Public Space, Public Policy, and Public Understanding of Race and Ethnicity in America
TERESA A. BOOKER, EDITOR

Public Space, Public Policy, and Public Understanding of Race and Ethnicity in America

An Interdisciplinary Approach

The University of Akron Press
Akron, Ohio

Buy this book.
Public Space, Public Policy, and Public Understanding of Race and Ethnicity in America was designed and typeset by Amy Freels, with assistance from Tyler Krusinski. The typeface is Minion with Helvetica Neue display. It is printed on sixty-pound natural, and bound by Bookmasters of Ashland, Ohio.


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have materialized without the support and guidance of family, friends, and colleagues. Special thanks to Thomas Bacher, who provided a home for this work at the University of Akron Press, and for his instrumental comments and feedback on the introduction. Thank you to all of the authors in this collection for their constant commitment, enthusiasm, and reassurance as this project spanned across years. Thank you to Carol Slatter, Amy Freels, and staff for their patience and invaluable attention to detail.

Buy this book.
Contents

Introduction

Part 1  Case Studies
1  The Myth of Post-Racialism: Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Stories about Race and Racism in the United States
    Babacar M’Baye 3
2  A Mexicana on Wheels: One Woman’s Account of Moving About in Los Angeles
    Marisabel Almer 16
3  Getting a Ride with Ronny, Tom, and David: Coming of Age Onboard the Rapid Transit District Buses in Los Angeles in the 1980s
    Marisabel Almer 36
4  The Hasidim of North Brooklyn
    Sam Beck 51
5  A White Man in the Colored Bronx
    Ivan Greenberg 77

Part 2  Representing and Imagining Race: Language, Music, and Community
6  Individual Representations of Bicultural Nature Exiled in Urban Communities
    Graciela Pérez Boruszko 93
7  Language Ideologies and Racial Formation in Latino Orlando
    Simone Pierre Delerme 105
8  A Tale of Two Cities: Go-Go and Punk Music as Representation of Race and Washington, DC
    Shayna Maskell 121
9  Blues without Black People:  
    Notes on New Orleans, Ethnic Cleansing, and  
    the White Imagination  
    Joshua Price  

Part 3  Physical and Mental Well-Being  
10  Shopping Daze:  
    Urban Supermarkets and Perinatal Health  
    Adwoa K. Boahene and Donald A. Cibula  
11  You Can’t Survive If You Don’t Eat Meat:  
    Food in the Asian Indian Diaspora  
    M. Gail Hickey  
12  Community-Based Role Models:  
    Ongoing Stories of Minority Male Mentoring  
    Stephen T. Powers  

Part 4  Housing and Space  
13  Puerto Rican Community Gardens and  
    Casitas of New York City  
    Jean Martin Caldieron, Ramon Sacristan, and  
    Mate Thitisawat  
14  Healthcare Policy and Housing “Choice” Among  
    Low-Income HIV Positive African American  
    Women in Urban North Carolina  
    Alyson J. O’Daniel  
15  Now It’s More Diverse, But It’s Still Ghetto:  
    Youth Discourses on Racial Diversity, Poverty,  
    and the Dislocating “Ghetto”  
    Kenzo K. Sung  
16  You Can’t Go Home…Again:  
    Confinement, Displacement, and the Legacy of Public  
    Housing in the Lives of Low-Income Black Americans  
    John N. Robinson III
Part 5  Politics and Activism

17  “Sangam Means Sacred Confluence”: Gender, Geography, and Generation in a US Asian Indian Association
    
    M. Gail Hickey  279

    
    Kenya Davis-Hayes  308

19  The Political Context for Understanding the Existence of the TRIO Program Upward Bound
    
    Teresa A. Booker  318

Part 6  Law and Justice

20  All the Tigers in the World: Race and Rehabilitation in an American Prison
    
    Robert L. Clark and Ying Yang  339

21  “Officially Murdered!”: Police Brutality, Internal Colonialism, and Black Liberation in 1930s Detroit
    
    Kenneth Jolly  353

Contributors  379
Introduction

In late 2014, Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the Justice Department’s civil rights investigation of Cleveland’s police department found that it engaged in a “pattern or practice” of unreasonable and unnecessary use of force. The report was released just weeks after black twelve-year-old Tamir Rice—brandishing what turned out to be a pellet gun—was shot down by a white police officer. The external review of the Cleveland police force was requested by the city after a 2012 incident during which police fired 137 shots into a car occupied by two unarmed black civilians following a high-speed chase. Other recent incidents of discrimination against blacks have heightened national awareness of how race impacts law enforcement decisions.

This book explores race in an urban context, and the public policies and public understanding that result from the interactions of communities that are part of densely populated areas. While some parts of urban landscapes are becoming chic again, much of the most desolate urban communities are a result of the suburbanization of large groups of whites and blacks over decades. Preconceived notions of inner city living, accurate or not, have impacted the rhetoric on race in America.

Discussions of race in the United States are complicated, to say the least. The legacy of racial interactions is as old as the founding of the country. Christopher Columbus, a white European, called the darker-skinned inhabitants “Indians.” That identification and subsequent char-
acteristics associated with the group, as the republic grew, would lead to forced marches and land seizures in the name of progress. Slavery, the subjugation of a race, led to the socially acceptable representation of the “other,” and the labeling of a whole group as inferior, dim-witted, immoral, soulless, or sub-human. Over time, the “other” has included Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and “white trash.” In the words of Cornel West, “race matters” in everything we consider “American.”

While prejudice is a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience, discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people. Racism, on the other hand, “is a system (consisting of structures, policies, practices, and norms) that structures opportunity and assigns value based on phenotype, or the way people look” (Jones 2002, 9). According to Aguilar-Pariente (2009), racial markers like skin color, build, height, and facial features are useful when differentiating between racial groups. The white officers who responded to a call about a person wielding a gun in a Cleveland park might have formed opinions about Tamir Rice because he was black and was large for his age. Michael Brown might have assessed a store clerk’s phenotype and decided that stealing cigars from his store posed no risk. On the other hand, when Brown was later shot, Officer Wilson felt threatened by Brown’s “hulk-like” presence.

Once short- and long-term perceptions concerning race surface, social, political, and governmental players and groups respond in predictable ways. White officers are accused of overreacting. Blacks are not completely surprised by the use of deadly police force. Protests follow to highlight institutional racism at the local level and tap into a national anger regarding similar prejudices against specific groups concerning other ills, like lack of jobs and inadequate housing (Grey 2011; Wilson 2005). This escalation, according to Mauer, can be partially explained by the fact that there has been a pervasive belief in America since the slave era that blacks are more likely to commit crimes. As late as the 1980s, popular culture and the media tended to reinforce the notion of the black “petty thief” before amplifying the stereotype to include “ominous, criminal predator” (McEntire 2007). Also, since minorities only make up 25 percent of police forces across the United States, the line between legitimate stops, searches, and arrests can easily be blurred by the lens of white
privilege, the protection that race provides amidst the “disadvantages Blacks and other historically oppressed groups routinely experience” (Banaszynski 2000, i; Grey 2011). In short, if whites carry an “invisible, weightless backpack of [unearned] special provisions” based on skin color (McIntosh 1998), then the “other” races are burdened with a visible and weighty steamer trunk of baggage (Hughes 1994).

Racial profiling exacerbates tensions between citizens and law enforcement officials, muddling the social landscape. Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 required “a reasonable attempt to be made to determine the immigration status of a person during any legitimate contact made by an official or agency of the state or a county, city, town or political sub-division if reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the U.S.” Proponents of the law called the passage historic. Opponents said the law was aimed at a specific population and was discriminatory. Discrimination is illegal, but the perception race plays in enforcing laws is deep-rooted. Still, many individuals argue that racial discrimination hasn’t been a problem since the 1950s (Grey 2011). In fact, in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that some provisions in the Voting Rights Act that dealt with racial discrimination in certain states could be rescinded because, according to Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., “our country has changed.” Those who believe racism is overused contend that minorities’ current economic situations have to do more with group inferiorities. The same “racists,” however, disregard the role that “good ol’ boy” networks play in the perpetuation of the status quo (Croll 2008). While bemoaning affirmative action results, the same individuals have no problem allowing “legacies” to be afforded preferential treatment in the college admissions process.

Post-Ferguson reactions and protests illustrated how race is not only a black and white issue. People who took to the streets to protest the overuse of force in Missouri included blacks, whites, Asians, Hispanics, Muslims, and Native Americans. Whites are sometimes accused of bulk racism, which lead them to spend “an inordinate amount of time [assuring] themselves and others that they are not racist” (Grey 2011, 12). Even model minorities like Asian Americans face stereotypes that seem positive—hard-working, and intelligent—but are held up as negative at the same time—insular, and secretive (Ho 1997).
This volume adds to the discussion of race and urban communities by looking at the situation across many disciplines, including anthropology, education, history, linguistics, medicine, sociology, and political science. The approach can be compared to the parable of the blind men and the elephant. When each man came into contact with a different part of the elephant, his interpretation of the animal provided only a part of the whole picture. However, when taken together, a clearer description of the elephant surfaced. Likewise, a much richer description of race in urban communities will be provided by using several research methods including ethnographies, historical approaches, archival research, content analysis, GIS research, and comparative analysis. For example, since skin color is one of the first traits that individuals use to identify a group, a sociologist might focus on minorities as the “other,” while a cultural anthropologist might see the “other” as a white person living in a mostly Latino or black neighborhood.

This book is divided into six parts:

- Coloring the Racial Landscape: A Series of Case Studies
- Representing and Imagining Race: Language, Music, and Community
- Physical and Mental Well-Being
- Housing and Space
- Politics and Activism
- Law and Justice

Part one paints a picture of what it is like to be a gendered, economic, racial, and/or religious minority. When the strength gained from a strong association to community, creed, color, or birth disappears, even the most unbiased person can feel like a fish out of water. In other words, the concept of “American” might not hold as strongly as a more prevalent community-based identification.

Part two deals with the concept of “isolation” to underscore how an individual might physically reside in one place for much, if not all, of her or his life without ever belonging. Other determinants—an individual’s outlook on his or her community, informal conversations and interactions, music, or different perceptions—impact identity. Space and place play a role in the feelings of community, but other characteristics might
make an area less homogeneous and not as easily identifiable as black, white, or Latino.

Part three continues the discussion of life in an urban community by examining the physical and mental challenges for individuals who live there. Much of the content revolves around how food impacts cultural, regional, and religious influences on racial identity. Residents of inner-city areas might not always have access to fresh food, which plays a large role in eating habits and health issues. Since poverty is a prevalent issue in these communities, the practice of how the area feeds indigent individuals highlights the concept of race. A final chapter deals how Ethiopian, African American, Dominican, and other community populations who faced strong deterrents to success overcame them and how they viewed other community members.

Part four takes the reader inside the living environments of low-income and immigrant neighborhoods. Explorations into the roles of public housing, community gardens, and residential options for individuals infected with HIV/AIDS are covered from a street-level view. How political decisions that fostered urban renewal efforts and caused changes in public service options initially impacted communities and how some areas choose to deal with those on a longer-term basis is discussed. This part also looks at the term “ghetto” in a particular community and how individuals and groups construct and re-construct the term.

Part five discusses what happens when members of the “other” decide to address issues that concern them despite being minority members of the overall urban community. These actions represent a microcosm of life whether they are attempts to help assimilate their compatriots, resist efforts to marginalize them, promote (or shun) programs established to help them, or reach beyond ordinary expectations to surpass their ancestors’ achievements. Many community associations play a vital role in these activities. Further, how do community racial minorities deal with the fact that they are not part of the racial majority?

Part six cuts to the heart of the discussion of what transpires when the “other” is mistreated by law enforcement agencies. In these instances, the community is not a safe place where one can enter and leave at will, but becomes a place of racial incarceration. How can the community respond to these actions other than in ways that reinforce typical stereotypes?
Introduction

As a whole, this volume does not try to be the authority on race in urban communities. However, the authors draw a very broad picture of parts which are not often covered about people, places, and problems associated with race, especially in very confined areas. The breadth of disciplines covered obviously opens up paths that are in need of even further investigation. Race is a topic that continually impacts American culture. This volume adds to that discussion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Part 1
Case Studies
Chapter 1

The Myth of Post-Racialism

Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Stories about Race and Racism in the United States

Babacar M'Baye, Kent State University

INTRODUCTION

Race must be foregrounded in the study of American public discourses which tend to substitute a concrete and radical civil rights agenda with notions of meritocracy and a post-racial equal playing field. The foregrounding of race shows the myth of post-racialism to be a fallacy based on hegemonic stories that minimize the effects of racism on African Americans. By contrast, counterhegemonic stories, or counter-stories, seek to emphasize and make visible the consequences of racism. While hegemonic stories ignore racial inequalities in the United States by shifting the responsibility for poverty onto African Americans themselves, counterstories reveal the structural disadvantages faced by blacks and work to challenge post-racial myths. My analysis of various hegemonic and counterhegemonic stories suggests the complexities of narratives that either elide or make visible the institutional and structural factors which explain the persistence of racism in the United States.
HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING

Hegemonic narratives are discourses that dominant groups create in order to romanticize America as a post-racial society in which everyone is becoming equal while ignoring the systemic and structural racism and inequalities that prevent subjugated groups from gaining power in the nation. Hegemonic narratives permeate books, news, tabloids, music, and other media by creating a virtual reality that Delgado describes as a set of “archetypes” or “well-told stories” that “ring true in light of the hearer’s stock of preexisting stories” (2000). Hegemonic stories are powerful tools of indoctrination because they dictate popular views about race. Williams states: “In order to permeate and shape our perceptions and responses to race, these narratives must conform to and reproduce the dominant cultural ideology” (2004). Counterstorytelling opposes hegemonic storytelling by subverting conservative assumptions that romanticize the “American dream” as able to provide upward mobility, should an individual work hard enough, whilst ignoring the precarious socioeconomic status of blacks in the United States. Counterstorytelling is apparent in Delgado’s critique of the inherent prejudices of American legal scholarship against African Americans (1995). Delgado gives the example of civil rights laws about which the majority of white scholars “hold that any inequality between blacks and whites is due either to cultural lag or inadequate enforcement” of existing civil rights laws, overlooking “the prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom” (2000).

COUNTERSTORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE AGAINST HEGEMONIC STORYTELLING

Counterstorytelling refers to the narratives that oppressed groups use to resist the discourses that hegemonic groups use to dominate them. In this vein, Delgado (2000) uses narratives that challenge conventional perceptions of race and racism, as is apparent in his concept of “counterstorytelling” which provides a framework for representing the continuing effects of racism on African Americans and for challenging the biases of academic disciplines dominated by Eurocentric thinking. In his essay, “Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea
for Narrative,” Delgado defines counterstorytelling as the curative process by which a subjugated group tells stories that resist the narratives that a dominant group tells themselves and others in order to establish a “shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (2000). Counterstorytelling is a curative process since it “can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” and, thus, “show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion” (2000). Delgado’s counterstorytelling helps us to challenge the facile dismissal of race and racism in hegemonic discourses as a “finished business.” Applying Delgado’s counterstorytelling a decade later, Williams denounces how American universities and colleges “reproduce the dominant cultural ideology” by restricting Black History Month to a mere celebration of the achievements of individuals such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Jackie Robinson (2004). Williams (2004) argues, “When we have our conversations about race in the context of such narratives of individualism and race as ‘other,’ we reinforce a worldview that does not address the systemic and cultural constructions of race.” Developing similar counterstories, my chapter critiques the easy dismissal of race in legal, political, and academic hegemonic stories from the 1940s to the present which ignore the ongoing impact of racism on African Americans.

HEGEMONIC STORIES OF COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND POST-RACIALISM

Another dominant hegemonic story is the representation of racism as a problem that has either been resolved or difficult to prove. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva acknowledges the prevalence of this hegemonic narrative in the United States when he argues that color-blind racism has a “slipperiness” because it blames the victim (blacks) “in a very indirect way” through the “now you see it, now you don’t” rhetorical style “that matches the character of the new racism” (2010). Color-blind racism is insidious since, as Bonilla-Silva suggests, it ignores “the effects of past and contemporary discrimination on the social, economic, and educational status of minorities” by “supporting equal opportunity for everyone without a concern for the savage inequalities between blacks and whites” (2010). William J. Bennett (1992), a former US secretary of education, reproduces this narrative when he argues that America has already gotten “angry
about racism and decided [that] it was wrong, [and] the country didn’t wait to eliminate the ‘root causes’ before going after it aggressively, in law and through social stigma.” Bennett’s argument assumes that racism is over and that it must be stricken from the American English vocabulary since it leads blacks to develop separatist notions of race that undermine American individuality. Bennett writes: “Along with abortion, race has become the most divisive issue in contemporary American politics. The great body of the American people believe in individual rights, not group rights, not rights conferred by sex, race, and religion.” Bennett’s rationale for individual rights comes from the hegemonic narrative of color-blind racism which allows whites to remove race from the factors that impede the social and economic mobility of blacks. In doing so, whites disoblige the government, states, and courts of the United States from any responsibility for the socioeconomic conditions of African Americans by “blaming them [African Americans] for their own misfortune” (Cohen 2010). This strategy of blame is deceptive because it frames racism in such a way that blacks appear as the people who perpetuate the problem, thus making the conversation revolve only around blacks as opposed to whites who contribute to inequalities without having to acknowledge and resolve them.

A parallel of color-blind racism is the hegemonic story of post-racialism which represents the Unites States as a post-racial society in which blacks and whites are treated as equals. This hegemonic narrative stems from an ideology, espoused by both Democratic and Republican leaders, which argues that race equality has been achieved in the United States. Post-racialism has become popular in the American media since the moments preceding the inauguration of President Barack Obama. A few hours before Obama was announced the winner of the 2008 presidential election, Anderson Cooper, a reporter for CNN (Cable News Network), asked a panel of commentators including Bill Bennett the meaning of the election “in terms of change of race relations in the United States.” Bennett replied, “Well, I’ll tell you one thing it means…. You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘The deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that’” (CNN 2009). Bennett’s comment suggests that African Americans can no longer complain about racial inequalities in the United States when there is a black presi-
dent. His statement is emblematic of the hegemonic narrative of the first decade in this century that portrays America as a post-racial nation in which all the promises of black civil rights struggles have been fulfilled.

Post-racialism also emphasizes the importance of individuality as opposed to group identity. Lawrence Auster (2008) writes: “Presumably a post-racial, beyond-race America will be one in which no one thinks about race any more, an America in which we all just see each other as individuals.” According to Auster, post-racial America also reinforces “the notion that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency will inaugurate a ‘post-racial’ America, an America that has gone ‘beyond race.’” Post-racialism is an admirable goal because it imagines a world in which blacks and whites in the United States live without racial division. As Patricia Zengerle (2010) suggests, post-racialism envisions the United States as a country in which “division and tension between black and white Americans” have disappeared. Despite such noble intentions, post-racialism constitutes more of a rushed idealism than what Zengerle calls “a thorough thinking through” which would reveal the persistence of race in the United States. As Zengerle suggests, post-racialism avoids the fact that “Racial conflict is America’s deepest wound.”

COUNTERHEGEMONIC STORIES OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Counterhegemonic narratives oppose hegemonic stories of the United States as a post-racial society in which blacks and whites are treated as equals in the absence of race. In an interview with Amy Goodman (2008), Glen Ford argued that during the 2008 presidential campaign some Democrats tended to represent African Americans as people who had “already come 90% of the way on the road to equality” and simply needed to go 10% of the rest of the way by voting for Obama. Ford (2008) rejects this narrative by arguing,

No indexes show blacks 90% of the way towards equality in any area of life. We’ve never made 65% more in income than white people. Black median household wealth is one-tenth white median household wealth…. In fact, we can't find 90% figures relevant, outside of NBA teams and prison. But no white man, no white Democrat who said that would avoid being excoriated by the entire spectrum of black political opinion.
Similarly, in his counterhegemonic story, Tim Wise (2009) opposes the narrative of post-racialism because it contradicts the grim realities of the majority of people of color in America. Wise explains: “For while the individual success of persons of color, as with Obama, is meaningful (and at this level was unthinkable merely a generation ago), the larger systemic and institutional realities of life in America suggest the ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malady—racism—which has been neither eradicated nor even substantially diminished by Obama’s victory.” Abby L. Ferber (2009) develops a comparable counterhegemonic criticism when she writes:

Even in the face of legal and political gains, there is no evidence to suggest that the racial economic divide is decreasing. And the reality is that during economic downturns, minority communities suffer first and worst. Economic gains made by people of color are generally only very recent gains, and thus most tenuous and vulnerable. They are much less likely to have inherited wealth from previous generations to soften the blow during a crisis.

The drastic conditions of African Americans are apparent in The Future of the Race (coauthored with Cornel West) (1996) in which Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes his experiences with racism. In his counter-story, Gates describes his humble socioeconomic background in a small town in Piedmont, West Virginia, where he was born on September 16, 1950, and how his father “worked two jobs—loading trucks at a paper mill, plus a night shift as a janitor for the phone company—to keep” his family “well fed and well clothed.” Gates describes the drastic poverty of black families in the 1950s and ’60s when “only 3 percent of blacks had a college degree. And more than half of blacks fell below the poverty line.” Gates notes, “In the year I graduated from high school, almost half of black households took in less than fifteen thousand dollars.” Gates observes a similar predicament among many African American families in 1993, when the median net worth of blacks was “zero” while those of whites was “ten thousand dollars.” To these bleak statistics, Gates adds, “In 1993, 2.3 million black men were sent to jail or prison while 23,000 received college diploma—a ratio of a hundred to one.” Ironically, Gates experienced racism on July 16, 2009, when Cambridge police officer James Crowley arrested him on the front porch of his own home and sent...
him to jail after he allegedly refused to step outside when he was asked to do so. Gates’ arrest is not an isolated incident because it is part of the structural racism that routinely subjects blacks to racial profiling in the United States.

In his book, *Driving While Black: What to Do if You Are a Victim of Racial Profiling*, Kenneth Meeks (2000) describes “a classic example of racial profiling,” which is “the tactic of stopping someone only because of the color of his or her skin and a fleeting suspicion that the person is engaging in criminal behavior. It’s generally targeted more toward young black American men and women than any other racial group.” Gates’ arrest is an example of racial profiling because police were reportedly told by a white female caller that two black men had broken into a home. In the wake of instant fury and accusations of racial profiling from prominent African American civil rights activists such as Al Sharpton and Tom Joyner, the Cambridge police dismissed their charge of disorderly conduct. Although he received an apology from the Mayor of Cambridge (E. Denise Simmons), Gates did not obtain a public request for forgiveness from James Crowley (Bloom 2009). In an interview about the incident, Gates said: “There are one million black men in jail in this country and last Thursday I was one of them. This is outrageous and this is how poor black men across the country are treated every day in the criminal justice system. It’s one thing to write about it, but altogether another to experience it” (Pilkington 2009).

Gates’ counterstory reveals how even a renowned African American scholar whose work emphasizes racial tolerance and multiculturalism is vulnerable to racial bigotry. Gates’ counterstory shows that America is not a post-racial society, a fact that President Obama acknowledged near the end of a press conference of July 22, 2009, in which he said that the “Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody [Gates] when there was already proof that they were in their own home.” As Nicholas Graham (2009) points out, Obama noted that racial profiling has “a long history in this country” though “he stepped lightly regarding any role race may have played in the situation.” Obama did acknowledge that blacks and Hispanics are frequent victims of racial profiling, though, as Andrew Mytelka (2009) argues, he also emphasized the “incredible progress that has been made” in race relations in the United States and cited
himself as “testimony to the progress.” Obama later invited both Gates and Crowley to a “beer summit” at the White House where the two people shook hands and had a cordial conversation.

The Gates incident reveals there are limitations in the ways structural racism can be discussed in media and political discourse at the highest level. This incident shows that post-racialism is a myth akin to wishful thinking that does not address the structural inequalities upon which blacks and whites in the United States have historically been taught to live with one another. Such systemic barriers need to be dismantled before the idealism of post-racialism, which is apparent in Obama’s desire to get beyond race, could be achieved.

COUNTERHEGEMONIC STORIES OF PRISON INJUSTICE

The continuing significance of race in the United States is apparent in counterhegemonic stories that reflect the effects of historically racist policies on the lives of African Americans. This racism is apparent in the disproportionate imprisonment of blacks at an unprecedented rate; which is also comparable to the incarceration of Hispanics in the United States and non-white minorities in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. According to a study entitled, “America, the so-called ‘land of the free,’ has more people in prison than any other country” (2015), at the end of 2002, “Black inmates represented an estimated 45% of all inmates with sentences of more than 1 year, while white inmates accounted for 34% and Hispanic inmates 18. . . . As of December 31, 2002, black males from 20 to 39 years old accounted for about a third of all sentenced prison inmates under state or federal jurisdiction. On that date 10.4 percent of the country’s black male population between the ages of twenty-five to twenty-nine was in prison, compared to 2.4 percent of Hispanic males and 1.2 percent of white males in the same age group.” In the same vein, the US Bureau of Justice Statistics states, “At midyear 2008, there were 4,777 black male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents being held in state or federal prison and local jails, compared to 1,760 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents and 727 white male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents.”

According to another report entitled “People of Color and the Prison Industrial Complex,” (2016) recent statistics show that African Americans represent “15% of US drug users (72% of all users are white), 36.8%
of those arrested for a drug-related crime, 48.2% of American adults in state, and federal prisons and local jails and 42.5% of prisoners under sentence of death.” The report goes on to note that “The United States imprisons African American men at a rate four times greater than the rate of incarceration for black men in South Africa.” Discussing a similar issue, Jeffrey Reiman (1998) quotes Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun’s statement that “Even under the most sophisticated death penalty statutes, race continues to play a major role in determining who shall live and who shall die.” In the same essay, Reiman argues, “a society that reserves the death penalty for the killers of whites but not of blacks treats blacks as of less worth than whites.”

Furthermore, as Floyd D. Weatherspoon (1998) points out, “The number of African Americans under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system is almost too startling to state.” Weatherspoon goes on to say: “The U.S. Justice department reported in 1989 that more than a million African Americans were then either on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole. Other reports which focus specifically on urban cities find that black males fare even worse. For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, 56% of the black males between 18 and 35 are under the supervision of the criminal justice system.” In a similar vein, Paul Street (2003) writes: “At the millennium’s turn, blacks are 12.3 percent of the US population, but they comprise fully half of the roughly 2 million Americans currently behind bars…. And according to a chilling statistical model used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, a young Black man aged 16 in 1996 faces a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life.” Weatherspoon also gives the following data with 1989 demographic characteristics of US jail inmates: “46% white males, 43% black males, 5.0% white females, 4.0% black females, 2.0% other.” These statistics reveal that the incarceration of black men is much higher than that of white men. Black men make up a small proportion of the population as a whole while their prison population is roughly the same as that of white men. Moreover, as is apparent in statistics from a report entitled “Prisoners in 2009” (2010), blacks were the most sentenced group of prisoners in the United States between 2000 and 2009 under state or federal jurisdiction and across race and sex.

These alarming statistics show that a racialized form of imprisonment has been destroying the core of the black community in the United
States since the end of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s, when subtle forms of segregation replaced those of preceding decades in many urban black communities. They suggest that incarceration has taken over from official segregation policies.

OTHER COUNTERSTORIES OF INEQUALITIES

In a similar vein, statistics about other aspects of the lives of African Americans are staggering. For instance, according to a report of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention entitled “HIV/AIDS and African Americans” (2008), blacks make up approximately 13% of the US population. However, in 2005, blacks accounted for 18,121 (49%) of the estimated 37,331 new HIV/AIDS diagnoses in the United States in the 33 states with long-term, confidential name-based HIV reporting.” Furthermore, according to a Violence Policy Center report entitled “Black Homicide Victimization in the United States” (2008), for black teens and young adults in the age groups 15 to 19, 20 to 24, and 25 to 34, homicide is the leading cause of death. Finally, according to a 2009 study by Sarah Fass and Nancy K. Cauthen, “34% of black children live in poor families. In the 10 most populated states, rates of child poverty among black children range from 28% in California to 48% in Ohio” (Fass and Cauthen 2008).

Equally grim conditions of blacks in the United States are found in Tavis Smiley’s The Covenant with Black America, a report on a 2006 African American convention on the primary concerns of blacks in the United States. In the book, David M. Satcher argues that “African Americans receive a lower quality of care in many areas in cardiovascular care, diabetes, surgery care, and the early diagnosis of cancer, to mention a few” (2006). The study traces these structural problems to the small number of African American physicians in the United States (only ten percent), the propensity of African Americans and Hispanics to be more exposed to hazardous toxic substances, low income of blacks, and the existence of a “culture of medicine [that] is predominantly white European,” and which does not accommodate the specific needs of black patients. Hence, black Americans face significant disadvantages beyond the control of individual choice that affects inequality and which the post-racial myth obscures with its focus on individual responsibility, culture of poverty, dysfunction, and other hegemonic metaphors. In
CNN’s Black in America (2008) series, Soledad O’Brien states, “Poor neighborhoods, poor choices, simply finding, let alone affording healthy food is a constant challenge in many black communities.”

CONCLUSION

Hegemonic discourses delay equality and justice for African Americans who are depicted as living in culturally deficient communities. These discourses underpin dominant race narratives in America which neglect the structural causes and manifestations of economic inequalities between blacks and whites in the United States and develop ideologies of a post-racial American society that is more myth than reality. Hegemonic stories are subtle and condescending narratives since they attempt to do away with race and the inequalities between blacks and whites in the United States while claiming that African Americans nurture a culture of poverty, separatism, and victimology. Such narratives ignore the persistence of racial oppression in the political, economic, and social lives of African Americans. Instead of shifting responsibility for racial inequality onto African Americans themselves, hegemonic narratives should look to the institutional and structural perpetuation of racism. Hegemonic stories fail to recognize the lived realities of racism and its effects on Americans where race is an identity shaped by economic and human relations rather than human genetics only. It is imperative, as counterhegemonic stories do, to critically interrogate race as a discursive form of power rather than something tied to bodies only.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


