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“I Did Not Get that Job Because of a Black Man. . .”: The Story Lines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva,^{1,4} Amanda Lewis,^{2,3} and David G. Embrick¹

In this paper we discuss the dominant racial stories that accompany color-blind racism, the dominant post-civil rights racial ideology, and assess their ideological role. Using interview data from the 1997 Survey of College Students Social Attitudes and the 1998 Detroit Area Study, we document the prevalence of four story lines and two types of testimonies among whites. We also provide data on ideological dissidence among some whites (we label them racial progressives) and blacks. We show that although these stories, and the racial ideology they reinforce, have become dominant, neither goes uncontested.

KEY WORDS: stories; color-blind; rhetorical; narrative; ideology; racism.

Storytelling is central to communication. According to Barthes (1977:79), “Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without a narrative.” To a large degree, communication is about telling stories. We tell stories to our spouses, children, friends, and coworkers. Through stories we present and represent ourselves to the world. In short, we tell stories and these stories, in turn, make us (Somers, 1994).

Stories have been defined as “social events that instruct us about social processes, social structures, and social situations” (Aguirre, 2000:3). We

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literally narrate our status (“When we were at the *Gold Golf Club*, . . .”), biases (“This black man, who is not qualified to be a member of the *Club*, . . .”), and beliefs about the social order (“They have a very nice public golf course and I do not understand why he even wanted to join our *Club*”). Stories are not only central to narrating our individual lives but to social relations. As Kenneth Plummer (1995:5) has stated, “Society itself maybe seen as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work.” The stories we tell are in many ways collective property, and they are not random—; certain kinds of stories are told at certain historical moments for specific reasons—, as we draw upon available discourses and chains of meaning (Hall, 1984, 1990; Moscovici, 2001). Storytelling most often reproduces power relations,⁵ as the specific stories we tell tend to reinforce the social order (for oppositional stories, see Jackson, 2002).

In this article we examine the dominant *racial stories* of the post-civil rights era. Because all stories are told within particular ideological formations, it is important to highlight their relationship to ideologies. We define *racial ideology* as the *broad racial frameworks, or “grids,” that racial groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right or wrong, true or false, important or unimportant*. And given that all societies are structured in dominance, the frameworks of the rulers (whether men, the bourgeoisie, or whites) are more likely to crystallize as “common sense” (van Dijk, 1999). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003a,b) has operationalized the notion of racial ideology as an interpretive repertoire consisting of frames, style, and racial stories.⁶ One sign that an ideology has gained dominance is that its central logic has come to be perceived as “common sense,” so that actors in different positions and in different contexts deploy similar kinds of narratives to explain social reality. Such racial stories can then be understood as part of the contemporary, dominant racial ideology as it is manifested in everyday life (Lewis, 2003).

Our analysis focuses on two types of racial stories, namely, *story lines* and *testimonies* (Bonilla-Silva, 2003a,b). We define story lines as the *socially shared tales that incorporate a common scheme and wording*. These racial story lines resemble legends or fables because, unlike testimonies (see below), they are most often based on impersonal, generic arguments with little narrative content—they are readily available, ideological, “of course”

⁵ Although stories that are part of the dominant ideological field are narrated to reproduce social relations of domination, they are never perfect (they always have contradictions or fractures) and are always challenged. Hence, our analysis of racial stories is not functionalist in either the Parsonian or Althusserian sense of the concept.

⁶ We borrow the idea of ideology as an “interpretive repertoire” from Wetherell and Potter (1992).

narratives that actors draw on in explaining personal or collective social realities. In story lines, characters are likely to be underdeveloped and are usually social types (e.g., the “black man” in statements such as “My best friend lost a job to a black man” or the “welfare queen” in “Poor black women are welfare queens”).⁷ The ideological nature of such story lines is revealed by the similar schemata and wording used in their telling (e.g., “the past is the past”), and by their use in a range of locations by a wide variety of actors for similar ends.

Testimonies, on the other hand, are *accounts in which the narrator is a central participant or is close to the characters* (see Denzin, 1989). Testimonies provide the aura of authenticity that only “firsthand” narratives can furnish (“I know this for a fact since I have worked all my life with blacks”). Such stories help narrators to gain sympathy from listeners or to persuade them about points they wish to convey. Although testimonies involve more detail, personal investment, and randomness than story lines, they are not just “plain” stories.⁸ They serve rhetorical functions with regard to racial issues, such as saving face, signifying nonracialism, or bolstering arguments on controversial racial matters. Moreover, they are often tightly linked to the story lines, as these personal experiences are understood and framed through the lens of more general racial narratives and understandings about the world.

We are not alone in our effort to study the meaning and role of contemporary racial stories. Other authors have discussed some of the stories we highlight in this article (Blauner, 1989; Frankenberg, 1993; Wellman, 1993) or studied whites’ race-talk (Eliasoph, 1997; Scott, 2000). Although their efforts are useful, we depart from them in several important ways. First, our analytical effort sheds light on storytelling itself and the possible functions (and limitations) of these stories in the racial order. Specifically, we contend these stories are part of the dominant post-civil rights racial ideology, and as such, potentially help sustain the contemporary racial order. Second, some of these studies focus on only one issue (for example, Fraser and Kick, 2000, on race-targeted policies) and thus fail to account for the way these stories fit in the larger racial drama of the United States. Finally, most of these studies have serious methodological or interpretive limitations. (For instance, many are based on small or unsystematic samples; others make no attempt to connect the stories to changes in the racial order; and, finally, some of these analysts interpret their findings in a very incomplete and racially naive

⁷In this paper we address the *dominant* story lines of the post-civil rights era. Therefore, the four story lines we highlight do not exhaust all the stories in the field as there may be secondary stories or stories that are corollaries to the dominant ones.

⁸In truth, there are no “plain” stories, as all stories are imbued with ideology (see Tambling, 1991).

manner.⁹) Hence, our main analytical goals in this article are to (1) document in a more rigorous manner the master racial stories of the post-civil rights era, (2) assess the rhetorical and ideological functions of these stories, and (3) provide evidence of fractures in whites' dominant racial narratives by including data from whites who do not use these stories (we label them "racial progressives") as well as from blacks.

We proceed as follows. First, we describe the theory and the racial context behind our analysis. Then we describe the data and methods for this study. Next we analyze the dominant story lines of color-blind racism,¹⁰ and the most frequent and structured testimonies that respondents invoked. Then, for comparative purposes, we briefly discuss how these stories affect white racial progressives and blacks. We conclude with a discussion of the ideological role of racial stories.

THEORY AND RACIAL CONTEXT FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RACIAL STORIES

Although racism often involves prejudice, antipathy, and irrationality, most researchers now concede that it has a material and, therefore, rational foundation (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2000; Fredrickson, 2002). Racism springs not from the hearts of "racists," but from the fact that dominant actors in a racialized social system receive benefits at all levels (political, economic, social, and even psychological), whereas subordinate actors do not (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Racial outcomes then are not the product of individual "racists" but of the crystallization of racial domination into a *racial structure*: a network of racialized practices and relations that shapes the life chances of the various races at all levels. Hence, domination in hegemonic racial orders such as ours is produced by the collective normal actions of *all* actors rather

⁹Eliasoph (1997), an important documentation of everyday conversations among whites in two settings, is particularly riddled with racially naive interpretations. When her respondents utter a racist joke, she argues that this ought to be seen as their effort to burst "through polite constraints" (p. 488) or just as a way of "violating norms" (p. 489). Or when a respondent offers a mild, backstage challenge to the person who uttered the racist joke but later reveals her own deeply racialized thinking, Eliasoph interprets this as a matter of breaking with the "structures of expression." Thus, not surprisingly, she concludes that the "beliefs that mattered most were *beliefs about talk itself*" (emphasis in original, p. 496).

¹⁰We are aware that other authors have developed somewhat similar arguments on post-civil rights racial discourse (e.g., Bobo's "laissez-faire racism," Jackman's "muted hostility," Kinder and Sanders "symbolic racism," etc.). However, we use the term color-blind racism because it fits better how whites talk about race in the post-civil rights era. More important, this concept is anchored in different theoretical and methodological traditions. Rather than basing this perspective on whites' "attitudes," we argue this viewpoint represents a new ideological formation and use textual (rather than survey) data to document it (see Bonilla-Silva, 2003b).

than by the behavior of a few “racists” (on hegemonic domination, see Omi and Winant, 1994).

The implications of this understanding of racism for our analysis are that the frameworks, affective dispositions (which range from sympathy to apathy and animosity), and stories that actors use or exhibit tend to correspond to their systemic location—actors at the top of a racial order tend to display views, attitudes, and stories that help maintain their privilege, whereas actors at the bottom are more likely to exhibit oppositional views, attitudes, and counternarratives.

But racialized social systems are not fixed, and neither are the ideologies that accompany them. For instance, the racial structure of the United States underwent a tremendous transformation in the 1960s and 1970s (Bloom, 1987). Demographic (urbanization of blacks), political (development of minority organizations), and economic factors (industrialization) in combination with organized (civil rights movement) and “spontaneous” challenges (race riots) to the Jim Crow order led to the development of what various authors label the “new racism” (Brooks, 1990; Smith, 1995). According to Bonilla-Silva and Lewis (1999:56), the elements that make up this new racial structure are “(1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices; (2) the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever growing claim by whites that they experience ‘reverse racism’; the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references; (4) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and finally, (5) the rearticulation of a number of racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations.”

Examples of how the “new racism” operates abound. For instance, residential segregation, which is almost as high today as it was in the past (Massey and Denton, 1993), is no longer accomplished through overtly discriminatory practices. Instead, covert behaviors such as not showing all the available units, steering minorities and whites into certain neighborhoods, quoting higher rents or prices to minority applicants, or not advertising the units at all are the weapons of choice to maintain separate communities (Desena, 1994; Yinger, 1995). In the economic field, “smiling face” discrimination (“We don’t have jobs now, but please check later”), advertising job openings in mostly white networks and ethnic newspapers, and steering people of color into poorly paid jobs or jobs with limited opportunities for mobility are the new ways of keeping minorities with different educational backgrounds in a secondary position (Ayres, 2001; Braddock and McPartland, 1987; Collins, 1997). Politically, although the civil rights struggles helped to remove many of the obstacles for the electoral participation of people of color, “racial gerrymandering, multimember legislative districts, election runoffs, annexation of predominantly white areas, at-large district elections,

and anti-single-shot devices (disallowing the concentration of votes for one or two candidates in cities using at-large elections) have become standard practices to disenfranchise” people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2001:100–101). Whether in banks, restaurants, school admissions, or housing transactions, white privilege is maintained in ways that defy facile racial readings.

The advent of this racial structure produced a new set of justifications for the racial status quo. With the emergence of a new normative climate on racial matters, old-fashioned racial views substantially receded (Schuman, 1997). Hence today few whites subscribe to the classical ideas of Jim Crowism, and the vast majority agrees with the principles of racial equality and equal opportunity (Schuman, 1997). However, except for a small and decreasing number of scholars (Lipset, 1996; Sniderman and Carmines, 1997), most analysts argue that these changes do not signify the “end of racism” (D’Souza, 1995). Instead, the new consensus among survey researchers is that racial prejudice has gone underground or is expressed in a “subtle” (Pettigrew and Martin, 1994), “modern” (McConahay, 1986), or “symbolic” way (Kinder and Sanders, 1996) or as “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo *et al.*, 1997). Kinder and Sanders’ (1996:106) capture the essence of the new prejudice in the following passage:

A new form of prejudice has come to prominence, one that is preoccupied with matters of moral character, informed by the virtues associated with the traditions of individualism. At its center are the contentions that blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned. Today, we say, prejudice is expressed in the language of American individualism.

Elsewhere Bonilla-Silva (2003a) has labeled the racial ideology that glues the post-civil rights racial structure as “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003a). He contends that the main frames of this ideology are the denial of the centrality of discrimination (“Discrimination ended in the sixties!”), the abstract extension of liberal principles to racial matters (“I am all for equal opportunity; that’s why I oppose affirmative action”), the naturalization of racial matters (“Residential segregation is natural . . .”), and the cultural explanation of minorities’ standing (“Mexicans are poorer because they lack the motivation to succeed”). But ideologies are not just about ideas (see above). To have salience and currency, ideologies must produce narratives that explain the world in ways that make sense to people, that convey its major frames; these stories are then the conveyor belts that transport the new racial frames.

Our analysis of contemporary white discourse is not much different from the new consensus among survey researchers (Dawson, 2000), particularly the work of Lawrence Bobo and his associates (Bobo *et al.*, 1997; see also Essed, 1996). However, unlike most survey researchers (but see

Jackman, 1994), we interpret whites' racial discourse as the racial ideology of the dominant race rather than as "prejudice" (individuals' affective dispositions). Therefore, for us, the issue is not to identify the proportion of "racist" individuals in the population who subscribe to prejudiced views. Instead, we attempt to analyze the *social representations* (Moscovici, 2001) that whites have developed to explain and justify how the (racial) world is or ought to be. This new ideology, we argue, fits the "new racism." The subtle, "now you see it, now you don't" character of contemporary racial practices is matched by the apparent nonracialism of color-blind racism. And, as we will try to demonstrate, racial stories fit color-blind racism, as they do not rely on traditional racist discourse to support the racial status quo.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for the analysis comes from two projects on racial attitudes: the 1997 Survey of College Students Social Attitudes and the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS). The first is a convenient sample of college students at three universities (referred to generically as West, Midwest, and South University) enrolled in social science courses. The size of the target group (whites) was 410. Although this sample is not representative, the bias, if any, is toward racial tolerance, since researchers have documented that tolerance increases with education (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Schuman, 1997), particularly among those in liberal arts (Quillian, 1996). The second data set is a systematic sample of black and white Detroit metropolitan area residents ($n = 400$, whites = 323). Both surveys included post-survey, in-depth interviews with a random sample of the participants. In the former survey, interviews were carried out with a 10% sample ($n = 41$) and, in the latter, with a 21% sample ($n = 83$: 66 whites and 17 blacks). Thus we include data from more than 100 interviews with whites of various social backgrounds in various geographic locations.

Since our goal is to examine the dominant racial stories, we rely almost exclusively on the interview data. The stories we draw upon emerged mostly spontaneously in discussions on race-related issues such as affirmative action, residential and school segregation, interracial friendship, and interracial marriage. Respondents inserted them to reinforce points, underscore the salience of an issue, or as digressions in the middle of racially sensitive discussions.

The interviews for these two studies were race-matched, followed a structured interview protocol, were conducted in respondents' homes or in neutral sites, and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. After the interviews were completed, project assistants transcribed the recorded material

verbatim (i.e., included nonlexicals, pauses, etc.). However, to improve the readability of the quotations, we have edited them in this paper. When all the material was transcribed, one of the authors read all the interviews to extract common themes and patterns. At that stage, the same author and project assistants performed a basic content analysis to locate all the instances where respondents inserted these racial stories.

Although all samples have limitations (ours, for example, are not “natural” samples of “speech acts” and do not include as many blacks as we would have liked), ours have advantages over most of those used by qualitative researchers on racial matters. First, our samples are systematic (randomly selected subjects from those who participated in surveys). Second, one of the survey samples has a bias toward racial tolerance (the students’ sample), but the other is a random sample. Third, the age, gender, and regional representation in these samples allow us to be confident that the findings are not peculiar to one subpopulation. Lastly, our subsamples for the interviews (representing 10% of students in the survey and 21% of the DAS respondents) as well as the 134 total respondents interviewed are large by qualitative standards. Therefore, we believe that the data for this study allows us to gain insight into the kind of dominant stories that whites deploy while talking about racial matters.¹¹

THE STORY LINES OF COLOR-BLIND RACISM

If racial stories were immutable, they would not be useful tools to defend the racial order (Jackman, 1994). Thus, racial stories are intricately connected to specific historical moments and hence change accordingly (Hall, 1990; Omi and Winant, 1994). For example, during the Jim Crow era, the myth of the black rapist became a powerful story line that could be invoked to keep blacks, particularly black men, “in their place” (Clinton, 1982; Hill-Collins, 1990). Today new story lines have emerged to keep blacks in their new (but still subordinate) place (Crenshaw, 1997). The most common story lines we identified were “The past is the past”; “I did not own slaves”; “If (other ethnic groups such as Italians or Jews) made it, how come blacks have not?” and “I did not get a (job or promotion) because of a black man.” Although some of these story lines are interrelated (e.g., “The past is the past” and “I didn’t own any slaves” appeared often together), we discuss each one separately.

¹¹No one has *systematic* data on private, nonnormative interactions on race among whites or nonwhites. The available (unsystematic) data suggest that whites’ private race-talk is much more racial in tone and content (see Graham, 1995 and, particularly, Myers, 2003).

“The Past Is the Past”

The core of this story line is the idea that we must put our racist past behind us and that affirmative action programs do exactly the opposite by keeping the racial flame alive. Moreover, as the story line goes, these policies are particularly problematic because they attempt to address a past harm done against minorities by harming whites today. This story line was used by more than 50% of college students (21/41) and by most DAS respondents, usually in discussions of race-targeted programs for blacks. A perfect example of how respondents used this story line is provided by Emily, a student at South University (SU), who told the story line in an exchange with the interviewer over the meaning of affirmative action.

I have, I just have a problem with the discrimination, you're gonna discriminate against a group and what happened in the past is horrible and it should never happen again, but I also think that to move forward you have to let go of the past and let go of what happened um, you know? And it should really start equaling out 'cause I feel that some of, some of it will go too far and it's swing the other way. One group is going to be discriminated against, I don't, I don't believe in that. I don't think one group should have an advantage over another regardless of what happened in the past.

Clear in Emily's logic is the idea that “two wrongs don't make a right.” Thus, to compensate blacks for a history of white advantage or black oppression would involve unjustified, unfair advantage today. Note this view does not involve a denial of past injustice. Instead, it regards the past as unrelated or irrelevant to current realities. Hence, programs designed to redress the “horrible” past are constructed as “reverse discrimination.”

Almost all DAS respondents resorted to a version of this story line to express their displeasure with programs they believe benefit blacks solely because of their race. However, these older respondents were more likely to use the story line while venting lots of anger. John II, for instance, a retired architect and homebuilder in his late sixties, used a version of the story line in his response to the question on reparations.

Not a nickel, not a nickel! I think that's ridiculous. I think that's a great way to go for the black vote. But I think that's a ridiculous assumption, because those that say we should pay them because they were slaves back in the past and yet, how often do you hear about the people who were whites that were slaves and the white that were, ah? Boy, we should get reparations, the Irish should get reparations from the English . . .

John's statement suggests not only that it is “ridiculous” to give blacks even “a nickel” in compensation for a history of slavery, but that blacks have no special claim with regard to poor treatment (“the Irish should get reparations from the English”).

But what is ideological about this story? Is it not true that “the past is the past”? First, whether whites inserted this story line or not, most interpreted the past as slavery even when in some questions we left it open (e.g., questions regarding the “history of oppression”) or specified that we were referring to “slavery *and* Jim Crow.” Since Jim Crow died slowly in the country (and lasted well into the 1960s to 1970s), the reference to a remote past ignores the relatively recent overt forms of racial oppression that have impeded black progress. Second, such stories effectively “erase” the limiting effects of historic discrimination on the ability of minorities’ and blacks’ to accumulate wealth at the same rate as whites. According to Oliver and Shapiro (1995), the “accumulation of disadvantages” has “sedimented” blacks economically so that even if all forms of economic discrimination that blacks face ended today, they would not catch up with whites for several 100 years. Third, the “reverse discrimination” element in this story line is central to whites as a rationale for their opposition to all race-based compensatory programs. This story line then does not reflect whites’ ignorance of racial history and racial facts. More than anything else, it provides a positive and even moral standpoint for them to explain why certain social programs are unnecessary and problematic.

“I Didn’t Own any Slaves”

This story line appeared often in conjunction with the story line of “The past is the past,” although it was deployed somewhat less frequently—it was used by about a quarter of the college students (9/41) and a third of DAS respondents. As with the previous story line, this one usually appeared in discussions of affirmative action (see Wellman, 1997). The core of this story line is the notion that present generations are not responsible for the ills of slavery. For instance, Lynn, a Midwest University (MU) student, used this story line to explain her opposition to the idea of a hypothetical company hiring a black rather than a white job applicant because the company had discriminated against blacks in the past.

I think I would, I would, I’d disagree, I think. I mean, yeah, I think I’d disagree because, I mean, even though it’s kinda what affirmative action—well, it’s not really, because I don’t think like my generation should have to be punished real harshly for the things that our ancestors did . . .

The story line allowed Lynn to state safely (albeit quite hesitantly) her concerns about affirmative action, even though she had stated before that she supported the program. Again we can see the ideological connection between racial story lines when Lynn responds to evidence of past discrimination manifested in a company’s current racial profile (described

as 97% white) by suggesting she should not be punished for the actions of her ancestors—essentially saying, “The past is the past.” Even though the question here does not refer to slavery but suggests concrete evidence for discriminatory practices by the company in the not-too-distant past, the story line provides a readily available justification for lack of action.

Some DAS respondents deployed this story line to answer a question on whether the government should spend money on blacks’ behalf to compensate for past discrimination. For example, Dina, an employment manager for an advertising agency in her early thirties, said,

No, and I have to say that I’m pretty supportive of anything to help people, but I don’t know why that slavery thing has a—I’ve got a chip on my shoulder about that. It’s like it happened so long ago, and you’ve got these sixteen-year-old kids saying “Well, I deserve [reparations] because my great, great, granddaddy was a slave.” Well, you know what, it doesn’t affect you. Me, as [a] white person, I had nothing to do with slavery. You, as a black person, you never experienced it. It was so long ago I just don’t see how that pertains to what’s happening to the race today, so that’s one thing that I’m just like “God, shut up!”

As exemplified in Dina’s statement, this story line involves more than a denial of personal responsibility for historical discrimination. The claim is in fact much broader: that historical discrimination does not disadvantage blacks today. Therefore, this story conveys the notion that the current social order is race-neutral and based on individual merit and effort. This story line then ignores the long history of pro-white racial policies and practices in jobs, housing, access to social space (“No blacks and Mexicans allowed here!”), and so forth, and their multiplier effect for all those deemed “white.” Thus, not surprisingly, “suspect” European groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995) struggled to become “white” because by doing so they could receive the manifold benefits of whiteness.

“If Jews, Italians, and Irish Have Made It, How Come blacks Have Not?”

Another popular story line of the post–civil rights era is “If Jews, Italians, and Irish (or other ethnic groups) have made it, how come blacks have not?” This story is used to suggest that because other groups who experienced discrimination are doing well today, the predicament of blacks’ must be their own doing. Although fewer respondents explicitly deployed this story in the interviews, a significant percentage agreed with a survey question on this matter (60% of DAS respondents and 35% of college students). An example of how whites used this story is provided by Kim, a student at SU, who used it to explain why she does not favor government intervention on

minorities' behalf.

No. I think that a lot of bad things happened to a lot of people, but you can't sit there and dwell on that. I mean, like the Jewish people, look what happened to them. Do you hear them sitting around complaining about it and attributing anything bad that happens to them? I've never heard anyone say, "Oh, it's because I'm Jewish." And I know it's a little different because a black, I mean, you can't really, a lot of—you can't really tell on the outside a lot of times, but they don't wallow in what happened to them a long time ago. It was a horrible thing I admit, but I think that you need to move on and try to put that behind you.

Here, this story line is used to question blacks' claims to harm. It also presents a moral racial tale: the way to deal with hard times is to work hard and not to "wallow" in what happened "a long time ago" which, according to the story, is presumably what other racial and ethnic groups have done to move up in this country.

An example of how DAS respondents used this story line comes from Henrietta, a transvestite schoolteacher in his fifties, who inserted the story to answer a question on compensatory government spending on blacks' behalf.

As a person who was once reversed discriminated against, I would have to say no. Because the government does not need programs if they, if people would be motivated to bring themselves out of the poverty level. Ah . . . when we talk about certain programs, when the Irish came over, when the Italians, the Polish, and the East European Jews, they all were immigrants who lived in terrible conditions, who worked in terrible conditions too. But they had one thing in common; they all knew that education was the way out of that poverty. And they did it. I'm not saying the blacks were brought over here maybe not willingly, but if they realize education's the key, that's it. And that's based on individuality.

What is ideological about this story? Have not Jews, Irish, and other ethnic groups moved up and even assimilated in America? The problem is that this story line equates the experiences of immigrant groups with those of involuntary "immigrants" (enslaved Africans, etc.). But as Stephen Steinberg pointed out some time ago, most immigrant groups were able to get a foothold in certain economic niches or used resources such as an education or small amounts of capital to achieve social mobility. "In contrast, racial minorities were for the most part relegated to the preindustrial sectors of the national economy and, until the flow of immigration was cut off by the First World War, were denied access to the industrial jobs that lured tens of millions of immigrants. All groups started at the bottom, but as Blauner points out, "the bottom" has by no means been the same for all groups" (Steinberg, 1989:101). Thus, the comparison in this story line is not appropriate, as the historical experiences and opportunities of the groups in question are vastly different.

“I Did Not Get a Job (or a Promotion or Was Admitted to a College) Because of a black Man”

The core of this story is the idea that less qualified minorities (mostly referring to blacks, although occasionally to women) are getting into college or taking jobs that more qualified whites deserve. However, as we will illustrate, this story does not involve concrete experience or knowledge and requires little evidence; the mere presence of a minority person in a particular setting allows whites to ignore the possibility that they are not qualified for a job, a promotion, or admission to a college (for a similar point, see Goldfield, 1997 and Bobo and Suh, 2000). And this story line, although narrated as personal experience, is quite often about distantly removed friends, friends of friends, or neighbors and lacks the spontaneity and vividness of a testimony.

This story line was most often used in discussions about affirmative action or race-based policies. Almost a quarter of the students (10/41) and more than a third of DAS respondents used the story line, “I did not get that job because of a black man.” For instance, Bob, a student at SU, opposed providing unique opportunities to minorities to be admitted into Universities:

I had a friend, he wasn't—I don't like him that much, I think it's my brother's friend, a good friend of my brother's, who didn't get into law school here, and he knows for a fact that other students less qualified than him *did*. And that really—and he was considering a lawsuit against the school. But for some reason, he didn't. He had better grades, better LSAT, better everything, and he. . . . Other people got in up above him, I don't care who it is, if it's Eskimo, or Australian, or what it is, you should have the best person there.

This is a classic example of this story line. Bob's brother has a friend who knows “for a fact” that less qualified minority applicants were admitted into a law school instead of him. For Bob, this is a matter of principle: “the best person (should be) there” whether “it's Eskimo, or Australian.”

Darren, a bus driver in his late forties (and other DAS respondents like him), vented lots of animosity toward blacks in his answer to a question on affirmative action. In this context, he inserted the story line to affirm his belief that he had been the victim of reverse discrimination¹²:

No, other than I have applied at jobs and been turned down because I was white. *Now, I have nothing* against the black person [if he] was qualified better than I was. But when the guy comes into the interview, and I'm off on the side and I can hear them talking, and he can't even speak English, he doesn't know how to read a map, and they're gonna make him a bus driver and hire him over me. I've been doing bus

¹²Despite the regularity with which this story line is deployed, the number of actual cases filed by whites as “reverse discrimination” before EEOC is quite small, and the great majority of them are dismissed as bogus (Wicker, 1996).

driving off and on since 1973, and I know the guy well enough that [I know] he's a lousy driver. I know why he got the job, and I don't think that's fair.

Although Darren's story seems like a testimony, it has the scheme of this story line. He believes he was passed over for a job by a bus company (presumably the one he currently works for) because he is white. His facts come from what he overheard from an interview with a black applicant. Darren does not provide data on his driving record or the record of the black bus driver.

Complex processes involving multiple applicants are simplified in such stories so that two individuals abstracted from their social context are depicted as going head-to-head in a competition of merit (Wise, 2004). According to the story, race triumphs over merit, and a specific black candidate is imagined as the beneficiary who displaced a specific, deserving white candidate. Collectively this story line is important because it makes the case that whites are the real victims of racial discrimination (Feagin and Vera, 1995; Fine and Weis, 1998) and supports the argument that color-blind decision-making is the only fair way to proceed.

TESTIMONIES AND COLOR-BLIND RACISM

The story lines discussed above were used to explain beliefs about public policy issues (e.g., government intervention, affirmative action, busing, etc.). Yet, in the interviews respondents also told more personal stories that, although connected to these story lines, were different enough in style, content, and function to warrant analytical distinction as testimonies (for example, testimonies were extremely valuable for image restoration or for self-presentation). In what follows we examine the two testimonies that appeared most frequently.

Testimonies Disclosing Knowledge of Someone Close Who Is Racist

Twelve students disclosed information about someone close (usually a parent or grandparent) who was racist. The narrative form used to reveal this information resembles confession in church; by disclosing this sensitive information, respondents seem to be attempting to absolve themselves from the possibility of being regarded as racist. By identifying a "bad" white individual, respondents could situate themselves among those who are "nonracist." For example, Mike, an MU student, replied as follows to the question, "Do you ever talk about racial issues at home?"

Yeah we do. I mean, my dad came from a pretty racist background, I mean, not, you know, like—well, actually, his grandfather, I think, was in the Ku Klux Klan until he

got married. And my great-grandmother, who I knew—she died, but I knew her—was completely the opposite. And basically when they got married, she said “no way.” So *that* ended, but I mean, there was still a certain, you know, racism that pervaded. In his family they were pretty racist, so you’ll still hear, you know, racial slurs slip out every once in a while, but I think he makes a conscious effort not to, I mean, he certainly didn’t ever try to teach me things like that, you know. For one thing, my dad was in the Navy for a long time, so I grew up with my mom for the first five years or so, and then he worked and my mom stayed at home with me. So my dad’s influence was not nearly as much as my mom’s to begin with, and even when it was, I wouldn’t say that influenced me a lot, but there were definitely, I mean, racist ideas in his family. And I see that with my grandparents, you know, his parents.

In all twelve cases, this testimony had a similar narrative structure. First, the respondent reveals that a relative is “racist” and then gives an example to illustrate this point. Finally, the respondent ends by explaining why she or he is “not racist.” Mike reveals that his dad comes from a “pretty racist background.” Then he mentions that his father’s grandfather was in the KKK—evidence of direct racist lineage. And finally, he concludes the story by showing that he was not substantially influenced by these ideas because his father “didn’t try to teach me things like that” and because his mother raised him.

DAS respondents used this testimony, too. For example, Jenny, a public school administrator in her fifties, while describing the neighborhood she grew up in as full of “Archie Bunkers,” characterized her own grandmother as follows:

My grandmother, who was—she was Scandinavian—used to make fun of blacks. And when we would drive through a black neighborhood, she would say things like, “Look at all the little chocolate drops.” And I can remember being a young child—maybe five, six, or seven years old—and being offended by her remarks. My parents never, ever said anything like that. My parents were very open-minded and broad-minded.

Jenny’s narrative structure is similar to Mike’s. First, she disclosed in an almost confessional tone that her grandmother harbored racist views. Then, she supplied the example of her grandmother’s mocking remarks about blacks. Finally, she distanced herself from her grandmother by pointing out that even at a young age she was “offended by her [grandmothers’] remarks” and that her parents were “very open-minded” and never said such things.

Why do we regard these stories as racial? Are not they just stories? We contend these testimonies are part of a larger narrative about race in contemporary America because they all have a similar structure, emerge often in response to similar questions, and seem to fulfill similar rhetorical and ideological functions. Furthermore, as we discuss below, when white racial progressives or blacks narrated stories about racist family members, their stories were different in structure and function. Our point about these

testimonies is that they serve strategic purposes: They are deployed to convey a message about self (as color-blind) through a discussion of others (the bad racist whites).

Testimonies of Interactions With blacks

Other testimonies involved stories of interactions (negative or positive) with blacks. In the first type, respondents narrated a negative incident with blacks in order to justify a position taken against blacks on some issue. In the other type, respondents narrated a positive incident or relationship with blacks as a way to signify their own good racial character (positive self-presentation). About a third of the students and DAS respondents inserted one of these stories.

Positive Interactions With blacks

These stories function much like the stories about a racist relative—all are used for the goal of representing oneself as color-blind. For instance, John II, a semiretired house designer in his sixties, inserted a positive story of interaction with blacks in WWII in response to the question on whether blacks are hard to approach or are not made to feel welcome by whites. After stating he had no experiences to offer on this matter, John II narrated the following story:

[So] the Filipino scouts stood farther away from me, and they got the cover, and I got behind the curb. It wasn't quite enough curb to hide me, and the fellow was shooting a full automatic. . . . A jeep came in out of one of the roads and slid to a stop, and, about the time he said, "Get in!," they said "Let's go!," because I was in laying across the back seat, and he took off. When we got down the road, I climbed out of the back seat into the front seat, and it was a colored captain. He wouldn't give me his name or anything. He said, "That's all right," but I've always remembered that. He put himself at risk and under fire to pick up a man and take him out of a line of fire.

John's story served as a vehicle to state his view that blacks and whites can be civil to each other. His story resembles those told by many veterans of interracial solidarity during war. However, for John II, as for so many white veterans, these experiences do not seem to have penetrated very deeply, as he did not have an interracial lifestyle after he returned to the United States or altered his racial views in any meaningful way. The telling of this story thus signifies acceptance or tolerance of blacks rather than as evidence of real racial "openness." For example, John II, who used the term "*colored*" to refer to the black man who saved his life, opposed interracial marriage and said he was "more comfortable around whites because I've grown up

with them.” He also had no qualms about neighborhoods or schools being almost completely white. John II’s stance amounts to a modern version of the separate but equal policy: blacks and whites can be civil to each other, but they should not live near each other or marry each other.

Negative Interactions With blacks

Mickey, a student at MU, acknowledged that his family talked about racial matters often because of the area they lived in (Benton Harbor, an area that has become predominantly black). After Mickey pointed out that Benton Harbor has “one of the highest crime rates in, like, the country” and that “now it’s, it’s a really dirtiest [*sic*] place,” the interviewer asked him if people ever worried about violence and crime spreading into their community. After acknowledging that he thought “about that [possibility] a lot,” he added,

but I mean, nothing really happened horribly. Actually, a neighbor of mine [laughs], kind of a grim story. I have a younger brother who’s friends with one of my neighbors just down the street who hangs out with him sometimes. And he was drivin’ downtown in Benton Harbor, about a couple of months ago, and I think he was trying to get some marijuana or somethin’ stupid like that, and he got beat over the head with a baseball bat, got some black eyes, and he had brain damage. He’s okay now, but he was in a coma for a little bit. And he’s like, I think he’s got minor brain damage, irreversible. But nothing that’s affecting him, like, too bad, but that was just one incident that happened a couple of months [ago] that made me think about stuff like this.

Mikey told this story as he was expressing ambivalence about whether the problems of Benton Harbor were rooted in economics or morality. This testimony allowed him to validate his belief that blacks are “more aggressive” than whites.

DAS respondents also told negative stories of interaction with blacks. Bill, a retired schoolteacher in his eighties, offered testimony to explain why he thinks blacks and whites are different. After saying that blacks had bought a church in his neighborhood, he claimed they forced a restaurant in the area out of business. He gave the following testimony to explain this situation:

They like to eat. They *pile their* dishes just loaded with that stuff and, I actually didn’t see it, but I saw one lady come in with a full plate of chicken. I didn’t pay much attention, but the next thing I know, they are leaving. Now I know she didn’t eat all that chicken. She probably put it in her purse and walked out with it. I didn’t see that. Lot of them are doing that. How can they make any money? And seeing that they are all *heavy people*, it seems like they do a lot of eating, and so I don’t know what to say about something like that.

Here there is no question that Bill’s facts are fuzzy (and racist in the traditional sense of the term). That an all-you-can-eat restaurant would go out of

business because of customers eating too much is unlikely. Nevertheless, the ideological importance of this testimony, as well as of all the racial stories we have discussed, does not depend on whether the facts are right or wrong but on the way they are deployed—that is, as evidence to validate whites' beliefs about minorities or about themselves.

COUNTERNARRATIVES: EXAMPLES OF WHITE RACIAL PROGRESSIVES AND BLACKS

Are all whites immersed in color-blind racism? Do they all buy into the racial stories we documented here? Do blacks rely on this ideology and its stories, too? Analysis of the interviews revealed that although most whites are “color-blind,” 15% of the college students and 12% of the DAS respondents were “racial progressives” who were significantly less likely to invoke these stories.¹³ The analysis also revealed that color-blind racism and its stories had a relatively small impact on blacks (but see below). Instead, white racial progressives and blacks were more likely to provide arguments and narratives *against* the dominant frames and racial stories of color-blind racism.

For example, Beth, a student at WU, said in reference to a white male who opposed affirmative action, “Being a white male I guess you don’t realize [sic] . . . [shit] unless it’s shoved in your face.” She also told the following story about her interaction with this student:

I said, “Well, if you think it’s a quota system, well you’re wrong” and that maybe it’s hard to see what these people go through all their life and, I mean—Me too, being female, what you go through, just the slight discrimination here and there, this like common slur, you don’t understand that. You just think it’s a harmless joke, but it’s not. It builds up. He was just not getting it.

Beth understood that discrimination affects the life chances of minorities and even expressed support for programs that compensate minorities for past discrimination because, she said, “It’s hard to start when you have hit rock bottom, it’s hard to climb back up.”

Judy, a college professor of nursing in her forties, realized discrimination is still important and described various examples of the old and new styles of discrimination. For example, she said that a black man told her

¹³We classified as racial progressives respondents who supported affirmative action, interracial marriage, and recognized the significance of discrimination in the United States. When respondents exhibited reservations on one of these issues, we searched for other elements disclosed in the interview to help us classify these respondents (e.g., whether they had meaningful relationships with minorities or the degree of racial progressiveness on other race-related issues discussed in the interviews).

that he was not served at a local hospital because he was black. She also mentioned that many blacks are used as guinea pigs because they are black and poor. Finally, she said that a black woman told her that when she shops in the suburbs, “she notices that people won’t give her change in her hand” because they are “fearful of her, and that bugs her to death.” Judy, like many racial progressives, used her experience as a woman to understand blacks’ plight.¹⁴ For instance, while explaining how the few blacks that move up in society “feel always on display,” she connected it to her experiences as a woman:

It’s kind of like women, you know, I have to be that much better just because of various conditions and practices that occur. So in that way I can understand it, because it’s difficult being a woman in this society. It is planned, it’s organized by men. It’s set up for them, and we’ve had to struggle to become equal. It’s just that way for people of color.

Last is Kay, an MU student, who said that her parents were displeased that she had a black boyfriend: “Not between us, but my parents at first didn’t approve of it really. Like my parents always told me that I could be friends with black people, but I couldn’t date them. But after a while, they just learned that they were gonna have to accept it.” Kay’s story does not fit the testimonies discussed above that we classified as dealing with someone close who is racist. For example, she did not use this story to exonerate herself or her parents from the influence of racism (“they just learned they were gonna have to accept it”).

An example of the counterarguments provided by blacks comes from Edward, an unemployed man in his fifties, who said the following about affirmative action:

I’d say that I would have to be for affirmative action simply because you still have ignorant people. Some of these ignorant people are in control and have a little more power than I’d like to think they should have . . . to prevent other people from having opportunities [so] that . . . they can’t have growth and development. Affirmative Action is a means and [a] method. Then it’s like a key when you got a locked door. You’ve got to have it.

When asked, “What would you say to those who say affirmative action is unfair to whites?” he responded: “I tell them that “What do you call fair?” If you got everything, it’s kind of like saying you are upset because you got ice cream and you don’t have a cone. Then put it in a bowl, you already got everything. Don’t worry about it.”

Blacks also believed that discrimination is an important reason for their present status and provided oppositional testimonies as evidence. For example, Tyrone, an unemployed man in his forties, gave the following testimony

¹⁴Our analysis revealed that white racial progressives were significantly more likely to be working-class women. For a discussion, see Bonilla-Silva (2003b:chap. 6).

in his answer to a question on discrimination:

I think sometimes you do. 'Cause I used to work in Sterling Heights [a neighborhood in Detroit]. I used to be out there waiting on the bus, somebody would drive by and call me a "black ass nigger" at least three times out of the week and I'm just trying to work and come home.

However, color-blind racism would not be a *dominant* racial ideology if it had not affected at some level even those who oppose it. For an ideology to become dominant, whether based on class, gender, or race, it must have some salience for those on all rungs of the social ladder; it must muddle in some fashion the ideological waters of the dominated and constrain their resistance (van Dijk, 1999). Thus it was not surprising to find that even white racial progressives and blacks were affected by the dominant racial stories.

One example of this phenomenon is provided by Carla, a black woman in her forties who works as an executive secretary. Although the vast majority of blacks supported affirmative action and reparations, she answered the question on reparations as did most whites.

That became [a] topic in school. I don't remember what I said, but right now I feel that was so long ago that the people who are here now didn't have anything to do with it. So I don't feel it would, I mean, you can say you're sorry but it's not going to take back what happened. Therefore, I don't think it's necessary.

DISCUSSION

In this article we have examined the dominant racial stories of the post-civil rights era. These stories "make" whites, but also help them navigate the turbulent waters of public discussions on race. However, before accepting the accuracy of our analysis of whites' contemporary race-talk, we must address a few plausible alternative explanations.

The first one is the always present possibility of researcher bias. Did we get the answers we got because we framed questions in a particular way? We believe this is unlikely, since the original purpose of these two studies was to assess if whites' racial attitudes were different in interviews than in surveys (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000) rather than to examine whites' racial stories. Therefore, the questions we asked in the interviews were based on the same issues and questions we included in the survey, and the bulk of the questions in the survey were exactly the same questions that other survey researchers have used in the past.¹⁵ The racial stories we found among these respondents were thus not the products of a fishing expedition for "racists"

¹⁵The instruments for the 1998 DAS survey are available from the Detroit Area Study at the University of Michigan. The instruments for the other survey can be obtained from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.

or of tendentious questions intended to make our respondents answer in a particular way.

Second, some analysts disagree about our interpretation of the ideological function of these stories.¹⁶ However, such disagreement does not challenge our claim about the salience of these stories in whites' contemporary imaginary. The fact that the racial stories we identified occurred so regularly in our diverse sample suggests that such stories are being repeated throughout society. Such widespread repetition is unlikely unless those who tell them believe that they reflect some truth about the way the social world works. The fact that old and young alike, working-class and middle-class, and male and female respondents all told these stories and told them so similarly is evidence that they are *collective* narratives.

Third, some analysts may believe that our goal is to label all whites racist. We went to great lengths to show that although most whites accept these stories as the "truth" about racial matters in America, a segment of the white community (and most blacks) do not accept these stories and have developed incipient counternarratives. Theoretically and substantively speaking, as we have argued in previous work (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2001, 2003a), the issue is not one of "good" versus "bad" or "educated" versus "ignorant" whites, but one of documenting the growth of a new racial logic that helps preserve racial inequality. Therefore, our data and analysis suggest not that there are more (or less) "racists" or more or less "racism" than in the past, but that a set of racial stories has emerged and is being deployed by whites from a wide range of social backgrounds and from a variety of geographic locations.

Finally, some may argue that we are presenting white respondents in a monolithic fashion. To this potential charge we say that our respondents, like all humans, exhibit contradictions. Thus, some of the respondents who told the dominant racial stories also had progressive views on specific issues (for example, they supported school integration or busing, or approved of interracial marriage). Similarly, although racial progressives and blacks exhibited radically different views from the majority of whites, a few used some of the dominant racial stories. This fact should not surprise students of racial attitudes in the United States (e.g., Schuman, 1997) who have documented the ambivalent views of whites on racial matters, or students of ideology in general, who have pointed out the contested and always unfinished nature of ideology (Billig, 1988). Yet, contradictions in attitudes, ideological positions, as well as behavior do not detract from the fact that all actors end up stating and taking positions on social issues (in our case, racial issues). And these

¹⁶Charles Murray (1984), Herrnstein and Murray (1994), D'Souza (1995) and others have concluded that whites' "common sense" on minorities (the idea that minorities are lazy, not too smart, see racism in everything, etc.) is fundamentally right. Liberal social analysts have read whites' contemporary views as expressions of racial ambivalence (Schuman, 1997).

contradictions allow us too, as analysts and policymakers, to think about ways to devise political arguments, policies, and politics for effecting social change.

CONCLUSION

The four story lines we analyzed in this article are powerful tools that help most whites maintain a color-blind sense of self and, at the same time, to reinforce views that help reproduce the current racial order. For example, if whites oppose affirmative action or reparations, they can use the “The past of the past” or “I did not own any slaves” story line to bolster the apparent reasonableness of their argument. If the issue involves accounting for blacks’ secondary status in this country, whites can use the story line “If (other ethnic groups such as Italians or Jews) made it, how come blacks have not?” Finally, because the story line “I did not get a (job or promotion) because of a black man” seems personal—even though the facts in such stories tend to be second-hand and remote—it can offer powerful support to those opposing government programs for minorities.

These story lines also allow many whites to vent deep-seated feelings about racial matters (on racism and emotions, see Feagin, 2000). In case after case, whites evinced anger about what they interpret as blacks’ whining (“I didn’t own any slaves, and I do not understand why they keep asking for things when slavery ended 200 hundred *goddamned* years ago!”) or about not getting into certain jobs or universities (“A friend of mine was not admitted into SU Law School, but many *unqualified* blacks students were, and that’s *wrong*”). The story lines then serve whites as legitimate conduits for expressing animosity and resentment toward minorities. Together, these story lines offer a specific interpretation of contemporary racial matters that favors whites and the current racial order: “The past is the past, we never benefited from the past, everyone had it bad and, in fact, and we are the real victims of discrimination today” (Doane, 1997; Gallagher, 1995).

Testimonies, although more loose and unstructured than story lines, are as important in the rhetorical arsenal of color-blind racism. Many respondents relied on them at some point in the interviews. Generally speaking, whites seemed to use testimonies for self-presentation goals such as saving face when discussing sensitive matters, signifying nonracism, or bolstering some specific claim about race (e.g., “Blacks are violent”). Although these stories were, compared to story lines, more unique, we analyzed two of the most structured and frequently used kind: stories disclosing knowledge of someone close who is racist and stories of interactions with blacks (negative and positive). The stories of disclosure seem to serve positive self-presentation (e.g., “I am not a racist like my dad, uncle, or friend”). Stories of positive interactions with blacks had a similar goal. For example, if a

respondent had a “good experience” with a black a long time ago, that story can be used to cover up for a present in which blacks are not part of the respondent’s life. Stories of “bad experiences” with blacks were mostly used to give credence to respondents’ negative views about blacks (“I know blacks are lazy because my friend Tyrone *never* does anything on time”).

These racial stories are “ideological” because they are part of the post-civil rights color-blind “common sense.” They represent the world in an “of course” manner—as if these stories are self-evident. Although such stories, as we have noted, are thin on hard data, misrepresent the importance of discrimination (both old and new), and can be classified as the “sincere fictions” of whites (Feagin and Vera, 1995), they are not experienced as such by whites. Instead, these stories are *real* in the imaginary of whites who subscribe to the dominant racial ideology and shape how they come to understand their lives as well as those of blacks. They are factual to them because both storytellers and (white) listeners share a representational community. Hence, the telling and retelling of these stories, strengthens their understanding about how and why the world is the way it is.¹⁷

Racial narratives, however, potentially do far more than help whites to understand the world in particular ways: they also justify current racial inequality. For example, when trying to explain why blacks are at the bottom of society, these stories are used to suggest that people’s station in life depends on ability and hard work, which explains blacks’ status as a result of their own shortcomings (Hoschchild, 1995; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). These racial narratives not only attempt to explain larger racial realities but also have the capacity to shape everyday behavior and interactions. For example, recent work on the behavior of whites toward students of color on college campuses (who often are imagined to be the recipients of unfair advantage) demonstrates the pernicious impact of such stories (Feagin *et al.*, 1996; Lewis *et al.*, 2000; Solorzano *et al.*, 2000).

It is the job of social analysts and activists alike to break the conventionality and commonsense character of these stories. We have provided evidence for a way out of the ideological web of color-blind racism and of these stories through our examples of the way white racial progressives and most blacks are challenging these racial narratives. As discussed here, many of these “ideological dissidents” (van Dijk, 1999) and “race traitors” have even developed oppositional narratives (albeit less coherent than the dominant racial narratives). Thus, our tasks are to recognize the origins and

¹⁷We are trying to convey here the positive role of ideology. As Althusser suggested long time ago, the content of an ideology may be false (misrepresent real social relations), but that ideology shapes the actions and behavior of people and is thus real, because ideology “interpellates” individuals as subjects (in our case, as “racial subjects”) from the day they are born (Althusser, 1977. On the notion of “racial subjects,” see Goldberg, 1993).

strategic functions of these racial stories and help popularize counternarratives (Delgado, 1999) so we can challenge their role in the maintenance of contemporary “white supremacy” (Mills, 1997).

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