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## WHAT IS RACIAL DOMINATION?

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This second reading is an excerpt from Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer's 2009 article, "What Is Racial Domination?" Desmond is Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, and Emirbayer is Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Together, they have coauthored a number of books on racial issues in America. In this reading, Desmond and Emirbayer explain why race and racism are still a part of contemporary social life. They define both concepts and illustrate different explanations for and misunderstandings about race and racism.

### WHAT IS RACE?

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You do not come into this world African or European or Asian; rather, this world comes into you. As literally hundreds of scientists have argued, you are not born with a race in the same way you are born with fingers, eyes, and hair. Fingers, eyes, and hair are natural creations, whereas race is a social fabrication (Duster 2003; Graves 2001). We define race as *a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category*. This definition deserves to be unpacked.

#### Symbolic Category

A symbolic category belongs to the realm of ideas, meaning-making, and language. It is something actively created and recreated by human beings rather than pre-given, needing only to be labeled. Symbolic categories mark differences between grouped people or things. In doing so, they actually bring those people or things into existence (Bourdieu 2003). For example, the term "Native American" is a symbolic category that encompasses all peoples indigenous to the land that is known, today, as the United States. But the term "Native American" did not exist before non-Native Americans came to the Americas. Choctaws, Crows, Iroquois, Hopis, Dakotas, Yakimas, Utes, and dozens of other people belonging to indigenous tribes existed. The term "Native American" flattens under one homogenizing heading the immensely different

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histories, languages, traditional beliefs, and rich cultural practices of these various tribes. In naming different races, racial categories create different races.

Such insights into the importance of the symbolic have not always been appreciated. Consider, for example, Oliver Cromwell Cox's hypothesis "that racial exploitation and race prejudice developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism and nationalism, and that because of the worldwide ramifications of capitalism, all racial antagonisms can be traced to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the [W]hite people of Europe and North America" (1948:322). Though few scholars today would agree fully with Cox's reduction, many continue to advance structuralist claims, filtering racial conflict through the logic of class conflict (e.g., Reich 1981), regarding racial formation as a political strategy (e.g., Marx 1998), or concentrating on the legal construction of racial categories (e.g., Haney-López 1996). Helpful as they are, structuralist accounts often treat race as something given and accepted—that is, as a "real" label that attaches itself to people (Bonilla-Silva 1997) or as an imposed category that forms racial identity (Marx 1998)—and thereby overlook how actors create, reproduce, and resist systems of racial classification....

### Phenotype or Ancestry

Race also is based on phenotype or ancestry. A person's phenotype is her or his physical appearance and constitution, including skeletal structure, height, hair texture, eye color, and skin tone. A person's ancestry is her or his family lineage, which often includes tribal, regional, or national affiliations. The symbolic category of race organizes people into bounded groupings based on their phenotype, ancestry, or both. It is difficult to say which matters more, phenotype or ancestry, in determining racial membership in the United States. In some settings, ancestry trumps phenotype; in others, the opposite is true.

Recent immigrants often are pigeonholed in one of the dominant racial categories because of their phenotype; however, many resist this classification because of their ancestry. For instance, upon arriving in the United States, many first generation West Indian immigrants, quite familiar with racism against African Americans, actively resist the label "Black." Despite their efforts, many are considered African American because of their dark skin (that is, they "look" Black to the American eye). The children of West African immigrants, many of whom are disconnected from their parents' ancestries, more readily accept the label "Black" (Waters 1999). And many individuals with mixed heritage often are treated as though they belonged only to one "race."

Some people, by contrast, rely on their phenotype to form a racial identity, though they are often grouped in another racial category based on their ancestry. Susie Guillory Phipps, a blond-haired blue-eyed woman who always considered herself "White," discovered, upon glancing at her birth certificate while applying for a passport, that her native state, Louisiana, considered her "Black." The reason was that Louisiana grouped people into racial categories according to the "one thirty-second rule," a rule that stated that anyone who was one thirty-second Black—regardless of what they looked like—was legally "Black." In 1982, Susie Guillory Phipps sued Louisiana for the right to be White. She lost. The state genealogist discovered that Phipps was the great-great-great-great-grandchild of a White Alabama plantation owner and his Black mistress and, therefore—although all of Phipps's other ancestors were White—she was to be

considered “Black.” (This outlandish law was finally erased from the books in 1983.) In this case, Phipps’s ancestry (as identified by the state) was more important in determining her race than her phenotype (Davis 1991).

## Social and Historical Contexts

Racial taxonomies are bound to their specific social and historical contexts. The racial categories that exist in America may not exist in other parts of the globe. In South Africa, racial groups are organized around three dominant categories: White, Black, and “Coloured.” During apartheid, the Coloured category was designed to include all “mixed-race” people (Sparks 2006). More recently, the Black category has been expanded to include all groups oppressed under apartheid, not only those of African heritage but also those of Indian descent and (as of 2008) Chinese South Africans. In Brazil, five racial categories are employed in the official census: *Branco* (White), *Pardo* (Brown), *Preto* (Black), *Amarelo* (Asian), and *Indígena* (Indigenous). However, in everyday usage, many Brazilians identify themselves and one another through several other racial terms—including *moreno* (other type of brown), *moreno claro* (light brown), *negro* (another type of black), and *claro* (light)—which have much more to do with the tint of one’s skin than with one’s ancestry (Stephens 1999; Telles 2004). Before racial language was outlawed by the Communist regime, Chinese racial taxonomies were based first and foremost on blood purity, then on hair, then odor, then brain mass, then finally—and of least importance—skin color, which, according to the taxonomy, was divided into no less than ten shades (Dikötter 1992). And in Japan, a group called the Burakamin is considered to be unclean and is thought to constitute a separate race, although it is impossible to distinguish someone with Burakamin ancestry from the rest of the Japanese population (Eisenstadt 1998; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994).

Cross-national comparisons, then, reveal that systems of racial classification vary greatly from one country to the next. Racial categories, therefore, are *place-specific*, bound to certain geographic and social contexts. They also are *time-specific*, changing between different historical eras. As a historical product, race is quite new. Before the sixteenth century, race, as we know it today, did not exist. During the Middle Ages, prejudices were formed and wars waged against “other” people, but those “other” people were not categorized or understood as people of other races. Instead of the color line, the primary social division in those times was that between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” The racial categories so familiar to us only began to calcify around the beginning of the nineteenth century, a mere 200 years ago (Gossett 1965; Smedley 1999). In fact, the word, “race,” has a very recent origin; it only obtained its modern meaning in the late eighteenth century (Hannaford 1996).

But racial domination survives by covering its tracks, by erasing its own history. It encourages us to think of the mystic boundaries separating, say, West from East, White from Black, Black from Asian, or Asian from Hispanic, as timeless separations, as divisions that have always been and will always be. We would be well served to remember, with Stuart Hall, that we must grapple with “the historical specificity of race in the modern world” (1980:308) to gain an accurate understanding of racial phenomena. In the American context, the “Indian” was invented within the context of European colonization, as indigenous peoples of the Americas

were lumped together under one rubric to be killed, uprooted, and exploited. Whiteness and Blackness were invented as antipodes within the context of English, and later American, slavery. More than any other institution, slavery would dictate the career of American racism: Blackness became associated with bondage, inferiority, and social death; Whiteness with freedom, superiority, and life. The Mexican American was invented within the context of the colonization of Mexico. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Asian American was invented as a response to immigration from the Far East. Whiteness expanded during the early years of the twentieth century as new immigrants from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe transformed themselves from “lesser Whites” to, simply, “Whites.” All the while, White supremacy was legitimated by racial discourses in philosophy, literature, and science. By the middle of the twentieth century, the racial categories so familiar to us today were firmly established. Although the second half of the twentieth century brought great changes in the realm of race—including the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the fall of Jim Crow—the racial categories that emerged in America over the previous 300 years remained, for the most part, unchallenged. Americans, White and non-White alike, understood themselves as raced, and, by and large, accepted the dominant racial classification even if they refused to accept the terms of racial inequality.

### Misrecognized as Natural

The last part of the definition we have been unpacking has to do with a process of naturalization. This word signifies a metamorphosis of sorts, where something created by humans is mistaken as something dictated by nature. Racial categories are naturalized when these symbolic groupings—the products of specific historical contexts—are wrongly conceived as natural and unchangeable. We misrecognize race as natural when we begin to think that racial cleavages and inequalities can be explained by pointing to attributes somehow inherent in the race itself (as if they were biological) instead of understanding how social powers, economic forces, political institutions, and cultural practices have brought about these divisions.

Naturalized categories are powerful; they are the categories through which we understand the world around us. Such categories divide the world along otherwise arbitrary lines and make us believe that there is nothing at all arbitrary about such a division. What is more, when categories become naturalized, alternative ways of viewing the world begin to appear more and more impossible. Why, we might ask, should we only have five main racial groups? Why not ninety-five? Why should we divide people according to their skin color? Why not base racial divisions according to foot size, ear shape, teeth color, arm length, or height? Why is ancestry so important? Why not base our racial categories on regions—North, South, East, and West? One might find these suggestive questions silly, and, indeed, they are. But they are no sillier than the idea that people should be sorted into different racial groups according to skin color or blood composition. To twist Bourdieu’s phrase, we might say, *when it comes to race, one never doubts enough* (1998 [1994]:36).

The system of racial classification at work in America today is not the only system imaginable, nor is it the only one that has existed in the young life of the United States. Race is far from fixed; rather, its forms, depending on the social, economic, political, and cultural pressures of the day, have shifted and fluctuated in whimsical and drastic ways over time (Duster

2001). Indeed, today's multiracial movement is challenging America's dominant racial categories (which remained relatively stable during the latter half of the twentieth century) as people of mixed heritage are refusing to accept as given the state's racial classification system (DaCosta 2007). Race is social through and through. Thus, we can regard race as a *well-founded fiction*. It is a fiction because it has no natural bearing, but it is nonetheless well founded since most people in society provide race with a real existence and divide the world through this lens.

## ETHNICITY AND NATIONALITY

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The categories of ethnicity and nationality are intrinsically bound up with race. Ethnicity refers to a shared lifestyle informed by cultural, historical, religious, and/or national affiliations. Nationality is equated with citizenship, membership in a specific politically delineated territory controlled by a government (cf. Weber 1946). Race, ethnicity, and nationality are overlapping symbolic categories that influence how we see the world around us, how we view ourselves, and how we divide “us” from “them.” The categories are mutually reinforcing insofar as each category educates, upholds, and is informed by the others. This is why these three categories cannot be understood in isolation from one another (Loveman 1999). For example, if someone identifies as ethnically Norwegian, which, for them, might include a shared lifestyle composed of Norwegian history and folklore, language, cultural rituals and festivals, and food, they may also reference a nationality, based in the state of Norway, as well as a racial group, White, since nearly all people of Norwegian descent would be classified as White by American standards. Here, ethnicity is informed by nationality (past or present) and signifies race.

Ethnicity often carves out distinctions and identities within racial groups. Ten people can be considered Asian American according to our modern racial taxonomy; however, those ten people might have parents or grandparents that immigrated to the United States from ten different countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, China, South Korea, North Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Laos. They might speak different languages, uphold different traditions, worship different deities, enjoy different kinds of food, and go through different experiences. What is more, many Asian countries have histories of conflict (such as China and Japan, North and South Korea). Accordingly, we cannot assume that a Chinese American and a Japanese American have similar lifestyles or see the world through a shared vision simply because they are both classified as “Asian” under American racial rubrics. Therefore, just as race, ethnicity, and nationality cannot be separated from one another, neither can all three categories be collapsed into one (cf. Brubaker et al. 2004).

Race and ethnicity (as well as nationality) are both marked and made. They are *marked* through America's racial taxonomy, as well as global ethnic taxonomy, which seek to divide the world into distinct categories. In this case, race and ethnicity impose themselves on you. They are *made* through a multiplicity of different practices—gestures, sayings, tastes, ways of walking, religious convictions, opinions, and so forth. In this case, you perform race or ethnicity. Ethnicity is a very fluid, layered, and situational construct. One might feel very American when voting, very Irish when celebrating St. Patrick's Day, very Catholic when attending Easter mass, very “New Yorker” when riding the subway, and very Northern when visiting a relative in South Carolina

(Waters 1990). Race, too, can be performed to varying degrees. One might act “very Black” when celebrating Kwanzaa with relatives but may repress one’s Blackness while in a business meeting with White colleagues. Race as performance is “predicated on actions, on the things one does in the world, on how one behaves. “As anthropologist John Jackson Jr. notes, “You are not Black because you are (in essence) Black; you are Black . . . because of how you act—and not just in terms of one field of behavior (say, intellectual achievement in school) but because of how you juggle and combine many differently racialized class(ed) actions (walking, talking, laughing, watching a movie, standing, emoting, partying) in an everyday matrix of performative possibilities” (2001:171, 188). Because racial domination attaches to skin color, a dark-skinned person can never completely escape its clutches simply by acting “not Black.” But that person may choose one saying over another, one kind of clothing over another, one mode of interaction over another, because she believes such an action makes her more or less Black (cf. Johnson 2003). This is why we claim that race and ethnicity are ascribed and achieved, both marked and made. . . .

In some instances, non-Whites may perform ethnicity in order to resist certain racial classifications (as when African migrants teach their children to speak with an accent so they might avoid being identified as African Americans); in other instances, they might, in an opposite way, attempt to cleanse themselves of all ethnic markers (be they linguistic, religious, or cultural in nature) to avoid becoming victims of discrimination or stigmatization. Either way, their efforts may prove futile since those belonging to dominated racial groups have considerably less ethnic agency than those belonging to the dominant—and hence normalized—group.

One reason why race and ethnicity are relatively decoupled for White Americans but bound tightly together for non-White Americans is found in the history of the nation’s immigration policies and practices. Until the late nineteenth century, immigration to America was deregulated and encouraged (with the exception of Chinese exclusion laws); however, at the turn of the century, native-born White Americans, who blamed immigrants for the rise of urban slums, crime, and class conflict, began calling for immigration restrictions. Popular and political support for restrictions swelled and resulted in the development of a strict immigration policy, culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. America’s new immigration law, complete with national quotas and racial restrictions on citizenship, would fundamentally realign the country’s racial taxonomy. “The national origins system classified Europeans as nationalities and assigned quotas in a hierarchy of desirability,” writes historian Mae Ngai in *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. “[B]ut at the same time the law deemed all Europeans to be part of a White race, distinct from those considered to be not [W]hite. Euro-American identities turned both on ethnicity—that is, a nationality-based cultural identity that is defined as capable of transformation and assimilation—and on a racial identity defined by [W]hiteness” (2004:7). Non-Whites, on the other hand, were either denied entry into the United States (as was the case for Asian migrants) or were associated with illegal immigration through harsh border control policies (as was the case for Mexicans). Indeed, the immigration laws of the 1920s applied the newly formed concept of “national origin” only to European nations; those classified as members of the “colored races” were conceived as bereft of a country of origin. The result, Ngai observes, was that “unlike Euro-Americans, whose ethnic and racial

identities became uncoupled during the 1920s, Asians' and Mexicans' ethnic and racial identities remained conjoined" (2004:7–8).

The history of America's immigration policy underscores the intimate conception between race, ethnicity, citizenship, and national origin. Racial categories often are defined and changed by national lawmakers, as citizenship has been extended or retracted depending on one's racial ascription. The U.S. justice system has decided dozens of cases in ways that have solidified certain racial classifications in the law. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, legal cases handed down rulings that officially recognized Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, Filipinos, Koreans, Native Americans, and mixed-race individuals as "not White." In 1897, a Texas federal court ruled that Mexicans were legally "White." And Indian Americans, Syrians, and Arabians have been capriciously classified as both "White" and "not White" (Haney-López 1996). Briefly examining how the legal definitions of White and non-White have changed over the years demonstrates the incredibly unstable and fluid nature of racial categories. It also shows how our legal system helps to construct race. For instance, the "prerequisite cases" that determined people's race in order to determine their eligibility for U.S. citizenship resulted in poisonous symbolic consequences. Deemed worthy of citizenship, White people were understood to be upstanding, law-abiding, moral, and intelligent. Conversely, non-White people, from whom citizenship was withheld, were thought to be base, criminal, untrustworthy, and of lesser intelligence. For most of America's history, courts determined race, and race determined nationality; thus, nationality can only be understood within the context of U.S. racial and ethnic conflict (Loury 2001; Shklar 1991).

## FIVE FALLACIES ABOUT RACISM

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According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2005), there are hundreds of active hate groups across the country. These groups are mostly found in the Southern states—Texas, Georgia, and South Carolina have over forty active groups per state—but California ranks highest in the nation, housing within its borders 53 groups. For some people, hate groups epitomize what the essence of racism amounts to intentional acts of humiliation and hatred. While such acts undoubtedly are racist in nature, they are but the tip of the iceberg. To define racism only through extreme groups and their extreme acts is akin to defining weather only through hurricanes. Hurricanes are certainly a type of weather pattern—a harsh and brutal type—but so too are mild rainfalls, light breezes, and sunny days. Likewise, racism is much broader than violence and epithets. It also comes in much quieter, everyday-ordinary forms (cf. Essed 1991 [1984]).

Americans are deeply divided over the legacies and inner workings of racism, and a large part of this division is due to the fact that many Americans understand racism in limited or misguided ways (Alba et al. 2005). We have identified five fallacies, recurrent in many public debates, fallacies one should avoid when thinking about racism.

1. *Individualistic Fallacy.* Here, racism is assumed to belong to the realm of ideas and prejudices. Racism is only the collection of nasty thoughts that a "racist individual" has about another group. Someone operating with this fallacy thinks of racism as one thinks of a crime and, therefore, divides the world into two types of people: those

guilty of the crime of racism (“racists”) and those innocent of the crime (“non-racists”) (Wacquant 1997). Crucial to this misconceived notion of racism is intentionality. “Did I intentionally act racist? Did I cross the street because I was scared of the Hispanic man walking toward me, or did I cross for no apparent reason?” Upon answering no to the question of intentionality, one assumes one can classify one’s own actions as “nonracist,” despite the character of those actions, and go about his or her business as innocent.

This conception of racism simply will not do, for it fails to account for the racism that is woven into the very fabric of our schools, political institutions, labor markets, and neighborhoods. Conflating racism with prejudice, as Herbert Blumer (1958) pointed out 50 years ago, ignores the more systematic and structural forms of racism; it looks for racism within individuals and not institutions. Labeling someone a “racist” shifts our attention from the social surroundings that enforce racial inequalities and miseries to the individual with biases. It also lets the accuser off the hook—“He is a racist; I am not”—and treats racism as aberrant and strange, whereas American racism is rather normal. Furthermore, intentionality is in no way a prerequisite for racism. Racism is often habitual, unintentional, commonplace, polite, implicit, and well meaning (Brown et al. 2003). Thus, racism is located not only in our intentional thoughts and actions; it also thrives in our unintentional thoughts and habits, as well as in the social institutions in which we all are embedded (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin et al. 2001).

2. *Legalistic Fallacy.* This fallacy conflates *de jure* legal progress with *de facto* racial progress. One who operates under the legalistic fallacy assumes that abolishing racist laws (racism in principle) automatically leads to the abolition of racism writ large (racism in practice). This fallacy will begin to crumble after a few moments of critical reflection. After all, we would not make the same mistake when it comes to other criminalized acts: Laws against theft do not mean that one’s car will never be stolen. By way of tangible illustration, consider *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark case that abolished *de jure* segregation in schools. The ruling did not lead to the abolition of *de facto* segregation: 50 years later, schools are still drastically segregated and drastically unequal (Neckerman 2007; Oaks 2005). In fact, some social scientists have documented a nationwide movement of educational resegregation, which has left today’s schools even more segregated than those of 1954.
3. *Tokenistic Fallacy.* One guilty of the tokenistic fallacy assumes that the presence of people of color in influential positions is evidence of the eradication of racial obstacles. Although it is true that non-Whites have made significant inroads to seats of political and economic power over the course of the last 50 years, a disproportionate number remain disadvantaged in these arenas (Alexander 2006). Exceptions do not prove the rule. We cannot, in good conscience, ignore the millions of African Americans living in poverty and, instead, point to Oprah Winfrey’s millions as evidence for economic equality. Rather, we must explore how Winfrey’s financial success can coexist with the economic deprivation of millions of Black women. We need to explore, in historian



Thomas Holt's words, how the "simultaneous idealization of Colin Powell," or, for that matter, Barack Obama, "and demonization of blacks as a whole ... is replicated in much of our everyday world" (2000:6)....

4. *Ahistorical Fallacy.* This fallacy renders history impotent. Thinking hindered by the ahistorical fallacy makes a bold claim: Most U.S. history—namely, the period of time when this country did not extend basic rights to people of color (let alone classify them as fully human)—is inconsequential today. Legacies of slavery and colonialism, the eradication of millions of Native Americans, forced segregation, clandestine sterilizations and harmful science experiments, mass disenfranchisement, race-based exploitation, racist propaganda distributed by the state caricaturing Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics, racially motivated abuses of all kinds (sexual, murderous, and dehumanizing)—all of this, purport those operating under the ahistorical fallacy, are too far removed to matter to those living in the here-and-now. This idea is so erroneous it is difficult to take seriously. Today's society is directed, constructed, and molded by—indeed grafted onto—the past (Ngai 2004; Winant 2001). And race, as we have already seen, is a historical invention.

A "soft version" of the ahistorical fallacy might admit that events in the "recent past"—such as the time since the Civil Rights Movement or the attacks on September 11—matter while things in the "distant past"—such as slavery or the colonization of Mexico—have little consequence. But this idea is no less fallacious than the "hard version," since many events in America's "distant past"—especially the enslavement and murder of millions of Africans—are the *most* consequential in shaping present-day society. In this vein, consider the question French historian Marc Bloch poses to us: "But who would dare to say that the understanding of the Protestant or Catholic Reformation, several centuries removed, is not far more important for a proper grasp of the world today than a great many other movements of thought or feeling, which are certainly more recent, yet more ephemeral" (1953:41)?

5. *Fixed Fallacy.* Those who assume that racism is fixed—that it is immutable, constant across time and space—partake in the fixed fallacy. Since they take racism to be something that does not develop at all, those who understand racism through the fixed fallacy are often led to ask questions such as: "Has racism increased or decreased in the past decade?" And because practitioners of the fixed fallacy usually take as their standard definition of racism only the most heinous forms—racial violence, for example—they confidently conclude that, indeed, things have gotten better.

It is important and useful to trace the career of American racism, analyzing, for example, how racial attitudes or measures of racial inclusion and exclusion have changed over time, and many social scientists have developed sophisticated techniques for doing so (e.g., Bobo 2001; Schuman et al. 1997). But the question, "Have things gotten better or worse?" is legitimate *only* after we account for the morphing attributes of racism. We cannot quantify racism like we can quantify, say, birthrates. The nature of "birthrate" does not fluctuate over time; thus, it makes sense to ask, "Are there more

or less births now than there were fifty years ago?” without bothering to analyze if and how a birthrate is different today than it was in previous historical moments. American racism, on the other hand, assumes different forms in different historical moments. Although race relations today are informed by those of the past, we cannot hold to the belief that twenty-first-century racism takes on the exact same form as twentieth-century racism. And we certainly cannot conclude that there is “little or no racism” today because it does not resemble the racism of the 1950s (Modern-day Christianity looks very different, in nearly every conceivable way, than the Christianity of the early church. But this does not mean that there is “little or no Christianity” today.) So, before we ask, “Have things gotten better or worse?” we should ponder the essence of racism today, noting how it differs from racism experienced by those living in our parents’ or grandparents’ generation. And we should ask, further, to quote Holt again, “What enables racism to reproduce itself after the historical conditions that initially gave it life have disappeared” (2000:20)?

## RACIAL DOMINATION

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We have spent a significant amount of time talking about what racial domination is not but have yet to spell out what it is. We can delineate two specific manifestations of racial domination: institutional racism and interpersonal racism. *Institutional racism* is systemic White domination of people of color, embedded and operating in corporations, universities, legal systems, political bodies, cultural life, and other social collectives. The word “domination” reminds us that institutional racism is a type of power that encompasses the *symbolic power* to classify one group of people as “normal” and other groups of people as “abnormal”; the *political power* to withhold basic rights from people of color and marshal the full power of the state to enforce segregation and inequality; the *social power* to deny people of color full inclusion or membership in associational life; and the *economic power* that privileges Whites in terms of job placement, advancement, wealth, and property accumulation.

Informed by centuries of racial domination, institutional racism withholds from people of color opportunities, privileges, and rights that many Whites enjoy. Social scientists have amassed a significant amount of evidence documenting institutional racism, evidence that demonstrates how White people—strictly because of their Whiteness—reap considerable advantages when buying and selling a house, choosing a neighborhood in which to live, getting a job and moving up the corporate ladder, securing a first-class education, and seeking medical care (Massey 2007; Quillian 2006). That Whites accumulate more property and earn more income than members of minority populations, possess immeasurably more political power, and enjoy greater access to the country’s cultural, social, medical, legal, and economic resources are well-documented facts (e.g., Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Western 2006). While Whites have accumulated many opportunities due to racial domination, people of color have suffered disaccumulation (Brown et al. 2003). Thus, if we talk about “Hispanic poverty,” then we must also talk about White affluence; if we speak of “Black unemployment,” then we must also keep in

mind White employment; and if we ponder public policies for people of color, then we must also critically examine the public policies that directly benefit White people.

Below the level of institutions—yet directly informed by their workings—we find *interpersonal racism*. This is racial domination manifest in everyday interactions and practices. Interpersonal racism can be overt; however, most of the time, interpersonal racism is quite covert: it is found in the habitual, commonsensical, and ordinary practices of our lives. Our racist attitudes, as Lillian Smith remarked in *Killers of the Dream*, easily “slip from the conscious mind deep into the muscles” (1994 [1949]:96). Since we are disposed to a world structured by racial domination, we develop racialized dispositions—some conscious, many more unconscious and somatic—that guide our thoughts and behaviors. We may talk slowly to an Asian woman at the farmer’s market, unconsciously assuming that she speaks poor English; we may inform a Hispanic man at a corporate party that someone has spilled their punch, unconsciously assuming that he is a janitor; we may ask to change seats if an Arab American man sits next to us on an airplane. Miniature actions such as these have little to do with one’s intentional thoughts; they are orchestrated by one’s practical sense, one’s habitual knowhow, and informed by institutional racism. . . .

### Intersecting Modes of Domination

Racial domination does not operate inside a vacuum, cordoned off from other modes of domination. On the contrary, it *intersects* with other forms of domination—those based on gender, class, sexuality, religion, nationhood, ability, and so forth. The notion that there is a monolithic “Arab American experience,” “Asian American experience,” or “White experience”—experiences somehow detached from other pieces of one’s identity—is nothing but a chimera. Researchers have labeled such a notion “racial essentialism,” for such a way of thinking boils down vastly different human experiences into a single “master category”: race (Harris 2000). When we fail to account for these different experiences, we create silences in our narratives of the social world and fail to explain how overlapping systems of advantage and disadvantage affect individuals’ opportunity structures, lifestyles, and social hardships. The idea of intersectionality implies that we cannot understand the lives of poor White single mothers or gay Black men by examining only one dimension of their lives—class, gender, race, or sexuality. Indeed, we must explore their lives in their full complexity, examining how these various dimensions come together and structure their existence. When we speak of racial domination, then, we must always bear in mind the ways in which it interacts with masculine domination (or sexism), heterosexual domination (or homophobia), class domination (poverty), religious persecution, disadvantages brought on by disabilities, and so forth (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1990).

In addition, we should not assume that one kind of oppression is more important than another or that being advantaged in one dimension of life somehow cancels out other dimensions that often result in disadvantage. While it is true that poor Whites experience many of the same hardships as poor Blacks, it is not true that poverty somehow de-Whitens poor Whites. In other words, though they are in a similarly precarious economic position as poor Blacks, poor Whites still experience race-based privileges, while poor Blacks are oppressed not only by poverty, but also by racism. In a similar vein, well-off people of color cannot “buy” their way out of racism. Despite their economic privilege, middle- and upper-class non-Whites experience

institutional and interpersonal racism on a regular basis (Feagin 1991). But how, exactly, should we conceptualize these intersecting modes of domination? Many scholars have grappled with this question (e.g., Walby 2007; Yuval-Davis 2006), and we do so here, if only in the most provisional way.

The notion of intersectionality is perhaps as old as the social problems of racial, masculine, and class domination, but in recent memory it was popularized by activists who criticized the feminist and civil rights movements for ignoring the unique struggles of women of color. The term itself is credited to critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who imagined society as divided every which way by multiple forms of inequality. For Crenshaw, society resembled an intricate system of crisscrossing roads—each one representing a different social identity (e.g., race, gender, class, religion, age); one's unique social position (or structural location) could be identified by listing all the attributes of one's social identity and pinpointing the nexus (or intersection) at which all those attributes coalesced. This conception of intersectionality has been the dominant one for many years, leading scholars to understand overlapping modes of oppression as a kind of “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000)....

We believe a more analytically sophisticated and politically useful rendering of intertwined oppressions is Myra Marx Ferree's model of “interactive intersectionality” (cf. Prins 2006; Walby 2007). In this version, overlapping social identities are best understood, not as a collection of “points of intersection,” but as a “figuration” (as Elias would have it) or “field” (as Bourdieu would) of shifting, deeply dimensioned, and “mutually constituted *relationships*.” This means ‘intersection of gender and race’ is not any number of specific *locations* occupied by individuals or groups (such as Black women) but a *process* through which ‘race’ takes on multiple ‘gendered’ meanings for particular women and men.... In such a complex system, gender is not a dimension limited to the organization of reproduction or family, class is not a dimension equated with the economy, and race is not a category reduced to the primacy of ethnicities, nations, and borders, but all of the processes that systematically organize families, economies, and nations, are co-constructed along with the meanings of gender, race, and class that are presented in and reinforced by these institutions separately and together” (Ferree 2009:85).

The best metaphor for intersecting modes of oppression, therefore, may not be that of crisscrossing roads, but of a web or field of relations within which struggles over opportunities, power, and privileges take place (cf. Bourdieu 1996 [1992]; Emirbayer 1997). The implication of this new theoretical development is that if we focus strictly on race and ignore other sources of social inequality (such as class and gender), not only will we be deaf to the unique experiences of certain members of society—their voices drowned out by our violent and homogenizing categorization—but we will also (and always) fundamentally misunderstand our object of analysis: race itself. Intersectional analysis of the type that breaks with old modes of thinking (e.g., society as a “matrix of domination”) and adopts a thoroughly relational perspective on multiple modes of oppression (e.g., “interactive intersectionality”) is not an option but a *prerequisite* for fully understanding the nature of racial identity and racial domination.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Desmond and Emirbayer's definition of race as a social construct. What is the authors' argument about race as a "symbolic category" based on phenotype and ancestry?
2. Discuss the ways in which racial classifications have shifted in the United States depending upon social, economic, political, and cultural conditions at different points in our history. Use the examples in this reading and from any others.

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