, she urges refinement and extension and changes the list herself in subsequent publications. She even says that the term *privilege* is inapt, since “its connotations are too positive to fit the conditions and behaviors which ‘privilege systems’ produce.”²¹ But she continues to use the word, and it has become ubiquitous in race studies in the ensuing twenty years, where it has rarely received any critique.²²

One white privilege—one McIntosh does not list (although her inclusion of the availability of so-called flesh-colored bandages points to it) but subsequent whiteness-studies theorists have insisted on—is that of belonging to a racial group that is taken to be the biological and social norm and therefore having no basic experience of specific racial identity.²³ As Laurie Fuller puts it, “White people do not conceptualize whiteness as an identity. Instead, white people assume that we are really just Americans or humans and we don’t need to think about being white people because white is just the normal, natural way of being human. Race is something that describes a quality of African Americans or Asian Americans, not white people.”²⁴ The first order of business in the project of ending white privilege, the argument goes, is to get white people to experience themselves as raced subjects, as members of one race in a multiracial society, rather than as the standard from which raced subjects deviate. As the feminist theorist Ruth Frankenberg asserts, “Naming whiteness displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance.”²⁵ The first step for white people in recovery from racism is to name ourselves white, to confess and own our raced subjectivity. The next step is to confront the privileges we have as a consequence of that identity

and, having realized the injustice in our continuing to exercise those privileges, divest ourselves of them.

McIntosh's discussion of divestiture, which is largely implicit rather than explicit in her work, builds on parallels with male privilege. For sexism to decline, men must give up their "unearned assets"—for example, the priority they have in university curricula. To study more works by women, we must study fewer works by men. Likewise, to study more works by people of color, we must study fewer works by whites. If we stick with examples of privilege like this one of curricular inclusion—that is, with examples that involve allocation of time or goods—divestiture makes sense. Things become more complex as soon as we leave the realm of the strictly quantifiable, however. For example, how does one divest oneself of "privilege" number 5, "I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed,"²⁶ or "privilege" number 23, "I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider"?²⁷ One cannot simply agree to bear a greater share of store clerks' harassment so that an African American shopper can bear less, and one surely should not forgo the right, indeed the responsibility, to criticize our government just because an Asian American might be ostracized for doing so.²⁸ The language of privilege does not work here, and the strategy of divestiture, even if feasible, could conceivably allow more racial injustice than it alleviates. Nevertheless, within whiteness studies divestiture is the strategy of choice.²⁹ It finds its most radical expression in the writings of the self-styled race traitors Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, who hold that the very racial identity that enables one to lay claim to privilege must be eschewed. "The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race."³⁰ Whiteness *is* privilege, they claim, so the only morally responsible option is to divest oneself of one's white racial identity entirely by refusing all the privileges associated with whiteness.³¹

Quite apart from the practical questions these strategies for ending racial injustice might raise—and they raise a great many—is the more fundamental question of whether racial injustice necessarily originates in subjectivity in the first place. To use terms taken from Michel Foucault, subjectivities may be the anchor or relay points for power, but they may not be the sovereign origins of it. In fact, they may themselves be products of that same network of power. Ignatiev and Garvey come close to this idea when they maintain that racial identities are historically constructed, but they seem to assume that subjectivity itself is not. White racial identity, in their view, appears to be something that an otherwise neutral given

subject assumes and can, with effort, refuse. But in fact, as careful attention to the real advantages that most whites have over most people of color in the United States clearly shows, divestiture is not an option. Some of the most important advantages are not things at all—not land or stocks and bonds or oil wells, although such things are very important and their unfair distribution must be addressed. The most important “things” are, for example, having developed one’s bones and brains in a house or apartment in a part of the world relatively free of toxic substances like lead and mercury,³² having grown up with literate elders who had the leisure time to pursue intellectual or artistic or political interests, having developed as a personality in a society in which others, even most strangers, clearly believe one’s life to be precious and one’s suffering to be misfortune. These and many other “white privileges” are not things any of us lucky enough to have had them can give up, for the simple reason that they are now us—our bodies, our psyches, our intellects, our self-esteem. And what is wrong is not that we have had these things; it is that many others have not had and do not have and will not have these things unless something pretty drastic is done.³³

But fifty years of moral condemnation of racism has done nothing that drastic. In fact, it has done virtually nothing at all, other than prevent people from analyzing racial injustice as a systemic problem that shapes our society and our selves long before any one of us ever becomes a moral agent of any sort, let alone a racist. Hence, I propose that we abandon the rhetoric of sin and sacrifice, and with it the strategy of divestiture—in fact, I would like to propose that we abandon the language of skin privilege altogether since it tends to obscure the ways in which subjectivities are formed in networks of power—and study race in much the same way that Foucault has studied sexuality, as a *dispositif*, as an apparatus of biopower with a specific history. Doing so, I believe, will do more to disrupt unjust racial power arrangements, including racial subject positions, than any critique of skin privilege ever could.

As we all know from Foucault’s analyses, biopower arose in the nineteenth century; race and racism preexist its advent. But a good genealogy will show that race was transformed in the nineteenth century and absorbed into biopolitical discourses and practices in much the same way that many other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century disciplinary practices and identities were. Space does not permit a thorough genealogy of race here, but I will offer a brief sketch derived from the recent work of several U.S. historians, as well as from Foucault himself.

Although the word *race* first appeared in English in 1580,³⁴ Foucault argues that both the concept of race as a specifically human form of differentiation and political discourses of race and racism emerged in the seventeenth century. At that time a new discourse, one Foucault calls a discourse of “race war,” enabled an English underclass to distinguish itself from its rulers and critique its government and laws.³⁵ The claim that the rulers were of an alien (Norman) race and that their laws were simply a means of conquest and ongoing oppression (of a Saxon race) served to constitute that underclass in their own eyes as a distinct people and to rally them for revolution. This discourse was easily adapted for other purposes, however, and so it had widespread currency in a variety of forms all across the political spectrum in ensuing decades.³⁶

In early uses of the concept, race was not primarily a morphological phenomenon. Races were distinct because of their distinct lineages, customs, languages, or values and perhaps their distinct characters or religious beliefs. A major transformation in the concept of race occurred when the word ceased to name distinctions between cultural or linguistic communities and came to be applied *only* to morphologically distinguishable groups (whose members might not share a language or culture or even a geographical region). Foucault calls this transition a “biological transcription,”³⁷ meaning that race was thereafter considered fundamentally a heritable physical trait. However, since the word *biological* sounds scientific and Foucault later distinguishes what he calls “scientific racism” from the racism associated with this earlier concept, I would prefer to call this a morphological transcription instead. By the late eighteenth century, this morphological transcription having taken place, race was primarily about bodies, not language or custom or political history. Foucault correlates this event with “nationalist movements in Europe and with nationalities’ struggles against the great State apparatuses (essentially the Russian and the Austrian)” and with colonization.³⁸

In the Anglo colonies of North America, race was deliberately introduced at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a means of dividing and disempowering a labor force. In *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, the historian Theodore Allen asserts that neither race nor racism as we know them existed in colonial America in the seventeenth century. What did exist in abundance was the horrific exploitation of laborers, especially in the tobacco colonies, as planters grabbed up land faster than labor could be imported into a marshy death trap where most workers perished within three years of arrival. Most laborers in the early years were indentured servants, meaning

that they worked for some specific length of time agreed to by contract (usually—unless they were simply liquored up and kidnapped or, as happened with orphans, stolen off the streets of London and “apprenticed” to planters or, as happened with many young women, purchased from impoverished parents). If they survived their term of indenture—very many did not—and managed to hang on to their indenture papers and convince their “employers” to go with them to court to have the term of contract officially terminated (this did not happen automatically), then they were entitled to freedom dues, which consisted of a certain number of acres of land and a set of tools to start their own plantations. Prior to the end of their term of service, indentured servants could be sold by their masters. Indeed, indentured servants were regularly traded as chattel. But they were not chattel for life—unless their lives happened to be prematurely curtailed. As the years wore on, enough indentured servants survived to acquire land that there was a glut of tobacco on the market. For that reason and others, prices fell. It was clear to the wealthy that freedom dues had to be avoided; there was no room for more producers and plenty of need for more labor. Upward mobility had to cease.

British law clearly forbade lifetime chattel servitude. Men could be bought and sold, made to work for free, confined against their will, and beaten almost to death, but they could not be made to suffer all these things for their entire lives. (Things were slightly different for women; as wives, women *could* be bought outright, forced to work for free, confined, and beaten for their entire lives. Why were they not considered slaves? Because British law prohibited husbands from reselling them after the initial purchase.) Colonial planters began to find ways around British law. Allen puts the number of European men, women, and children brought to Virginia and Maryland between 1607 and 1682 at 92,000, of which more than 75 percent were made to be, in fact if not in law, lifelong chattel slaves in the tobacco colonies.³⁹

But they did not take to it kindly. Allen documents hundreds of incidents of resistance and rebellion. The entire colonial labor force was extremely unruly and quite apt to act with solidarity across what we now perceive as racial lines.⁴⁰ European, African, and Native American bond-laborers often escaped together, sometimes seeking asylum in nearby Native American communities, where they were welcomed. Many chose to fight rather than run, however, and racially mixed groups of militant laborers menaced planters throughout the seventeenth century, cooperating with each other apparently without racial discord.

How could planters bring such a large and volatile labor force under their control? And how could they prevent the planting class from expanding as bond-laborers earned their right to land and market share? The

easiest way was to stop importing so many European bond-laborers whose rights were recognized and sometimes enforced by European governments. Native Americans were not optimal slave material, since their knowledge of the land and kinship ties with neighboring groups made escape a constant possibility. But Africans, strangers in the New World without Old World governments to protect their rights, could be used indefinitely, with no freedom dues ever paid. After the British chartered the Royal Africa Company in 1667 to exploit their newly acquired access to the African coasts following the Second Dutch War, the supply of vulnerable Africans seemed endless.

Slavery, then, was not at first a racist institution in North America (although obviously it was an unjust and oppressive one). Nor was racism characteristic of the general population of laborers in Anglo-America in the seventeenth century. Racism was invented to persuade laborers of European descent not to act in solidarity with, and to accept the lifelong enslavement of, African laborers. This was no easy feat; after all, the lifelong enslavement of any group ran counter to the economic interests of all laborers.⁴¹ Therefore, Allen claims, the colonial governments of the tobacco colonies—acting independently of the British government—deliberately drove an ideological wedge between laborers of African and European descent, and the U.S. government continued this policy in the late eighteenth century. This was done systematically not by degrading chattel slaves (which would have been difficult, considering how degraded they already were) but rather by lowering the legal status of free laborers of African descent and elevating that of free laborers of European descent. This is how, according to Allen, the so-called white race was created. It was established as a legal and economic category in colonial and then in U.S. law and policy as a way of co-opting the European American portion of the labor force so that enslavement of a subset of the total labor force—the African American portion—could proceed unhampered.

When it revised the Virginia Code in 1705, the Virginia General Assembly enacted a number of new laws that changed the civil status of free African Americans, differentiating them for the first time from free European Americans. In addition to making these changes, the General Assembly, as Allen says, “took special pains to be sure that the people they ruled were propagandized in the moral and legal *ethos* of white-supremacism,”⁴² pains they persisted in taking with the enactment of more such laws over the next two decades. Allen describes the new rules in detail:

For consciousness-raising purposes (to prevent “pretense of ignorance”), the laws mandated that parish clerks or churchwardens,

once each spring and fall at the close of Sunday service, should read (“publish”) these laws in full to the congregants. Sheriffs were ordered to have the same done at the courthouse door at the June or July term of court. If we presume, in the absence of any contrary record, that this mandate was followed, we must conclude that the general public was regularly and systematically subjected to official white-supremacist agitation. It was to be drummed into the minds of the people that, for the first time, no free African-American was to dare to lift his or her hand against a “Christian, not being a negro, mulatto or Indian” {note here that in 1705 the Virginians had as yet no way to refer to “white people”}; that African-American freeholders were no longer to be allowed to vote; that the provision of a previous enactment was being reinforced against the mating of English and Negroes as producing “abominable mixture” and “spurious issue”; that, as provided in the 1723 law for preventing freedom plots by African-American bond-laborers, “any white person {and notice here, eighteen years later, the use of the term *white*} . . . found in the company with any [illegally congregated] slaves” was to be fined (along with free African-Americans or Indians so offending) with a fine of fifteen shillings, or to “receive, on his, or her, or their bare backs, for every such offense, twenty lashes well laid on.”⁴³

Obviously, if Americans of European descent already considered African Americans their inferiors, discriminated against them, refused to associate with them, and ignored their interests and needs, no such policy of public recitation would have been necessary—nor would many of the laws recited have been necessary. The point was to produce racial division where little or none existed and to do so in order to control the labor force and thus allay elite fears of a general uprising and a destabilization of the colonial economy.

The general laboring population was not the only group who had to be taught the lessons of morphological racism by colonial governmental officials. In 1723, after the Virginia General Assembly drastically curtailed basic civil rights for free blacks,⁴⁴ the British attorney general Richard West launched an inquiry. Denying anyone the right to vote in any colonial election on the basis of skin color was a clear departure from English law and from previous colonial statutes. West wrote, “I cannot see why one freeman should be used worse than another, merely upon account of his complexion.”⁴⁵ In response, colonial governor William Gooch explained that free Negroes and mulattoes tended to be sympathetic to slaves, many having previously been slaves themselves. Recent uprisings of

slaves in which black freeholders had participated made that fact obvious. Therefore the governor thought it wise to affix to them “a perpetual Brand . . . by excluding them from that great Privilege of a Freeman.”⁴⁶ Gooch was no racist; he did not believe that blacks were inferior to whites. He simply wanted to limit freeholders’ support of slave rebellions. Race hatred was not the fundamental reason for new racial distinctions in law. The basic reason was strategic: the easiest way to contain people who, because of their personal affiliations and histories, could not be supposed to support the current and quite profitable organization of colonial labor was to create law that marked them permanently as an underclass and distanced them from other laborers who might otherwise share their interests.

Contrary to tradition and legal precedent, colonial governments deliberately established morphological race as a civil concept. Over the course of the eighteenth century, race, a form of embodiment, became a form of subjectivity—of citizenship, of social status, and finally of personal identity. By Thomas Jefferson’s day, race was no longer a matter of lineage or culture at all; it was simply a matter of morphology—skin color, hair texture, facial structure—along with the internal physiology that was thought to attend such variations, including increased or decreased capacity for rational thought. What had once been a political scheme had become within sixty years a kind of common sense. Law and policy in the new United States would thus be based on the assumption that racial subjectivity is real, that members of the black and red races are incapable of exercising the responsibilities of full citizenship in a free republic, and that *lifelong servitude* is appropriate for some races but inappropriate for others.

However, morphological race in the late eighteenth century was not, strictly speaking, a scientific concept; it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that race became fully integrated into biological thought. Foucault writes, “At the time when the notion of race struggle was about to be replaced by that of class struggle . . . it was in fact only natural that attempts should be made by one side to recode the old counterhistory not in terms of class, but in terms of races—races in the biological and medical sense.”⁴⁷ The ruling classes took over the morphological concept of race, reworked it with the aid of evolutionary theory, and deployed it to offset the discourse of class that was developing in the years immediately preceding and following the revolutions of 1848. Now race became a question of “differentiation of species, natural selection, and the survival of the fittest.”⁴⁸ The various races were subspecies that had developed along different lines in response to different environmental pressures; consequently, they had differing capacities and vulnerabilities

that made each one more or less likely to develop at an acceptable rate toward that nineteenth-century Western ideal, "civilization."

Nineteenth-century U.S. policy regarding indigenous peoples and those peoples whose ancestors had been imported against their will reflected this view that there was one and only one ideal of human development and that various racial types could be judged against that ideal and the norms of development toward it. In other words, U.S. policy coalesced with the techniques of power and knowledge that Foucault has famously labeled "normalization." The Bureau of Indian Affairs undertook a number of programs to force Native Americans to abandon their tribal practices, to assimilate to white American culture, insofar as possible to develop into white people.⁴⁹ Under this view, Native Americans were merely retarded compared with whites and might be brought along with the proper management strategies, but African Americans were irreversibly abnormal. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scientists claimed that African Americans were degenerate as a race and prone to alcoholism, venereal disease, insanity, and idiocy; segregation practices and laws were established in great part to prevent the spread of black contagion to white blood.⁵⁰ U.S. immigration policy in the first half of the twentieth century clearly reflects the view that members of allegedly less developed races were a biological threat to white Americans.⁵¹ As Foucault puts it, writing about Western Europe during the same period, "Thanks to the shift from law to norm, . . . sovereignty was able to invest or take over the discourse of race struggle and reutilize it for its own strategy. State sovereignty thus becomes the imperative to protect the race"⁵²—the white race, that is. And the enemy of the normalizing state is deviance in all its forms.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses of race that developed out of biological accounts of normality and closely allied anthropological accounts of progress toward civilization hold up the white race as the standard from which all other races deviate. Racial identities are deviant identities, just as the sexual identities that Foucault lists are—"mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyophiles, sexoesthetic inverts," and so on.⁵³ The outcasts in Western societies of the twentieth century are always figured as deviants in their very truth as selves. Within those societies, racial difference has become part of a general discourse of norm and deviance, part of the growing network of power that uses normalization to control populations. It is no accident that throughout the twentieth century race was thoroughly sexualized and sex was very often overtly racialized. Racial and sexual identities as we know and live them now, in contrast to those of two hundred years ago, are products and tools of normalization and biopower.⁵⁴

Just as Foucault's genealogy of sexuality can help loosen the hold that sexual identities have over us and lessen the compulsion to confess and conform to sexual networks of power, genealogies of race can expose racial categories and identities as formations of power and through that exposure change our relationship to them, to each other, and to ourselves. Genealogy is not a self-sacrificial strategy of divestiture; it is an antinormalizing discipline that engenders movements of self-overcoming opening toward fundamental transformation in subjectivity and social practice. As genealogy reveals the porosity of the past, it reopens the future. As it exposes the accidents that constitute norms, it frees difference from the confines of deviance. Genealogy as a practice is part of an ethos, a way of living that resists and counters normalization. It is an antinormalizing discipline.

If we are serious about ending racial injustice, simply passing moral judgment on normalized subjectivities is futile. The institutions that shape every aspect of our lives carry racist values within them. No one can successfully resist the repetition of those values in our society and in our lives by simply refusing "skin privilege" or by renouncing white identity. The solution to racial injustice is not moral and personal; it is political and systemic. But moral discourse, focused on sovereign individuals as the origins of evil, blocks any progress in that direction. What we need instead is an *ethos* that includes countermemory—genealogical archival research combined with local accounts of living race differently⁵⁵—an ethos that fosters our capacities without increasing our docility and thus unfits us for normalization. We need an ethos that creates the conditions under which we might eventually be able to disrupt and thoroughly undermine the normalizing institutions that perpetrate the racial injustice that so very many of us do not want in our society anymore.