



# RACECRAFT

*The Soul of Inequality  
in American Life*

KAREN E. FIELDS AND BARBARA J. FIELDS

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## *Authors' Note*

Some readers may be puzzled to see the expression *Afro-American* used frequently in these pages. *African-American* being more common these days. We do not take a dogmatic view on such terminological questions, preferring the approach of our grandmother, who used all but two of the terms that prevailed in her day (she died in 1987, just short of ninety-nine): Colored, Negro, Afro-American, and black. She used the term *nigger* and its close South Carolina cognate *nigra* only when quoting others with disapproval. Although we leave our fellow citizens to their own choice, we prefer *Afro-American*. We prefer it because it is time-honored, having deep roots in the literary life of African American English. Moreover, it leaves room for useful distinctions. Karen's husband Moussa Bagat is a naturalized American citizen born in Ivory Coast, is an African-American. Barack Obama, the child of a Kenyan father and a Euro-American mother, is an African-American. Karen and I, like Michelle Obama, are Afro-Americans. Karen's daughter Maïmouna, the child of an African-American like the Obamas' daughters, and an Afro-American, may choose whichever term she likes.

The Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, and the Conclusion are published here for the first time. Chapters 3 through 8 are republished with minor changes. Details of original publication are given in notes at the beginning of each chapter.

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# Introduction

*In the beginning was the deed.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein quoting Goethe misquoting John the Apostle

*The Idols of the Tribe have their foundation in human nature itself, and in the tribe or race of men.*

Francis Bacon

*“Race” is the witchcraft of our time.*

M. F. Ashley Montagu

During the 2008 presidential election campaign, hardly a week passed without a reference to America’s “post-racial” society, which the election of Barack Obama supposedly would establish. No one, however, anyone really was imagining such a thing as a post-racial America, what that might be was hard to pin down. Right through the campaign, references to “race” and the “race card” kept jostling the “post-racial” and “post-racial.” When insinuations about Obama’s supposed foreignness cropped up, one journalist called that “the *new* race card.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is among the oldest and most durable. Pronouncing native-born Americans of African descent to be aliens goes as far back as Thomas Jefferson and the other founding fathers. More than a century later, D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* launched American cinema with the same pronouncement in its opening sequence.<sup>2</sup> And, a few days after the 2008 vote, suits filed in Pennsylvania and New Jersey to overturn President Obama’s election denied his American birth in order to deny his citizenship. Far from holding mere playing cards in their hands, those who brought suit had historical bedrock under their feet, and a ready-made place in national discourse.<sup>3</sup> How and why a handful of racist notions have gained permanent sustenance in American life is the subject of this book.

Other supposedly new notions are just as old and as deeply embedded. Today’s talk of “biracial” or “multiracial” people rehabilitates *mulatto*, *quadroon*, *octoroon*, and the like—yesterday’s terms for mixed ancestry.<sup>4</sup> Although they now reemerge in the costume of post-racial progressiveness, not to say a move toward “an ideal future of racelessness,”<sup>5</sup> their origins are racist. *Mulatto* made its first appearance on the US census in 1850, after two theorists, Josiah Nott, a physician, and James De Bow, a political economist, decided to classify and count individuals with one parent of African and one of European descent.<sup>6</sup> Today’s lobbying for a new census classification, called *multiracial*, defines it the same way, “someone with two monoracial parents.”<sup>7</sup> Does it matter that these citizen rejuvenators and obsolete racist categories cannot reasonably share the agenda of their predecessors—to validate the folk theory that mixed offspring are degenerate in mind and body?<sup>8</sup> Today, some parents passionately seek a state-sponsored classification as a means of protecting their own children from feelings that enter all American children’s minds via toxic drip. “Self-esteem is directly tied to accurate racial identity,” said one mother.<sup>9</sup> Whatever she thought she was saying about mixed ancestry and mental

health, the very phrase *accurate racial identity* ought to set off sirens. Dangerous lies do not always dress the part.

Where but in recycled racist fiction are “monoracial” parents to be found to serve as guarantors of “accurate racial identity”? The least one can say is that the fiction misrepresents the American experience. According to an estimate derived from decades of census reports, some 24 percent of Americans listed in 1970 as “white” probably had African ancestors, while more than 80 percent of those listed as “black” had non-African ones, which implies that there were nearly twice as many white as black Americans of African descent.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson’s descendants fit both descriptions.<sup>11</sup> But misrepresentation is not all. While redacting America’s real history, the fiction revives an old fallacy: the move, by definition, from the concept “mixture” to the false inference that unmixed components exist, which cannot be disproved by observation and experience because it does not arise from them.<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century, that logic had hideous real-world consequences. In the comparative innocence of the nineteenth, the same logic aligned itself with a zeal for measurement and percentages of mixture between (theoretically) unmixed individuals beckoned as avenues for further investigation. In due course, the Census Bureau experimented with the classifications *quadroon* and *octoroon* (respectively, an individual with a black grandparent or a black great-grandparent). Some states enacted laws to prevent people with African ancestry from “passing” as white, and set up genealogical research procedures to detect violators.<sup>13</sup> In sum, restoring notions of race mixture to center stage recommit us, willy-nilly, to the discredited idea of racial purity, the basic premise of bio-racism.

The latter, meanwhile, is neither gone nor forgotten. “Bio-racism” is a more precise appellation for the nineteenth-century research just sketched than the more usual term, “race science.” For all the measuring and experimenting that research inspired, it failed as science.<sup>14</sup> Modern genetics began afresh, and on a basis so different as, perhaps, to deserve labeling *non-racial*. *Race* in today’s biology is not a traditionally named group of people but a statistically defined population: “the difference in the frequency of alleles between populations (contiguous and interbreeding groups) of the same species.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike the units of bio-racism, these populations are not held to be visible to the naked eye, or knowable in advance of disciplined investigation. So the news is not good when scientists studying the human genome—adept in some of the twenty-first century’s most sophisticated research techniques—hark back to the old notion, yoking those techniques to a system of classifying people that is steeped in folk thought.<sup>16</sup> They have a choice in the matter. Today’s probabilistic methods and molecular-biological evidence by no means compel resort to the folk system. Indeed, they would seem to be incompatible with it.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if the scientific logic is indeed non-racial, the folk classification ought to wither under its influence. To adhere to both old and new is to pick up and put down modern science with shameless promiscuity.

However, such picking up and putting down has its defenders, sometimes offering defenses so remarkable as to justify this book’s new coinage, “racecraft.” That term highlights the ability of proper or non-scientific modes of thought to hijack the minds of the scientifically literate. Here, an anthropologist defends the traditional folk classification: “After all, genetics has added very little to what scientists, or indeed any observant people, have known for centuries about human groups . . . . Modern genetics can be a bit more technically specific, *but the basic truths are not new.*”<sup>18</sup> The anthropologist proceeds to justify, on grounds of data-processing convenience, the routine use of “[subjects’] ‘race’ as categorical (check-box) variables in studies . . . to identify epidemiological risk factors.”<sup>19</sup> Notice that, even where properly genetic risk factors exist, no part of the procedure,

described, prevents the subject's "race" from being taken, before the fact, to "explain" whatever found after the fact. A psychologist has noted the "garbage in/garbage out" circularity of "elegant experimental designs and statistical analyses applied to biologically meaningless racial categories." The check-box method reduces "genetics" to a matter of querying, or simply glancing at, the research subject. If "looks-like" genetics and "says-so" genomics are respectable tools, what, indeed, could modern science add to popular belief?

Fortunately, not all American scientists choose to yoke their technological racehorse to the centuries-old oxcart. J. Craig Venter, whose imagination accelerated to warp speed the race to map the human genome, reflected on his work autobiographically in *A Life Decoded*.<sup>21</sup> In his depiction mapping the human genome revealed nature's real world of irremediably diverse individuality—Venter's own (the first genome ever to be posted online) as well as everyone else's.<sup>22</sup> Nature's world of diverse individuality is precisely *not* one that "observant people have known about" for centuries. Rather, that world stands open to fresh discoveries about nature in the make-up of human beings. Venter links his own susceptibility to asthma to probable genetic determinants that he shares with various statistical populations of Americans. Presented in a series of insets, his own particulars disclose enormous complexity. *Not* "known for centuries," for instance, is the family of enzymes glutathione S-transferase (GST), variants of which, found on chromosomes 1 and 11, are believed to affect individuals' allergic response to diesel exhaust particles. Other sites also seem to be involved. Venter's own combination may be "read," and the "reading" suggests why he must reach for an inhaler on a foggy San Francisco day.<sup>23</sup>

Venter's way of introducing new science to a lay public seems more in accord with the ingrained individualism that so impressed early visitors to America, like Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, than with the ingrained anti-individualism that the very word "gene" evokes for many today.<sup>24</sup> Venter makes few concessions to that anti-individualism, whatever phase of his work or life he is recounting, and race has no entry in his book's index. When questions arose about his decision to take human samples private<sup>25</sup> Human Genome Project's five samples from individuals who differed by what Americans call race, he replied that the point was to "help illustrate that the concept of race has no genetic scientific basis; and that there is no way to tell one ethnicity from another in the five Celestial genomes"<sup>26</sup>—surely a caution against the widespread habit of treating "race" and "genetics" as though they were interchangeable terms. Later, he told a BBC interviewer that "skin colour as a surrogate for race is a social concept, not a scientific one."<sup>27</sup>

Venter was surely mistaken, however, when he suggested that "greater scientific literacy" might help combat (altogether predictable) discrimination in the use of genomics.<sup>28</sup> That bit of naive catechism glares amid the sophistication of the book as a whole. Few can claim greater scientific literacy than James D. Watson, a Nobel laureate for his work on DNA and founding director of the public Human Genome Project. Yet remarks he made to interviewers during his 2007 book-promotion trip to London owed less to that scientific literacy than to the racist certainties in which many Chicagoans of his generation were reared.<sup>29</sup> Pronouncing himself "inherently gloomy about the prospects of Africa," Watson said that "all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas testing says not really." Indeed, in his view, reason is not properly regarded as "some universal heritage of humanity." For evidence, however, the man of science resorted to personal impressions, haphazardly collected: "People who have to deal with black employees find this is not true." From his digest of anecdotes, he went on to prophesy that genetic evidence for black people

lesser intelligence would emerge within a decade.<sup>30</sup>

But a statement does not acquire validity because a duly ordained scientist utters it. The sirens went off immediately. Certain of Watson's fellow molecular biologists took the floor with a scientifically correct formulation: It was "not possible to draw such conclusions from the work that has been done on DNA." Dr. Venter, who happened to be traveling in the United Kingdom at the same time, said "There is no basis in scientific fact or in the human genetic code for the notion that skin colour will be predictive of intelligence."<sup>31</sup> For his part, Watson did not defend himself by citing his own scientific work to date or anyone else's. Reporters later observed that he at first denied what he had said, and seemed stunned. Perhaps a pre-scientific layer of his mind had taken over momentarily.<sup>32</sup>

Not all who piled onto Dr. Watson can claim to differ fundamentally from him. Shortly after he published his own genome online, scientists at Iceland's deCode Genetics startled the world with a revelation. Watson had "16 times more genes of black origin than the average white European—1 percent rather than the 1 percent that most of his origin" would have. "This level is what you would expect in someone who had a great-grandparent who was African."<sup>33</sup> In other words, Dr. Watson is someone whom nineteenth-century census takers would have classified as an *octoroon* if they had been able to see behind appearance. In those days, a technology able to expose "genes of black" origin (expressed in percentages, no less) would have appealed to people who yearned for a sure-fire way to know an octoroon when you could not know by looking. Watson's comeuppance, so deliciously prompt upon the sin, occasioned so much laughter that it is easy to miss the unhappy fact that deCode Genetics' researchers themselves yoked the new technology to the uses of yore.<sup>34</sup>

As if all that were not enough, now comes a techno-fad that purports to determine the so-called tribal origins of Afro-Americans with the help of Personal Genetic Histories (PGHs).<sup>35</sup> The same methods and logic might equally have revealed Dr. Watson's African tribal origins to the world.<sup>36</sup> Anyone who is committed to thinking of tribes as objectively occurring biological phenomena cannot think differently about bio-racists' races.<sup>37</sup> What an irony, then, if the World War II defeat of the Nazis did indeed discredit race science, only to have the yearning for "identity" and the jaw swabs of Afro-American bio-genealogists abet its revival. Whatever the "post" may mean in "post-racial," it cannot mean that racism belongs to the past. Post-racial turns out to be—simply—racial; which is to say racist.

Something is afoot that is the business of every citizen who thought that the racist concepts of a century ago were gone—and good riddance!—as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. The continued vitality of those concepts stands as a reminder that, however important a historical watershed the election of an African-American president may be, America's post-racial era has not been born. Perhaps it can be made if America lets those concepts go. But if they are hard to let go, why is that? What are they made of? How do they work? And what work do they do? Those are our subjects in the coming chapters. For now, we sketch our answers briefly and bluntly, so as not to preempt the essays to come. One general point must be made at the outset, however, and with an important caveat: Racist concepts do considerable work in political and economic life; *but*, if they were merely an appendix of politics and economics, without intimate roots in other phases of life, their persuasiveness would accordingly diminish.

From very early on, Americans wove racist concepts into a public language about inequality that made "black" the virtual equivalent of "poor" and "lower class," thus creating a distinctive idiom that has no parallel in other Western democracies. The French Revolution assigned universal validity to the



slogan *Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!* By contrast, America's rendering of the same sentiments added asterisks, for it had to make sense of an anomalous reality: the presence of native-born people who were "foreign," hardworking people who were not free. When Tocqueville sought to convey to French readers the racist prejudice he found in the United States, North and South—a signal exception to the enthusiasm for equality that he duly noted—he wrote that he could draw no direct comparison from French experience. Instead he proposed as an "analogy" the gut-level physical repugnance aristocrats felt toward their equally white, but unequally born, compatriots.<sup>38</sup> In that tiny vignette of white-on-white struggles in France lay the kernel of a legitimate public language to come, in which the French might tackle class inequality in straightforward terms.

In America, straightforward talk about class inequality is all but impossible, indeed taboo. Political appeals to the economic self-interest of ordinary voters, as distinct from their wealthy compatriots, court instant branding and disfigurement in the press as divisive "economic populism" or even "class warfare."<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, divisive political appeals composed in a different register, sometimes called "cultural populism," enlist voters' self-concept in place of their self-interest; appealing, in other words, to who they are and are not, rather than to what they require and why. Thus, the policies of the 1980s radically redistributed income upward. Then, with "economic populism" shooed from the public arena, "cultural populism" fielded something akin to a marching band. It had a simple melody about the need to enrich the "investing" classes (said to "create jobs"), and an encoded percussion of "culture wars"; "welfare mothers"; "underclass"; "race-and-IQ"; "black-on-black crime"; "criminal gene"; on and on.<sup>40</sup> Halfway through the decade, as the band played on, a huge economic revolution from above had got well under way. The poorest 40 percent of American families were sharing 15 percent of household income, while the share of the richest 20 percent of families had risen to a record 43.7 percent, and the trend appeared to be (and has turned out to be) more and more of the same.<sup>41</sup>

The late Derrick Bell seems to have coined the phrase "post-racial." In his 1990 essay, "After We're Gone: Prudent Speculations on America in a Post-Racial Epoch," he intended not to gesture at a vague future state, but to examine the relationship between two developments of the 1980s: the need to manage politically the radical redistribution of income toward the well-to-do and the suffocation of public sentiment favorable to civil rights.<sup>42</sup> Bell used allegory. Space Traders arrive with a proposal for America's deciders. They will sell America a proven technology for producing unlimited wealth and will buy in return every living Afro-American. Their deal poses constitutional and moral problems, obviously, but also a practical one. The practical problem is not whether to accept the deal (which is inevitable) but how to couch, stage-manage, and spin it. Bell portrays the ensuing National Conversation with hilarious fidelity to its real-world models. In taking the deal, however, the deciders overlook a fundamental problem. The traditional political language will become obsolete the instant the ships lift off. What then? The curtain falls, and bits and pieces are heard as post-racial America confronts—straightforwardly, for the first time—the problem of who gets what part of the nation's wealth, and why.

Strange though it may seem, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, provided a coda to Bell's article "After We're Gone" (1990). Contrary to its strenuously promoted race-and-IQ public identity, *The Bell Curve* is far more centrally a class-and-IQ book, a story about a society that no longer rewards hard work by the "not very smart." Furthermore, the authors, like Bell, not only cite the top-heavy income distribution they also begin where he does, with many white Americans faring badly. Where Bell sees "politics" however, they see "nature," with born winners and losers, not tilted playing fields or policies with

intended outcomes. They conclude, therefore, from the same statistics as Bell's, that a "cognitive elite has pulled away from the rest of the population economically, becoming more prosperous even as real wages in the rest of the economy stagnated or fell."<sup>43</sup> If smart people are gaining ground by virtue of their IQ, hardworking others are losing ground by virtue of theirs. Who now remembers this principal story of *The Bell Curve*? In the time it takes to say "racecraft," growing class inequality, the shared theme of their work and Bell's, became inaudible, despite its prominence in a very long book.

Furthermore, if the main story went unheard, the reason is not that the authors spoke softly. A year before publication, Charles Murray contributed a raise-the-alarm piece to the *Wall Street Journal* about "the coming white underclass." Burdened with unemployment, illegitimacy, jail—in short, the telltale exudations of class in America, not race—Murray's white underclass was identical to its black counterpart.<sup>44</sup> What is more, Murray and Herrnstein made no bones about their scientifico-ideological agenda, to counteract the "perversions of the egalitarian ideal that beg[an] with the French Revolution."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *The Bell Curve* opens with a quotation by Edmund Burke, a fierce detractor of that revolution, who made no bones about upholding the very same "natural" distinctions that Tocqueville the aristocrat deployed as an analogy to American racism. Imagine the fallout if the media had aired then, in a National Conversation about Class, the truly controversial views of the two authors. Indeed, what might happen today if neoconservatives addressed hardworking, morally marrying (and, until recently, respectably employed) Americans with the authors' lodestar belief? The good society promotes "contentment," say they, simply by having "a place for everyone," even for those who "aren't very smart"—indeed, "a valued place." To explain what that place might be, they offer a "pragmatic definition" at once serene and ruthless: "*You occupy a valued place (their italics) if other people would miss you when you were gone.*"<sup>46</sup> In their version of America's future, the raised voices that Bell imagined are to hold their peace.

Perhaps the economic turmoil that lent resonance to Barack Obama's call for change may itself provide an opening toward better things than that. The debacle of the bankers rubbed the gloss from the justifications for inequality that prevailed in the 1980s. Americans of all colors now have good evidence that "genetic" testing back then for the "criminal gene" missed a bet by taking samples only among the incarcerated, while ignoring well-heeled virtuosos of thievery. Besides, Americans have taken a good look at incompetence rewarded with outsize pay and perks, while ordinary workers' day in, day out competence has failed even to protect their jobs. The image of CEOs gliding in Washington in silver jets, hands outstretched for taxpayers' money, has disrupted the old icons. The "welfare mother" can no longer stand for what is not right with America.

The authors have been living through recent events as Afro-Americans of Southern origin and as American citizens. But it is in another capacity—as teachers whose students are of all colors and origins—that we present these chapters. They begin with a guided tour of racecraft, followed by a joint essay in which we highlight common metaphors, such as the so-called racial divide, that becloud and misdirect thought. Three chapters examine America's past while testing the lenses (sometimes on poorly ground) through which historians today try to "see" what happened in the past and understand why and with what lasting consequences. Another revisits a classic by the great anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who showed how witch beliefs could be held by rational people. The last is an imaginary conversation between two great sociologists, Emile Durkheim and W. E. B. Du Bois, whose different national histories, French and American, confronted them with similar predicaments. The conclusion synthesizes what the preceding essays show about the intimate interaction between racecraft and inequality in American life. Throughout, we strive to think rigorously about the world

experience that Americans designate by the shorthand, *race*.

That very shorthand is our abiding target because it confuses three different things: race, racism, and racecraft. The term *race* stands for the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank.<sup>47</sup> For example, *The Races of Europe*, published in 1899 to wide acclaim and lasting influence, set out to establish scientifically the distinctness of the “Teutonic,” “Alpine,” and “Mediterranean” races. After compiling tens of thousands of published measurements (of stature, shape of head and nose, coloring of skin, hair, and eyes, and more), the author, William Z. Ripley, had more than enough quantitative evidence to work with—indeed, far too much. A “taxonomic nightmare”<sup>48</sup> loomed up and forced on him a certain flexibility of method: shifting criteria as needed, ignoring unruly instances, and employing ad hoc helpers like the “Index of Nigrescence” (to handle the variable coloring of persons indigenous to the British Isles). Fitting actual humans to any such grid inevitably calls forth the busy repertoire of strange maneuvering that is part of what we call *racecraft*. The nineteenth-century bio-racist’s ultimately vain search for traits with which to demarcate human groups regularly exhibited such maneuvering.<sup>49</sup> *Race* is the principal unit and core concept of *racism*.

*Racism* refers to the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard. That may be what the economist Glenn Loury intends when he identifies “a withholding of the presumption of equal humanity.” *Racism* is not an emotion or state of mind, such as intolerance, bigotry, hatred, or malevolence. If it were that, it would easily be overwhelmed; most people mean well, most of the time, and in any case are usually busy pursuing other purposes. *Racism* is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action and a rationale for action, or both at once. *Racism* always takes for granted the objective reality of *race*, as just defined, so it is important to register their distinctness. The shorthand transforms *racism*, something an aggressor *does*, into *race*, something the target *is*, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss. Consider the statement “black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color”—a perfectly natural sentence to the ears of most Americans, who tend to overlook its weird causality. But in that sentence, segregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then in a puff of smoke—*paff*—reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole. In similar fashion, enslavers disappear only to reappear, disguised, in stories that append physical traits defined as slave-like to those enslaved.<sup>51</sup>

Jefferson became so entangled in the reversals as to declare that the very people white Americans had lived with for over 160 years as slaves would be, after emancipation, too different for white people to live with any longer. He proposed that slaves be freed and promptly deported, their labor to be supplied through the importation of white laborers.<sup>52</sup> His catalogue of differences went from skin color (they do not blush) and internal organs (“They secrete less by the kidneys”), to intellect (“In imagination, they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous”) and even emotion (“Their griefs are transient,” he asserted without irony). Even so, as a man of science, Jefferson qualified: “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”<sup>53</sup> He thus recognized the oddity of his position—even if intermittently, through the off-and-on blinking of *racecraft*.<sup>54</sup>

Distinct from *race* and *racism*, *racecraft* does not refer to groups or to ideas about groups’ traits, however odd both may appear in close-up. It refers instead to mental terrain and to pervasive beliefs

Like physical terrain, racecraft exists objectively; it has topographical features that Americans regularly navigate, and we cannot readily stop traversing it. Unlike physical terrain, racecraft originates not in nature but in human action and imagination; it can exist in no other way.<sup>55</sup> The action and imagining are collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical, and consequential even though nested in mundane routine. The action and imagining emerge as part of moment-to-moment practicality, that is, thinking about and executing every purpose under the sun. Do not look for racecraft, therefore, only where it might be said to “belong.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, *racecraft* is not a euphemistic substitute for *racism*. It is a kind of fingerprint evidence that *racism* has been on the scene.

Our term racecraft invokes witchcraft, though not for the reason that may come first to mind. We regard neither witchcraft nor racecraft as “just mischievous superstition, nothing more,” a position Loury has rightly dismissed as of little interest.<sup>57</sup> Far from denying the rationality of those who have accepted either belief as truth about the world, we assume it. We are interested in the processes of reasoning that manage to make both plausible. Witchcraft and racecraft are imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined, the action and imagining inextricably intertwined.<sup>58</sup> The outcome is a belief that “presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth.” So wrote W. E. H. Lecky, a British scholar of Europe’s past who, looking back from the nineteenth century, tried to understand how very smart people managed for a very long time to believe in witchcraft. He warned that it takes “a strong effort of the imagination ... [to] realise the position of the defenders of the belief.”<sup>59</sup> To “realise,” in his sense, is to picture a bygone real world of normally constituted people who accepted, as obviously true, notions that the real world of one’s own present dismisses as obviously false. What if we Americans applied that “strong effort” to our present? Only if we imagined racecraft as a thing in itself worth scrutiny might we imagine ourselves outside or beyond the belief. It is impossible to understand what “post-racial” might be without first understanding more profoundly than we do the present just what “racial” is.

Of course, it is easier to see the movement between imagining and doing, re-imagining and re-doing when it is they who are doing it rather than ourselves. Distance can magnify. The “they” in Europe who believed in witchcraft includes great reformers like Martin Luther, whose wit and logic again and again the superstition he abhorred crackle on the page.<sup>60</sup> Yet Luther not only made witchcraft accusations but also repeatedly emerged, physically exhausted, from his own wrestling with spirits.<sup>61</sup> It could not be otherwise. He grew up hearing folk notions about witches and their doings, taking them in with his mother’s milk and his native tongue. In adulthood, he asserted that a person could steal milk by thinking of a cow and that his mother had contracted asthma via a neighbor’s evil eye.<sup>62</sup> As he lay dying, he saw a demon.<sup>63</sup> Such reports conveyed nothing improbable to him or to his hearers. The everyday understandings about the world took for granted the existence of an active, well-populated invisible realm that manifested itself in the realm of the seen, as real things, events, and persons. Everyday experience reinforced those understandings, which in turn had bearing on everyday behavior and in the recounting of events.<sup>64</sup>

Thus Luther recounts, in a single thought, his mother’s chronic asthma *and* her stated belief that a neighbor’s evil eye caused it *and* her own explanation, that the woman had repeatedly rebuffed his friendly overtures. Today, the incompleteness of this “explanation” jumps off the page, for our everyday understanding denies power to the gaze (for example, in the common phrase “if looks could kill”). For Luther and his hearers, however, physical explanation has disappeared into a thicket of circumstances on the surface of life and visible to all. Local lore and a twice-told tale about neighbors thereafter conceal the gap between the illness and the gaze. Thus, for everyday intents and purposes

the gap does not come into view, and the question of ordinary cause and effect does not arise. In the light, consider again the weird incompleteness of the explanatory formula “because of skin color.” How might an American account for the causal mechanism at work in that phrase?

Luther’s story about the milk-less cow exposes another facet of suspended causality. As before, he begins with a mundane predicament, but rather than ignore the question “How?” he answers explicitly. Reminding his flock that witches “do many accursed things while they remain undiscovered,” he gives them a (to us) show-stopping causal sequence: “Thinking about some cow, they can say one good word or another and get milk from a towel, a table, or a handle.” Everyone present knows the ordinary sequence (creeping into someone else’s barn, scurrying away with a sloshing pail), but the preacher has made it plain that the thievery is not of that order; it is invisible thievery (“they remain undiscovered”). Then and there, cause and effect disappear into the smoky notion of “witches”—by definition, people who can “do accursed things” that, by definition, are the things witches can do. Like pure races a while ago, Luther’s witches enter the world, and come to matter therein, not by observation and experience but by circular reasoning. Neither “witch” nor “pure race” has a material existence. Both are products of thought, and of language. Having no material existence, they cannot have material causation. Strictly speaking, Luther’s explanation omitted nothing essential.

Witchcraft has no moving parts of its own, and needs none. It acquires perfectly adequate moving parts when a person acts upon the reality of the imagined thing; the real action creates evidence for the imagined thing. By that route, belief of that sort constantly dumps factitious evidence for itself into the real world. In Luther’s day, learned jurists and ecclesiastics produced mountains of such evidence. The specialized language of the proceedings generated evidence by shaping routine modes of narrating invisible (nay, impossible) events. The very pageantry of witchcraft trials yielded more evidence, and drastic executions of “accursed” people still more of it, a kind of material proof that bad things happen to bad people. Lecky concluded: “If we considered witchcraft probable, a hundredth part of the evidence we possess would have placed it beyond the region of doubt.”<sup>65</sup> Correspondingly, if Ripley’s readers had considered racecraft improbable, his classification would have trapped him well within the region of doubt. In both instances, there was vast and varied evidence, but of what?

Of products of imagining, “realised” in everyday practice. Here, paraphrased, is an exchange between an unbelieving interviewer with the American children or grandchildren of European immigrants who believed in the evil eye: Q: How does the evil eye work? A: Some people are known to have it. Q: How do you know that? A: I have seen X’s remedy work. Q: Is it always effective? A: I know for a fact that it worked for So-and-so.<sup>66</sup> Today, as in the sixteenth century, logical hopscotch of that kind is the warp and woof of banal sociability. The talkers respond to, but ignore, the interviewer’s question about the *mechanism* of the evil eye. It exists, period. The interviewer does not press, and does not need to. Those present do not query assumptions, the nature of available evidence, or the coherence of their reasoning from that evidence. What they know they know intimately, but not well. Such is the stuff that racecraft is made of. It occupies a middle ground between science and superstition, an invisible realm of collective understandings, a half-lit zone of the mind’s eye.

Dr. Watson was operating within it when he prophesied breakthroughs in genetics to account for things that happen when white people like him “have to deal with black employees.” That a scientist of his stature slipped into that half-light demonstrates the ease with which scientific and non-scientific thinking conflate in the minds of individuals. Had he been chatting over his back fence with a like-minded (or risk-averse) neighbor, rather than to a battalion of journalists, there would have been no uproar. And the world would have missed a sober lesson: Science is forever dogged by those seductive

cousins and ancient antagonists which Francis Bacon named “Idols of the Tribe.”<sup>67</sup> In their grip Luther, a powerful dialectician, held both a workaday notion of cause and effect and a phantasmic fo belief that contradicted it, and so, too, did his learned contemporaries. Lecky again: “The acute lawyers and ecclesiastics confronted evidence that extends to tens of thousands of cases, in almost every country of Europe.” For them, as for less well-educated people, there was little to impose the idea of absurdity or of improbability on stories about “old women riding on broomsticks.”<sup>68</sup>

What about here and now? Americans acquire in childhood all it takes to doubt stories of witchcraft but little in our childhood leads us to doubt racecraft. For us, as for bygone believers in witches, daily life produces an immense accumulation of supporting evidence for the belief. Think no further than the media-borne miscellany of things tabulated “by race”—from hardy perennials like teenage pregnancy to novelties like “under-representation” among blood donors<sup>69</sup> and “disproportional representation” on Twitter,<sup>70</sup> constantly churning out factitious evidence for an ever-expanding American immensity, the so-called racial divide. A recent instance, carried out under the sign of sociological theory, includes familiar features: for example, mapping genomic data onto “census” (that is, folk) racial categories and assuming a genetic origin for social conduct, with the absence of supporting evidence expected any day now.<sup>71</sup> Lecky’s subjects had authoritative sources in the sciences and law of the day. So do we. For them, but no less for us, it often is (or seems) “impossible for so much evidence to accumulate around a conception which has no basis in fact.”<sup>72</sup> To them, witchcraft was obvious, not odd. Turn now to a tour of racecraft. Will its features seem familiar or strangely obvious or odd?

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1 Peter Beinart, “Is He American Enough?” *Time*, October 20, 2008, 56.

2 In the same vein, a 2002 sociological study counts the intermarriage of Caribbean immigrants with white Americans, but not with black Americans, as evidence of assimilation. See Chapter 3, below.

3 Howard Fineman, “Playing With Fire,” *Newsweek online*, July 28, 2009; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, AP, “Suit Questioning Obama’s Eligibility Rejected,” December 9, 2008. A Georgia native of the president’s age told an interviewer that “if you had a real change it would involve all the members of Obama’s church being deported.” Quoted in Jesse Washington, “Race Crime Around the Country Spurred by Obama’s Win,” [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), November 16, 2008.

4 United States Bureau of the Census, *The Census: A Social History* (Washington, DC: USBC, 2002), 11.

5 Quoted in Kim M. Williams, *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1.

6 Nott’s medical practice included slaves. De Bow held the chair of political economy at the University of Louisiana at New Orleans. See Williams, *Mark One or More*, 23; Reginald Horsman, *Josiah Nott of Mobile: Southerner, Physician, and Racial Theorist* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

7 Williams, *Mark One or More*, 44.

8 This speculation, retailed as science, advanced the career of Dr. Nott, who wrote De Bow that “my nigger hallucinations have given me more notoriety than I had any idea of.” De Bow once asked his friend to “do a lecture for me on niggerology.” Horsman, *Josiah Nott of Mobile*, 101, 109. In *Types of Mankind* (1854), Nott inferred degeneration from his definition of black and white Americans as separately evolved biological species (*ibid.*, 102, 170, 270). On American theories of “mongrelization” see Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2003), 159–82.

9 Susan Graham, national director of Project RACE, quoted in Williams, *Mark One or More*, 43.

10 Stephan Palmié, “Genomics, Divination, ‘Racecraft’,” *American Ethnologist* 34:2 (May 2007), 206.

11 In 1873, Madison Hemings, the son of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, told an interviewer that his brother Beverly “went to Washington as a white man.” John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1977), 474–80. See also Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997), and *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: Norton, 2008).

12 We take instruction from A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946 [1956], 78–9.

13 Black, *War Against the Weak*, 163–6. Findings by John H. Burma, “The Measurement of Negro Passing,” *American Journal of Sociology* 52:1 (July 1946), 18–22, raised a stir when they appeared in *Collier’s* magazine, and were followed by E. E. Eckhard’s “How Many Negroes ‘Pass’?” in the same journal, 52:6 (May 1947), 498–500.

14 Foundational work toward something new includes Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon, *We Europeans* (1936), M. F. Ashl

- Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942), William C. Boyd, *Genetics and the Races of Man* (1952) and Frank B. Livingstone, "On the Non-existence of Human Races" (1962).
- 15 Anthony Griffiths et al., *Introduction to Genetics, Ninth Edition* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 2008), 206.
  - 16 See Troy Duster, "Buried Alive: The Concept of Race in Science," in Alan H. Goodman, Deborah Heath, and M. Susan Linde eds., *Genetic Nature/Culture: Anthropology and Science Beyond the Two-Culture Divide* (Berkeley, CA: University California Press, 2003), 258–77.
  - 17 Troy Duster writes that when scientists are asked to do their work with already categorized samples, they "are necessarily 'buying in' to a taxonomic system that has little to do with a molecular geneticist's professional training or expertise..." "Lessons from History: Why Race and Ethnicity Have Played a Major Role in Biomedical Research," *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 34:3 (Fall 2006), 487–96, esp. 488.
  - 18 Kenneth Weiss, "On Babies and Bathwater," *American Ethnologist* 34:2 (May 2007), 242. Our italics.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 243.
  - 20 Jefferson M. Fish, "Mixed Blood: An Analytical Look at Methods of Classifying Race," *Psychology Today*, November 1, 1999.
  - 21 J. Craig Venter, *A Life Decoded: My Genome, My Life* (New York: Viking, 2001).
  - 22 Thus, in contrast to the anti-individualism of "racial medicine" that captured headlines a few years ago (when the Food and Drug Administration allowed two old drugs to be re-patented together as supposedly "race-specific" Bidil), some researchers and geneticists are now pursuing the ultimate individualism in their search for the cause of disease: sequencing the individual patient's genome. Nicholas Wade, "Disease Cause Is Pinpointed With Genome," *New York Times*, March 11, 2010, A1.
  - 23 Venter, *A Life Decoded*, 79.
  - 24 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Vols. 1&2*, trans. Henry Reeve, with an Introduction by Joseph Epstein (New York: Bantam, 2000), 383–440.
  - 25 Venter left the public Human Genome Project, at the National Institutes of Health, to create a private one at the Celera Corporation.
  - 26 Venter, *Life Decoded*, 317.
  - 27 BBC News, "Lab Suspends Pioneer Watson," October 19, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.
  - 28 Venter, *Life Decoded*, 317.
  - 29 Born April 6, 1928, he belonged to the same generation as Martin Luther King, Jr. (born January 15, 1929). Both were in the late thirties when, on August 5, 1966, Chicago residents attacked King and other marchers with such violence that the SCLC abandoned its campaign against segregation in the North.
  - 30 Helen Nugent, "Black People 'Less Intelligent' Scientist Claims," [www.timesonline.co.uk](http://www.timesonline.co.uk), October 17, 2010. As quoted in the *Independent* (October 17, 2007), Watson's book affirmed that "there is no reason to anticipate that the intellectual capacities of peoples geographically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically. Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so." He is apparently a twenty-first century adherent of the American theory of "polygenism," promoted in the nineteenth century by Josiah Nott and Harvard's Louis Agassiz.
  - 31 BBC News, "Lab Suspends Pioneer Watson."
  - 32 By contrast, while Venter's individual intelligence lights his book, he offers no generalities about it; and, like race, intelligence does not appear in his index, thereby imposing the complexity of the whole book upon simplifying and selective readers.
  - 33 Robert Verkaik, "Revealed: Scientist Who Sparked Racism Row has Black Genes," *Independent*, December 10, 2007.
  - 34 William Faulkner's *Light in August* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1992 [1932], 344, 346, 350) circles the troubled terrain of those uses of yore. The ambiguity of Joe Christmas, the "white nigger that did that killing up at Jefferson last week," maddened the townspeople. "He dont look no more like a nigger than I do," one declares. And another: "He never acted like either a nigger or a white man ... That was what made the folks so mad ... It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger, too."
  - 35 Stephan Palmié provides an astute analysis in "Genomics, Divination, 'Racecraft,'" 207.
  - 36 The late Jack Temple Kirby wrote a dead-serious yet uproarious account of his own tribal genealogical investigations, based on historical documents, in "ANCESTRYdotBOMB: Genealogy, Genomics, Mischief, Mystery, and Southern Family Stories" *Journal of Southern History* 76 (February 2010), 3–38.
  - 37 Palmié, "Genomics, Divination, 'Racecraft,'" 206.
  - 38 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 414.
  - 39 Howell Raines, "Winning the Populism PR War," *Washington Post*, online edition, July 27, 2004. On the salience of this theme in 2011, see Paul Krugman, "Panic of the Plutocrats," *New York Times*, October 10, 2011, A23.
  - 40 Its predecessor in the 1890s, the so-called Gilded Age, marched with two varieties of racism, one directed against African Americans, and the other against immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. Aiming to eliminate "the unfit," bio-racism supported both varieties, and, besides, a eugenics program against the white poor. See Black, *War Against the Weak*, 413–19.
  - 41 Derrick Bell, "After We're Gone: Prudent Speculations on America in a Post-Racial Epoch," *St. Louis University Law Journal* 34 (1990), reprint, 6. The US census first tracked such figures in 1947. Today's figures, according to David Johnson ("Income Gap: Is It Widening?" The Official Blog of the US Census Bureau, September 15, 2011) are 11.8 and 50.2 percent respectively.
  - 42 Ellis Cose recorded the testimony of accomplished Afro-Americans about the closing of doors, in *The Rage of a Privileged*

- Class: Why Do Prosperous Blacks Still Have the Blues?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- 43 Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 538 (our emphasis).
- 44 Charles Murray, “The Coming White Underclass,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1993. His new book continues in this vein. See *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012).
- 45 Herrnstein and Murray, *Bell Curve*, 534.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 535.
- 47 K. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.
- 48 The fine phrase and analysis are drawn from Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 21–27.
- 49 That maneuvering, as applied to intelligence, is nowhere dissected better, or with greater concision and elegance of expression than in Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 62–175.
- 50 Glenn Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 88.
- 51 Thus, in 1962, the Harvard anthropologist Carlton S. Coon found in the skulls of Afro-Americans a supposedly child-like trait, the “bulbous forehead,” a trait formerly held to bespeak superiority. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 132–35, 149–51.
- 52 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984 [orig. ed. 1787]), 264–5.
- 53 Jefferson, *Notes*, 270.
- 54 He contradicted himself four queries after the one he was answering when he laid out the differences that supposedly required deportation (see Chapter 3, below, and Jefferson, *Writings*, Query 18, 162–3). Answering a critic who had disputed his arguments, he admitted that, even if the Negroes’ inferiority could be proved, it would not justify their enslavement. Thomas Jefferson to Henri Grégoire, February 25, 1809, in *ibid.*, 1202.
- 55 Such artifacts are independent of subjective belief. See Karen E. Fields, “Political Contingencies of Witchcraft,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 16:3 (December 1992), 567–93, esp. 586.
- 56 For an ethnographer’s exploration in a particular milieu, see Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft in the American Academy*, in progress.
- 57 Loury, *Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, 21–2.
- 58 Some readers may recall Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), about the invention of nations. In our view, all human communities are imagined, not excluding those thought of as “natural”—like the Biblical families that reckon descent through men only. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. 17–40.
- 59 W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, with an Introduction by C. Wright Mills (New York: George Braziller, 1955 [1982]), 38.
- 60 See “The Pagan Servitude of the Church,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings Edited and with an Introduction by John Dillenberger* (New York: Anchor, 1961), 249–359.
- 61 Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study of Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962), 26, 243–50, and Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 44, 65. These two authors worked hard to express the idea that obvious features of everyday life in Luther’s time did not depend on constant leaps to belief against all evidence. It is interesting to see the rhetorical tongs they devise to deal with Luther’s reports about farting to undo a demon, the devil’s “mooning” outside his bedroom window, and such like. When *race* demands longer tongs than the normal conventional quotation marks, well, that will be the Day.
- 62 Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Mary E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther On Woman: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 234; and Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 27.
- 63 Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 59.
- 64 On concepts that are intelligible in one time and place but not in another, consult the inimitable Alasdair MacIntyre, “Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?” in Bryan R. Wilson, *Rationality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), esp. 72.
- 65 Lecky, *Rise of Rationalism*, 39.
- 66 Derived from Louis C. Jones, “The Evil Eye among European-Americans,” in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1981), 150–68.
- 67 Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings, Aphorisms—Book One XLI*, Fulton H. Anderson, ed. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 48.
- 68 Lecky, *Rise of Rationalism*, 34.
- 69 Beth H. Shaz, James C. Zimring, Derrick G. Demmons, and Christopher D. Hillyer, “Blood Donation and Blood Transfusion: Special Considerations for African Americans,” *Transfusion Medicine Review* 22:3 (July 2008), 202.
- 70 See <http://gawker.com/5802772/why-so-many-black-people-are-on-twitter>.
- 71 Jiannbin Lee Shiao, Thomas Bode, Amber Beyer, and Daniel Selvig, “The Genomic Challenge to the Social Construction of Race,” *Sociological Theory*, 30:2 (June 2012), 67–88. These sociologists propose a deployment of genomic science different from the approach of J. Craig Venter, one of the first scientists to sequence the human genome. See pp. 6–9.
- 72 Lecky, *Rise of Rationalism*, 39.



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# Chapter 1

## A Tour of Racecraft

*The ideas of racecraft are pieced together in the ordinary course of everyday doing. Along the way they intertwine with ideas that shape other aspects of American social life. Those of racecraft govern what goes with what and whom (sumptuary codes), how different people must deal with each other (rituals of deference and dominance), where human kinship begins and ends (blood), and how Americans look at themselves and each other (the gaze). These ideas do not exist purely in the mind or in only one mind. They are social facts—like six o'clock, both an idea and a reality. Because racecraft exists in this way, its constant remaking constantly retreats from view. This “now you see it now you don't” quality is what makes racism—the practice of a double standard based on ancestry—possible.*

*To eliminate racecraft from the fabric of our lives, we must first unravel the threads from which it is woven. Thus, the current guided tour. Its three sections—“From Racism to Race,” “Blood Works,” and “How Americans Look”—are not linear. The sections circuit and overlap, like the social facts of everyday life that they chronicle.*

### **From Racism to Race**

Begin with a story about travel in Mississippi circa 1964, a time and place when racecraft daily performed its conjuror's trick of transforming racism into race, leaving black persons in view while removing white persons from the stage. To spectators deceived by the trick, segregation seemed to be a property of black people, not something white people imposed on them. But Robert S. McNamara, in his memoir of service during the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, recounts an incident that set all parties on the stage.<sup>1</sup> While addressing business and labor leaders whom he had summoned to the White House to demand their help in passing the Civil Rights Bill, Johnson told his story of the day when he and Lady Bird lived Jim Crow. Johnson was speeding along a road in Mississippi with his wife and their black longtime cook, Zephyr, when Lady Bird turned to him and said, “Would you please stop at the next gas station [restroom]?” They stopped. Not long thereafter, Zephyr said, “Mr. President, would you mind stopping by the side of the road?” The President replied with his well-known earthiness, “Why the hell didn't you do it when Bird and I did?” Zephyr answered, “Cause they wouldn't let me.” (Notice Zephyr's “they”).

At that point in the story, “LBJ pounded on the table and in a bitter voice said, ‘Gentlemen, is this the kind of country you want? It's not the kind I want.’” For a brief moment, Johnson had lived Jim Crow as Zephyr did. Ordinarily, white Southerners experienced Jim Crow as law and order, not as the ever-present disorder it was for black Southerners. So white Southerners did not notice, or need to notice, their own presence on the Jim Crow stage. McNamara's anecdote recaptures a moment when Jim Crow inconvenienced the President of the United States.

The disorder engendered by racecraft did not end with Jim Crow. What better typifies it than being killed by mistake, as happened not long ago to an Afro-American police officer? While pursuing a criminal thief, the officer was shot to death by a white brother officer, who took him for a criminal.<sup>2</sup> The instant, inevitable—but, upon examination, bizarre—diagnosis of many people is that black officers in such situations have been “killed because of their skin color.” But has their skin color killed them? If so, why does the skin color of white officers not kill them in the same way? Why do black officers not mistake white officers for criminals and blaze away, even when the white officers are dressed to look like street toughs? Everyone has skin color, but not everyone’s skin color counts as race, let alone as evidence of criminal conduct. The missing step between someone’s physical appearance and an invidious outcome is the practice of a double standard: in a word, racism. It was his fellow officer, not his skin color, that caused the black officer’s death. Even so, the fellow officer was devastated by his error and its fatal consequence. His grief and that of other white officers visibly weighed down the solemn procession in blue that conducted the dead policeman toward his final rest. Racism did not require the officer to be a racist. It required only that, in the split second before firing the fatal shot, the white officer entered the twilight zone of America’s racecraft.

“Minority” ranks alongside “the color of their skin” as a verbal prop for the mental trick that turns racism into race. The word slips its literal meaning as well as its core definition, which is quantitative. Vice President Spiro Agnew once demonstrated the trick unconsciously. Responding to a question about American policy toward the white supremacist regime in what was then Rhodesia, he said it was no business of the United States how other countries dealt with their “minorities,” by which he meant the country’s black majority. The quantitative meaning slips again in the paradoxical formula “majority minority,” referring to the projected numerical predominance of non-white persons in the United States in the not-so-distant future. If the logic were harmless, it would be hilarious.

But “minority” is not harmless. Zigzagging between quantitative and invidious meanings, it justified a dragnet in September 1992 in which officers rounded up all the black and Hispanic men and some women in Oneonta, New York. Police deployed the dragnet after an elderly white woman, victim of an attempted armed robbery, described her assailant as a black male, possibly young and with an injured wrist. Is it imaginable that police would round up, detain, question, and search every white person in town because an elderly victim of attempted armed robbery described her assailant as a white male, possibly young and possibly with an injured wrist? Would they, furthermore, obtain lists of all white students on the local campus of the State University of New York, question them, and check their arms for signs of injury; detain white men found arriving in or leaving the town by bus; pull over cars carrying white persons; and even stop a white female admissions officer en route to visit her ailing grandmother? When a group of students posed that hypothetical question to a police official, he answered that it would not have been “practical.”<sup>3</sup> *Practical* hid the qualitative and invidious meaning of “minority” inside the quantitative one. It would not have been practical to arrest and search every white man in town over a vague suspicion attaching to one; neither would it have passed muster as legitimate police work.

Next on the tour, consider a habit so fundamental that, without it, there can be no racecraft: the will to classification. Writing in the *New York Times*, a social work consultant describes his intervention to stop a young woman from slapping her young child on the subway.<sup>4</sup> Ordering her to stop, he threatened to call the police. Of about thirty persons in the car, only a woman in her fifties seated near the young woman takes a hand, quietly suggesting ways to handle the child without slapping. A stranger from Mars (if suitably briefed about New York subways) might have considered intervention by two out of

about thirty people a high percentage, whoever the interveners were. Observing through the smoke racecraft, however, the *New Yorker* immediately shuffles the protagonists into categories: He, “a 54-year-old white Jewish guy”; the child-slapper, “a young African-American kid with a kid”; the quiet counselor, “an African-American woman in her fifties”; and two white men who congratulated him for intervening, after the fact and at a safe distance. His first impression, that the silent onlookers from whom he “wished [he] had received more support” were “mainly black,” gave way upon later reflection to the realization that, actually, “there were many more whites.”

Recounting the story to a friend, the consultant again classifies. His friend, a “30-something Arab-Canadian,” says, “I don’t get the white and black in this. Why would you want the black people to jump in and give you support? Are the black people her people and the white people yours?” The consultant regards his friend’s response as “a post-racial analysis.” Not so fast. The “Arab-Canadian” is the nearest equivalent to a stranger from Mars: a person raised outside the force field of American racism, whose view therefore is not distorted by the haze of expectations (in other words, racecraft) through which the American-bred consultant filters what he sees. The Canadian is the outsider who attributes a drought, a crop failure, or an illness to ordinary cause and effect; the American is the insider on the alert for witchcraft.

That imprint of American rearing is not limited to white Americans, nor does travel abroad automatically disable its mental apparatus. Thus: A black American woman professor, recently arrived in France, staggers into a sixteenth-century church to escape the hot sun of Bordeaux in August. Looking straight ahead from the entrance, her vision zooms toward an image at the very center of the stained-glass window behind the altar: a black slave, kneeling and in chains. She asks the Bordeaux residents the why and wherefore of it. They are astonished to learn that such an image exists in that well-known old church. Some openly doubt the report: “*Where?!*” And: “What makes you think it is a slave?” One Saturday afternoon, the parish priest arrives to prepare for a wedding, just as the American visitor from Mars is leading a tour for University of Bordeaux students. The priest is amazed as the students.<sup>5</sup> By rights, the window had other claimants to attention. A Crusader in his red cross tunic stood prominently on the slave’s right; above him, a huge Mary rose toward heaven; yet the eyes of the American went straight to the man in chains.

Black people everywhere do not “see” alike. Persons from Africa and the Caribbean may not see what Afro-Americans see. Visualize the Afro-American professor again, this time in Washington, DC en route to Union Station, on a rainy fall afternoon in 2008, flagging down a taxi. She is safely on board when the African driver spots a soaked white traveler, loaded with baggage. He glances at her through the rearview mirror to ask if it will be all right to pick up the other traveler as well. Why, of course! He pulls to the curb and proposes. The traveler jumps, his face the very portrait of fear. “No, thank you. No, no. Thank you.” Getting under way again, the driver again glances in the mirror. “What was wrong with him?” At the professor’s explanation, “He saw a car full of black people,” the driver exclaims, his face registering shocked understanding. Asked later where he is from, he says, “I am Egyptian.” In not instantly seeing the reality that both the white and the black American did, the African cab driver qualifies as a Martian, too.

So do children before they have absorbed the classification system. In late June of 2009, sixty-five children aged six to twelve, most of them Afro-American or Hispanic, bounced out of their bus and ran toward the pool of the Valley Club, in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> The day camp, Creative Steps, had a contract with the club for swimming one afternoon each week. At first sight of the children, the club members at the pool rose and flew like startled birds.<sup>7</sup> “Made for the

exits” and “pulled their children out of the pool” were phrases that appeared in reports of the ensuing uproar. What exactly did “pulling their children out” look like? How must a child have felt to be pulled out or to see others pulled out? What about the three white children whose parents let them stay? Most of all, how is it that grown-ups decided, all at once, to run from children?

On the following day, the club banned all the summer camps that had contracted to use the pool, which prompted the Justice Department to file suit. Members began explaining their actions to themselves and to the press.<sup>8</sup> According to the club’s president, “There was concern that a lot of kids would change the complexion ... and the atmosphere of the club.” Encouraged to rephrase (or to suppose), he later affirmed that the events had “nothing to do with race.” There simply were “too many children in the pool,” so the situation “went from a safe swim club to an unsafe swim club.” The director of Creative Steps pointed out that the contract specified sixty-five children, and that “no one was misbehaving.”

The campers overheard remarks, prompting a seven-year-old to ask if she was “too dark” to go swimming.<sup>9</sup> Her white counterparts almost certainly made guesses of their own, but none were reported, as though only the black children had experienced and would remember those moments. To the contrary, interviews hint at discussions that almost certainly occurred within and among the families. One man, who seems to speak for others, tells CNN that, “as general members, we were not told that they were coming. If we knew we could decide not to come when the pool was crowded we could come anyway. We could have had an option.”<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the need for such an “option” does not seem to have crossed the mind of the club president or his wife, both white. He speaks with the personal burden of having negotiated the ill-starred contract. She recounts a birthday party for the camp director’s son and his friends, held at the pool without incident the week before.

In an on-camera interview, the couple face the arrows alone: no other club members stand nearby. They identify themselves as Obama voters (to the sneers of some bloggers). The husband confesses to a “poor choice of words” and disavows the sentiment; but, in the hubbub, his action (having negotiated the contract) cannot speak louder than those words. The wife, in a how-could-this-happen torrent, blurts out that a little boy, “just eight years old,” had “cried on CNN! *Cried on CNN!* He didn’t deserve to feel those feelings.” The viewer sees raw emotion on a mother’s face; the interviewer seems not to and does not probe. Two hot seats have sprung up, one inside with club members, the other outside with sound-biting news hounds. By turns shocked and confused, furious and disillusioned, the couple seem to be good people, brutally waylaid in a white neighborhood they thought they knew well and once believed safe.

Whereas the children had not understood the classification system, the director and his wife had not grasped, until the moment came, that a sumptuary code was in effect. Sumptuary codes enforce social classification. They consist of rules, written or unwritten, that establish unequal rank and make it immediately visible. When there is no phenotypic difference, like the little girl’s “too dark” skin, sumptuary rules do what nature leaves undone. In the pre-Revolutionary France to which Tocqueville referred,<sup>11</sup> sumptuary rules overcame visual similarity by defining who might (or must) wear or use what, where they must or must not go, and so on through limitless elaboration (Louis XIV weakened the nobility by compelling them to live opulently at Versailles). Even physical appearance, however, cannot speak inequality by itself. Sumptuary rules in slaveholding America reserved certain fabrics for slaves and might forbid certain colors. In that spirit, a group of Charlestonians demanded legislation to “prevent the slaves from wearing silks, satins, crapes, lace muslins, and such costly stuffs as are looked upon and considered the luxury of dress,” because “every distinction should be

created between the whites and the negroes, calculated to make the latter feel the superiority of the former.”<sup>12</sup> An emancipated slave acted in the same spirit when she defined “freedom” as buying herself a blue dress with polka dots.<sup>13</sup>

In post-slavery America, Jim Crow presided over its own sumptuary code. A century ago, that code governed who might be received at the White House. In his remarkable concession speech on election night 2008, John McCain mentioned the national storm that buffeted the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt after he invited Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House, acknowledging and praising the enormous change since.<sup>14</sup> The story is more intricate than McCain had time for or perhaps, even knew. Washington was the president of Tuskegee Institute and probably the best-known Afro-American at the time. Moreover, he was a political ally of Roosevelt’s and the chief referee of federal patronage in the South during the administrations of Roosevelt and his successor, William Howard Taft: the sort of person, in other words, that a president invites to dine at the White House. But not in 1907, at least not for publication in the South. “The worst enemy to his race of any white man who has ever occupied so high a place in this republic” was the verdict of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* of Roosevelt’s offense. Roosevelt complained “that he had appointed fewer Negroes and more white Democrats and showed more solicitude for Southern feelings than any previous Republican president yet he had been rewarded with more hatred than any of them.” Once Roosevelt had regained his popularity among white Southerners, public memory converted the dinner into a lunch, which, for reasons impenetrable today, did not carry the same taboo.<sup>15</sup>

Rules designed to promote feelings of inferiority and superiority travel in tandem with expectations of deference and with rituals that simultaneously create and express the requisite feelings. In the South just after the Civil War (and, depending on the place, for many years thereafter), a black person was required to step off the sidewalk when a white person approached and, if male, to uncover his head. Obedience usually concealed the intrinsic violence of the rule and kept black people visibly in their place. This etiquette was not unique to the United States. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud recorded his feelings when his father described the same ritual, as performed in the Moravian town of Freiburg. Well dressed and wearing a new fur cap, Freud senior was walking along one day, when “Christian came up to me and with a single blow knocked my cap into the mud, shouting, ‘Jew! Get off the pavement!’” The younger Freud then asked his father, “And what did you do?”<sup>16</sup> Freud senior said quietly: “I went into the roadway and picked up my cap.” Thus did the ritual pass from a bygone real world into the dream life of a new generation.

Freud’s sidewalk could as well be a highway. On May 24, 2009, just after 1:00 p.m., an ambulance owned by the Creek Nation Tribal Authority and an Oklahoma State Police cruiser are winding along the hilly road between Paden and Prague, one behind the other. What happened next, captured on a cell phone, traveled the world via YouTube. One blog yelled the headline: Cop pulls over EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] and gives him the CHOKE HOLD. Yikes! Holy crap!” Next came the news in brief. “It was a jarring scene, if only for its incongruity, a highway patrolman trying to arrest an EMT. All the while there was a woman in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.”<sup>17</sup>

Because the man being choked was black and the trooper was white, the incident at first looked like an extreme case of “driving while black.” It was not. When the driver of the Creek Nation ambulance at last agreed to a TV interview, he turned out to be, to all appearance, a white man. At length (and under enormous pressure), the authorities released a video of the whole encounter, recorded second by second by the cruiser’s dashboard camera.<sup>18</sup> Loudly and with vulgarisms, the trooper chews out the ambulance driver for failing to yield to an emergency vehicle (though he, too, was driving one) and

for having allegedly “flipped a bird” out the window: “I don’t have to put up with this *shit* ... the *disrespect*.” The paramedic, who to all appearance is black, and who, until then, has been in the back of the ambulance (treating the patient?), emerges through the back door of the ambulance, steps down, and, his back to the camera, walks slowly toward the trooper. “I am in charge of this unit,” he says. He gives his name, presents his card, and suggests that the cruiser follow the ambulance to the hospital; there is a patient. “I don’t want to talk to you,” says the trooper, “Go back in the ambulance ... get your *ass* back in that ambulance.” He is determined to deal only with the apparently white driver. Freud asked his father, “And what did you do?” The paramedic’s question to himself must have been “What shall I do?”<sup>19</sup>

In response to the trooper’s repeated order that he get back in the ambulance, the paramedic makes no move to obey, but keeps intoning words like “patient,” “duty,” “interfering,” “emergency vehicle,” and “sworn to protect.” The patrolman moves to arrest him. A scuffle breaks out. The scuffle jolts the ambulance. The patient starts screaming. Newcomers enter the frame. Someone calls the police. The white trooper is heard screaming at the driver of the Creek Nation ambulance, “Tell *your manager* and “*Your supervisor ... jail!*” A second trooper arrives. A new scuffle ensues when the original trooper tries again to handcuff the paramedic. Though held in a chokehold, the paramedic never stops talking, always in low volume. The second trooper, who can also be heard talking in low volume, gradually calms the situation.

An observer from the blogosphere thought that the paramedic should have deferred to the trooper and that he “needed to be taken down a peg or two.”<sup>20</sup> Uppity, was he, talking about his duty to his patient? And did the patient need taking down as well? No matter. The choices are not open to observers’ remaking after the fact and at a safe distance. The point to notice is that, in the paramedic encounter, as in the elder Freud’s, violence crackles like electricity. Both encounters show that the everyday routines that organize racism do not always, but always can, explode.

Those routines do not require a large stage. They are just as powerful in small events, such as the children’s expulsion from the swimming club, as they are in a duel between adults about deference and respect. Every one of the children present, black or not, participated in a routine of racism that might have ended in violence. (Imagine, for example, that just one of the camper’s mothers had been present to overhear.) On the spot, unwritten rules that had been keeping black children out became explicit. When children who looked wrong to club members materialized at the pool, all but three parents (Heroines of the Republic!) did the same thing at the same time, as if a fire alarm had sounded.

Sumptuary rules produce a regular supply of circumstantial evidence about what the world is made of and who belongs where within it. Not only can rules endowed with that power shape action in advance, they can also shape opinions of which the holders may be unaware until the moment they come into play. Such rules shaped the campaign-era mocking of Candidate Obama’s taste for arugula, the elegant tailoring of his suits, and, especially, his habit of speaking in complete, grammatically correct English sentences.

Counterparts of the rules under which pundits mocked Obama’s speech daily materialize in inner-city schools whenever children learn to mock the use of Standard English as “trying to be white,” and to enforce use of “Black English” through bullying. The present authors were teased good-naturedly for “talking all proper” as elementary-school children newly arrived in Washington, DC, and for speaking Standard English with Pittsburgh accents. Daily enforcement of such rules among peer groups of children both creates and polices racial distinctness.

Turn now to a familiar scene in which the sumptuary code in effect, from beginning to end, would

doubtless escape a foreigner. Shoppers are scrutinizing the cart of a black woman holding food stamps, judging the appropriateness of her selections. Are food-stamp sirloins to be carried away in a welfare Cadillac? Turn the scene around. Now a black woman is under scrutiny for a large order, paid for at the last minute by credit card. Do the racecraft exercise yourself, and then do it again with a black man buying a large grocery order with cash. Now contemplate a double whammy: You are a black woman stepping into a shabby little store in upstate New York. Is it safe? How far away is help (Far.) And look at that line of white people ahead of you buying their groceries with food stamps. Whoa! On top of being a black person surrounded by white people in the deep North, here comes the jaw-dropping (but why jaw-dropping?) spectacle of the white woman in front of you. She's coming out of her jeans pocket with a wad of food stamps in her fist!

Reason suggests that a racecraft short-circuit made the black woman's jaw drop at a sight that should have looked normal. It certainly looked normal to the white people in line with their food stamps. If white people are a majority in the area, then most poor people there are white, just as most rich people are. Turn the scene around again. What would have happened if the black woman, in turn, had pulled out a wad of food stamps? And which would racecraft single out for condemnation: an uppity Negro paying with cash or an undeserving Negro paying with food stamps? Along that way, the sumptuary code shades into the peculiar American predicament of having multiple class resentments but no legitimate language for talking about class. In that setup, the question "Why food stamps?" has two stock answers, depending on the ancestry of the person using them: on the one hand, fecklessness; on the other, bad luck, plant-closing, and the like.<sup>21</sup>

Now try a final twist. The food-stamp program underwent rebaptism in 2008 as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Sleek plastic cards replaced the old food-stamp vouchers.<sup>22</sup> What else has probably changed?

What does not change is that racecraft generates a unique language, opaque to outsiders. The phrase "social equality" was once widely understood by everyone, and especially everyone living in the Jim Crow South. It denoted a precipice that might claim the liberty, or even the life, of any Afro-American who ventured too near (like the 14-year-old Emmett Till, pistol-whipped, shot, and his mutilated body dumped into the Tallahatchie River in 1955, because he allegedly said "bye, baby" to a white woman;<sup>23</sup> or the young man whose misfortune is recounted below in Chapter 2). Social equality was the taboo that Theodore Roosevelt violated by inviting Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House. Today, "social equality" has become a sepia-tinted relic, familiar only to scholars and antiquarians. By contrast, "race relations," which was coined in the same era, sounds ordinary, and to grasp its weirdness requires historical probing. Invented in the late-nineteenth-century heyday of the Jim Crow regime, the term "race relations" finessed the abrogation of democracy and the blood vigilanteism that enforced it.<sup>24</sup> Unlike "social equality," "race relations" has outlasted the regime that gave birth to it and continues in wide use. A college administrator, discussing friction between black and white roommates, automatically placed it under the rubric of race relations, even while aware that the friction involved no more than the usual occasions for roommate disputes, from noise to unauthorized use of each other's property. Then and there, through the transforming power of racecraft, an individual becomes a race, roommates become an "interracial pairing," and the outcome, whether friction or friendship, becomes "race relations."<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes the fog of racecraft rolls in at the last minute, as a derailing non sequitur to an otherwise logical argument. A few years ago, the *New York Times* reported that scientists who conducted an epidemiological study of asthma among schoolchildren in South Bronx produced damning evidence

about environmental pollution caused by heavy truck traffic. Their study identified the particulate emissions, cited the location of major highways, and, through resourceful data collection, drew conclusions about the children's exposure, in specific neighborhoods, at different hours of the day, to "very high fine particle concentrations on a fairly regular basis." The correlations emerged: "Symptoms, like wheezing, doubled on days when pollution from truck traffic was highest." It would seem as clear as noonday that class inequality had imposed sickness on these American schoolchildren. Yet the article's summary tails off into confused pseudo-genetics. To a list of contributors to high asthma rates that includes heavy traffic, dense population, poorly maintained housing, and lack of access to medical care, the article adds "a large population of blacks and Hispanics, two groups with high rates of asthma." Racecraft has permitted the consequence under investigation to masquerade among the causes.<sup>26</sup> Susceptibility to filthy air does not depend on the census category to which the asthma sufferer belongs. And even if that susceptibility is (to whatever degree) genetically determined, Dr. Venter's account of his own asthma stands as a reminder that "genetic" is not equivalent to "racial" or "ethnic."<sup>27</sup>

Some of the oddest racecraft moments come when scientists yoke modern genetics to folk notions. In the controversy over Dr. James D. Watson's remarks in London,<sup>28</sup> some of his defenders charged his critics with a "politically correct" retreat from science, insisting that good science requires a free marketplace of ideas. Researchers must be free, they implied, to salvage the old bio-racist ranking of superior and inferior races, regardless of the collapse as science of its core concept, race. But it is doubtful that those foes of political correctness would wish to rehabilitate that part of bio-racism that once identified inferior white races.

If they took their own position seriously, they would applaud the writings of such eminent American scientists of the late nineteenth century as Edward Drinker Cope and Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (dean of Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School during the 1890s) on the inequality of races, not simply their work on dinosaurs and the earth's history. Cope advocated both "the return of the African to Africa" and restrictions on immigration by "the half-civilized hordes of Europe." Shaler agreed, characterizing those hordes as inferior "by birthright," "essentially in the same state as the Southern Negro," and distinct from "the Aryan variety of mankind."<sup>29</sup> Popularizers hustled bio-racist "science" into public policy. Madison Grant, who advocated "Nordic" superiority in his 1916 best-seller, *The Passing of the Great Race: The Racial Basis of European History*, purported to map class inequality onto physical traits, such as height:

The Nordic race is everywhere distinguished by great stature. Almost the tallest stature in the world is found among the pure Nordic populations of the Scottish and English borders, while the native British of Pre-Nordic brunet blood are, for the most part, relatively short; and no one can question the race value of stature who observes on the streets of London the contrast between the Piccadilly gentleman of Nordic race and the cockney costermonger [street vendor] of the old Neolithic type.<sup>30</sup>

In 1924, the lay and scientific streams of bio-racism converged in the Immigration Act of 1924 (which excluded European races deemed undesirable) and the Virginia Racial Integrity Act (which prohibited "miscegenation"). In the same year, Virginia adopted a law (upheld by the US Supreme Court three years later) providing for compulsory sterilization of persons held to be "defective and degenerate," a group that included "the shiftless, ignorant and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South." The Nazis followed these developments closely. When they decided to weed out the "unfit," they had American models of how to proceed, from administrative searching of family trees to sterilization



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