

CLASS AND RACE IN AMERICA:
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Many Americans aren't comfortable acknowledging that class distinctions or racism exist in our country. After all, wouldn't it be nice to believe – as our forefathers wrote in the Constitution – that all men are created equal? That if we just work hard enough, we can “get ahead” and live the American Dream of success? That if economic or racial inequality and discrimination once existed, the playing field is even now? Or, maybe it's just easier to believe it's so. Otherwise, if we start looking too hard at what's really happening in America today, we might see that everyone isn't treated so equally after all – and if we don't start out as equal and may never be considered equal no matter what we achieve, then exactly what does that mean to our personal or national beliefs and identities?

Even if we can convince ourselves that these issues have nothing to do with us personally – we aren't prejudiced, or we've worked hard to get where we are – they do affect us. Class distinctions and institutionalized racism are a fact of everyday life in America and affect everyone in our society. Often our degree of consciousness and always our perspective depends upon with which socioeconomic class or race we identify, or are identified – along with our personal experiences with classism or racism. But, even if we choose not to notice, we cannot escape from the fact that racial and class identities – and more importantly, the embedded and systemic societal privileges or disadvantages that come from these socially-constructed roles – affect how we define ourselves, how others relate to us, and what opportunities we are offered or denied in almost every aspect of our lives (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003 and Price Class Lecture, 15 June 2003).

ON A PERSONAL LEVEL

As an Asian/European-American (not that such a classification exists) from a working-class background, I am guilty of having done little to examine my own personal economic status and ancestry and how these affect my life – or to examine the impact that class and race have on others. For most of my life, I gave little more than cursory thought to the culture and heritage of my first-generation Japanese and Italian parents, other than to write the occasional report on Japan and Italy in grade school. For

their own reasons – which I regret never having discussed with them and can now only guess at – my parents raised my brother and I as typical American kids in the late 1950s and 1960s, and we never discussed what their lives were like growing up. Although I didn't want to move from our home on Kansas City's east side in 1969, at the time I had never heard of the term "white flight," and years later, it was something that seemed to have little left to do with me. After high school, I didn't appreciate the significance of being the first of my cousins on either side to go to college – a feat achieved partly because of a scholarship I earned, but also because of my father's many long years of hard work as a mechanic. I took for granted that I'd go to college, not understanding until much later the value or privilege or opportunities that came my way because of that extra education.

In some ways, my personal story isn't unique. Many people go about their lives giving little consideration to the role that class and race plays in their lives, or perhaps noticing it only occasionally in particular, unusual circumstances. Yet, many others have no choice but to be acutely aware of the effects of socially constructed ideas of race and social-economic class on their everyday lives. In the unsettling transcripts of tapes from meetings at Texaco to discuss a Federal discrimination suit against the company in 1996, senior-level officials "freely deride black employees as 'niggers' and 'black jelly beans'" (New York Times 2001). In New York's Harlem, the competition is fierce among the neighborhood's working poor for fast-food restaurant jobs – considered entry level jobs for teenagers in the suburbs, in Harlem they have become "real" jobs which adults take to support families (Newman 2001: 317). There are millions of Americans who get up knowing that each day will be a struggle to just to survive, let alone improve their social or economic position in life.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF CLASS AND RACE

Many people have been made to feel outsiders as a result of the roles society has assigned to them based on socially-constructed differences. Often these roles turn into stereotypes in which preconceived attitudes and half-truths are projected onto others. Beyond the insidious personal loss of their own traditions and self-respect, stereotypes keep people from being seen as human, which makes it easier to develop a system of exploitation against them and harder to open an "agenda of multicultural democracy"

(Marable 2001:124-125). They must deal with the real and immediate effects of poverty and racism on a daily basis – less and inferior education, fewer economic opportunities, loss of pride, a sense of not belonging, threats from authority or others who fear or resent them, and very little participation in positions of true power within society (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003 and Price Class Lecture, 15 June 2003). Socially-constructed differences lead to a stratified, embedded system of unequal access to resources, services, and positions of respect and power in society (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). How did we get there?

It is human nature to look for similarities – and differences – with others. In a complex world, our brains have to make visual distinctions about what is significant to notice and what isn't in order to distinguish people from one another. It is important to understand that while such social differentiations take note of different content, the distinctions themselves don't require that the content be ranked. For example, characteristics such as mother and father should be treated as equal states of parenthood, though in reality that isn't always the case. Although we exalt Motherhood, single mothers without a male in the household find it very difficult to gain the support and assistance they need, while single fathers are singled out and given particular admiration for dealing with the same set of circumstances (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003).

Thus, social differentiation by itself doesn't tell us much until we add a social inequality that derives from those differences. In our society, unlike some early Native American tribes that allowed their members to choose their own different social roles based upon their personal qualities, many of our roles are assigned by others – and have grown throughout the years to carry with them a judgment of superiority or inferiority (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). As social beings, we naturally become stratified because of differences – real, perceived, or socially-constructed. And the consequences of these differences aren't always understood, especially on a personal level. As Jean Baker Miller argues in her discussion on how differences lead to domination and subordination, "It is not always clear that in most instances of difference, there is also a factor of inequality – inequality of many kinds of resources, but fundamentally of status and power" (Miller 2001: 86-87). Social stratification is related to different positions in social structure – and the fact that these different positions receive different rewards. When this happens, inequality has become

institutionalized and a system of social relationships now determines accesses to society's resources. Relationships are established by those in power to keep others in their place (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). And in America, each group has a distinct and particular relationship, and each form of domination and subordination is shaped by their position to each other (Hurtado 2001:152).

Very few people will admit – to others or themselves – that they might be prejudiced. It is a distasteful thought. Yet, if we think of prejudice as a preconceived judgment or opinion, one that is usually based on limited or faulty information, then it is possible for most of us hold prejudiced ideas, however unintentionally. Beverly Tatum makes the argument that what people are saying when they claim they are free of prejudice is that they are “not hatemongers.” However, while she goes on to state that prejudice is not our fault – that we are in fact socialized to prejudice – she emphasizes that we are not relieved of responsibility for ending prejudice (Tatum 2001:102). While many people use prejudice and racism interchangeably, Tatum believes it is important to make a distinction between the terms. She emphasizes that “racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudices, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (Tatum 2001:103).

Tatum writes that people often say to her, “People of color can be racist, too” (Tatum 2001:104). Tatum argues that if we accept that racism is a *system* of advantage based upon race, then oppressed people – people of color or women – cannot be racist or sexist because there is no institutionalized system from which they can benefit by their actions, no matter how hateful or bigoted their actions might be. Using her definition, even though someone might hold power over someone else on a personal level, if there is no systematic benefit for their actions, they cannot be racist. She also writes that she is often asked if she believes that all white people are racist. While her answer is, “of course not,” she also argues that all white people, “intentionally or unintentionally, do benefit from racism. It is the unintentional benefits that many people find hard to acknowledge. Active racism like the Ku Klux Klan is easy for most people to denounce. Passive racism, on the other hand – accepting racist jokes in your presence or letting exclusionary hiring policies go unchallenged at work – is more subtle and deeply ingrained in systemic practices that we may just take for granted. In Tatum's view, it is important for people to realize that by ignoring systemic racial

inequalities – although they are not participating in racism in an active, overt way – that they are still guilty of being passively racist.

She also argues that, while fighting racism isn't the responsibility of whites alone, the "fact of White privilege – or the systematic advantages of being White – means that Whites have greater access to the societal institutions in need of transformation" (Tatum 2001:103,106). She acknowledges that even though all whites benefit from white privilege, not all benefit equally due to factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, religions affiliations, sexual orientations and the like (Tatum 2001:103). White privilege, like passive racism or sexism, is hard to see unless you are looking for it. Peggy McIntosh, in "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" noticed through her work with women's studies that men are often unwilling to acknowledge that they are over-privileged, even if they are willing to admit that women are disadvantaged. In thinking about male privilege as a phenomenon, she realized that she "had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (McIntosh 2001:163-64). As she began to keep track of privileges she received simply for being white but which she had previously never noticed, she began to realize the extent to which men – and whites – work from an unacknowledged basis of privilege.

Accepting white privilege brings with it new knowledge of how power is systematically conferred to people, based on no more than the color of their skin – and often without their awareness that it is even happening. McIntosh admits that facing that she is the beneficiary of white privilege isn't easy. For one thing, she has had to give up the idea of meritocracy in America, because if white privilege exists, then certain people are offered opportunities through no merit of their own. They are simply given to them because they are white. What she came to believe is that the word "privilege" is somewhat misleading. We often think of privilege as a favored state, which in fact white privilege is. But it is more. In some cases, the unearned privileges McIntosh found "work to systematically overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply *confers dominance* because of one's race or sex" (McIntosh 2001:166). In fact, systematic unearned privilege is ingrained in America, whether because of differences in race, sex, wealth, or social position. "It's not what you know, but who you know." Being connected to and identified with the favored in society pays off in many ways.

THE EFFECT OF CLASS IN A 'CLASSLESS' SOCIETY

Within our stratified society, a class describes a group of individuals and families with similar positions and similar political and economic interests (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). Socially and economically, America is a land of extremes, even though we sometimes pretend we don't notice. In "Class in America: Myths and Realities (2000), Gregory Mantsios notes "It is not that Americans, rich or poor, aren't keenly aware of class differences [...] it is that class is not in the domain of public discourse" (Mantsios 2001a: 168-69). For example, we know the terms that define the classes in America, and we have a pretty good idea of who can be found in each. There's the Upper Class, where people are born into wealth and don't work for a living. Then there's Corporate Class, which is made up of the new wealth of extremely successful businessmen like Donald Trump, who tend to want to flaunt their wealth. Next is the Upper Middle Class – those executives and professionals like doctors and lawyers who are very successful, but haven't moved into the Corporate Class. Right in the middle is, logically enough, the Middle Class. This is an extremely visible class and is made up of professional workers, many of whom work in service industries. Next in line is the Working Class, which is made up of skilled laborers in manufacturing and some service industries. Last, but not least, are the Poor. Men and women in this class perform the functions other classes won't do. They can be pulled into Working Class seasonally, as in the case of migrant workers, or in special circumstances like the housewives who moved into manufacturing jobs during WWII, but who were expected to return home and give up their newfound social and economic independence to returning servicemen (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003).

Social stratification also involves the establishment of a system of rules that explains how rewards are distributed and why. People have to buy into the "why" or the explanations won't work. These rules develop in two ways. The first is based on rules of ascription that blame the victim; your role in life is your destiny and any problems are your own fault. The second is based on rules of achievement that state that qualities can be (or appear to be) under the control of the individual; again, blame the victim if they don't achieve what they want. While we impart the highest social value to those at the top of the class pyramid, in reality, without those at the bottom –

whose services and contributions are valued least – the system would collapse (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). According to Mantsios, part of the reason people don't understand the plight – or value – of the poor is that we are often presented a misleading message about poverty. He argues that “a mass media that did not have its own class interest in preserving the status quo would acknowledge that inordinate wealth and power undermines democracy and that a ‘free market’ economy can ravage a people and their communities” (Mantsios 2001b:563-71). And although Marilyn Frye is speaking of the oppression of women, her sentiment applies to all people – of any gender, class, race – who are confined by systematic barriers. She applies the metaphor of a birdcage to show that if you look at only a single wire on the cage, it would appear that the bird should be able to move freely and that there was nothing in that particular wire that would hold the bird back. But, she explains, if you move back to view the cage as a whole, then is it “perfectly *obvious* that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon” (Frye 2001:141). This concept of systematic barriers applies to gender, race, and class.

We've all heard the saying, “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer,” but we don't often look at real numbers. It is almost too outlandish to believe, but in 1997, “the top 1 percent of households in the nation had more wealth than the entire bottom 95%.” And financial wealth was even more concentrated. According to economist Edward Wolff of New York University, “the top 1 percent of households had nearly half of all financial wealth (net worth minus net equity in owner-occupied housing)” and in fact, “the richest 0.5 percent of households had 42 percent of the financial wealth” (Sklar 2001:267-68). That is hard to accept when at the other extreme, 13 percent of the American population lived below the poverty line – calculated in 1999 at \$8,500 for an individual and \$17,028 for a family of four (Mantsios 2001a:170). In another example of economic inequity, a Kansas City couple, neither of whom has a college degree, struggled to piece together a series of part-time jobs to earn \$18,000 in 1994, less than half what the husband was earning before he lost his job at the local T.W.A. plant (Johnson 2001a:273-74) – while the ex-wife of billionaire Ronald O. Perelman revealed that she needed \$4,400 – a day – in child support for the next 14 years (Rohde 2001:277-8).

These numbers are hard to accept, but even more important than just the numbers themselves are the repercussions that result from these kinds of systematic, gross inequities. Many Americans are conflicted about wealth and economic class status, and so we don't often look at how the system of economic and social classes actually works to keep the majority of Americans in the place in which they were born. While most of us strive to "move up" and earn more money – and let others know that we earn more – we are also uncomfortable with claiming ourselves too rich or too poor. In the film, "People Like Us," a wide extreme of people from all walks of life, when asked, responded that they were middle class.

The film pointed out that along with the economic realities of different classes are sets of social distinctions that accompany each class, and people tended to defend their associations carefully. Many times the defense wasn't that they were associating with a particular "class" of people, but they were just associating with people like themselves that they'd always grown up with. This tended to be true no matter which class they appeared to be from. The distinctions that each class used to distinguish itself – or another class – ranged from where they lived, what kind of car they drove, the clothes they wore, who they associated with, what their job expectations were, what they did with their free time, to even what they ate – from imported Italian balsamic vinaigrette to a loaf of white bread selling for 99 cents. In fact, white bread became an extremely divisive issue in one community. Years of resentment had built up between those who wanted a corporate chain grocery store that would stock loaves of Wonder Bread and red meat, versus those who thought a co-op grocery would be a better alternative. Those who wanted the chain store felt as if they were being forced into something they didn't want – that the co-op would be too expensive for them and wouldn't stock the food they wanted. The loaves of white bread became a symbol of the class division between those who had stayed in town after high school and supported the supermarket chain – and the resentment they held against the perceived better-than-thou attitude of those who supported the co-op and ate fancier, pricier bread. After the co-op won the bid, it did begin stocking white bread. While white bread may sound like a small thing, you could hear the frustration and anger in people's voices as they felt yet another choice was being taken from them by others who ultimately had more power than they did.

While this is a local case of who makes decisions and the feelings that could be aroused, if we looked closely at who has the power to make legislation in America, we would find that virtually all of our Senators are millionaires, whether earned or inherited. Regardless of where they got their wealth, this bastion of equality has no real concept of what it means to participate in the daily struggles of working America, professional or otherwise. Yet, these are the people create current tax policies. Although cutting payroll taxes for lower-paid people would help the poor – what passes as legislation is a tax cut on dividends that helps those already wealthy enough to have money to invest... not those living from paycheck to paycheck (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003).

The fact is that income and wealth determine people's life chances and choices. They affect the length and quality of people's lives. In the U.S., access to medical services isn't available to everyone. The poor have little access, which means they are more susceptible to illnesses and receive less and possibly poorer treatment than those who can afford it (Mantsios 2001a:176). Working for minimum wage means that you are so far down can't even see the poverty line – and from that (disad)vantagepoint, there are few life choices. The less money you have, the fewer choices you have (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003). Corporations bombard kids with marketing messages, and kids learn at an early age to spend (their parents') money. Those who can't afford the symbols of the "in crowd" find themselves constantly reminded that they are outsiders. Thirteen-year-old Wendy Williams, who watches the other kids in designer clothes go horseback riding on weekends, understands that "to be without money, in so many ways, is to be left out." An understanding counselor works with Wendy to encourage her to take an advanced course in Math, but Wendy's desire not to be thought of as even more of an outsider by being a brainy 'nerd' has kept her from taking the chance (Johnson 2001b: 398). Thus Wendy is not only held back from participating in social functions because her family lacks money, her fear of not belonging holds her back from reaching for a chance at a better education – one of the most effective ways in which she might be able to change her status in life.

Within a supposedly classless American society, there are economic and social distinctions made every day. What gives these social differentiations added meaning is the value attributed to these differences. Not only have economic and social classes been constructed in our society, but another even more sensitive differentiation – race –

has been constructed by white people as a means of maintaining power within American society.

RACE AND RACISM

Although it is the American Dream to achieve whatever you want, the reality is that your ability to change your life fortunes is always limited by where you start in life. You may, through hard work or good fortune, be able to change your social status, although moving up a class generally takes a generation to accomplish. But you can never escape from the confines of the race to which you belong – no matter how artificially constructed the idea of race itself is.

Until the 18th century, the concept of dividing human beings into different races, or subspecies, did not even exist. In 1775, using the principles of classification that biologists had recently developed to categorize plants and animals, Linnaeus was the first to make this division of races official. Yet, this so-called “science of race” has never been proven. Omi and Winant note, “despite efforts ranging from Dr. Samuel Morton’s studies of cranial capacity to contemporary attempts to base racial classification on shared gene pools, the concept of race has defied biological definition” (Omi 2001:12-13). They go on to note that the social sciences have moved toward an assumption that race is “indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept” or a concept that is constructed by different societies at different times in history. Which has resulted is a racial paradox, in that the social construction of race has taken on a social reality in which certain races are judged to be superior to others – when in fact there is no biological validity to the idea of separate human races to begin with. Despite the fact that race, as a biological principle, simply doesn’t exist, its effects run deep within society (Price Class Lecture, 15 June 2003).

The social construction of race requires that races be ranked as superior or inferior to one another. This distinct treatment inevitably leads to inequality of many resources, but the fundamental inequality is of status and power (Miller 2001:86-87). Those in power (white policymakers, media, politicians, religious leaders) have linked different outward physical characteristics such as skin color, color and shape of the eyes, color and type of hair, with different races. In turn, they have then linked those races with differences within. According to Omi and Winant, things such as “skin color

'differences' are thought to explain perceived differences in intellectual, physical and artistic temperaments," and what is most damaging, to "justify distinct treatment of racially identified individuals and groups" (Omi 2001:15). This social reality of "race" has been created and maintained – as most social constructs are – by those who hold the power within a society.

In our society, as far as race and discrimination is concerned, power has always been found with the "white race," especially white males. Even the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has acknowledged as much (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2001:192). However, depending upon how those in power felt toward those whom they counted as lesser or subordinate, even the idea of who has been allowed to call themselves "white" in America has evolved over the years. In discussing "How Jews Became White," Karen Brodtkin notes that the turn of the twentieth century saw "a steady stream of warnings by scientists, policymakers, and the popular press that 'mongrelization' of the Nordic or Anglo-Saxon race – the real Americans – by inferior European races (as well as inferior non-European ones) was destroying the fabric of the nation" (Brodtkin 2001:30). After World War II, Brodtkin wonders if the economic benefits from U.S. governmental policies such as the GI Bill – offering educational, employment, and housing benefits to returning servicemen – helped Euroethnics (non-northern Europeans) to become white, or if being incorporated into a more inclusive sense of whiteness in America after the war helped bring them into the middle class (Brodtkin 2001:30-45). Nevertheless, although racial constructs changed over time, this change was within what was always considered a European population, where the differences lay in their relative superiority or inferiority. Brodtkin, in fact, notes that while new attitudes and policies helped bring about changes in the status of Euroethnics, assistance and acceptance continued to be systematically denied to African-Americans during this time of social expansiveness and economic growth (Brodtkin 2001:30-45).

Throughout American history, the institution of slavery has made the perceived and entrenched distinctions between whites and people of color much harder to bridge. The subordination of African-Americans, along with Native Americans, began with and was exacerbated by European colonization of the Americas and their thirst for land and labor. In actuality, the Native Americans had a highly organized social structure, and were often power-players in early colonial struggles in North America (Price Class

Lecture, 15 June 2003). The many Native American tribes that populated America before the Europeans arrived soon found themselves defined as “biologically and morally ‘inferior’ to the more ‘civilized’ newcomers who were only doing God’s will in conquering the natives and taking their land” (Hess 2001:324). Native Americans were forced off their lands as white settlers moved westward. Not one of the more than 300 treaties between the Native American tribes and the U.S. government was enforced. Entire tribes were forcibly relocated to reservations on land with few natural resources, and disease and years of economic hardship followed (Hess 2001:324-5). Although the Native Americans were robbed and mistreated by the white settlers, they were never enslaved, as the white settlers chose to Christianize them instead (Price Class Lecture, 15 June 2003). The same was not true of African-Americans, and it is the institution of slavery that has tainted race relations in the United States ever since.

Although some African-Spanish were on Spanish ships that explored the Americas in the 1500s, most African-Americans initially came to America as indentured servants after the English began colonizing in 1610. It took time for slavery to become institutionalized, but gradually the treatment of African-American indentured servants became harsher than that of their white counterparts, as indicated by actions such as punishments for similar crimes. Indentured servants became slaves at an accelerating pace so that by 1671, there were 2000 slaves in Virginia alone (Price Class Lecture, 15 June 2003). By 1860, most of the three million blacks in the United States were American-born. Although the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, the Civil War was followed by a bitter period for African-Americans. “Jim Crow” laws, which created basically an apartheid-type separation between blacks and whites, lasted for nearly 100 years (Hess 2001:326). During the Reconstruction after the war, a set of Black Codes were enacted throughout various states that showed there was, according to W.E.B. Du Bois, “plain and indisputable attempt on the part of the southern states to make Negroes slaves in everything but name” (Du Bois 2001:467).

These practices permeated the lives of blacks in insidious and overt ways. Richard Wright grew up in Arkansas and was just a small child when he first received his first lesson in “how to live like a Negro.” It came when a white boy threw a brick at him and cut his neck. He expected sympathy from his mother because of what he saw as an injustice to himself. Instead, she “grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two,” and while

his skin was still smarting, took a moment to “impart to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom.” They included a reminder of how hard she worked every day in the “white folks’ hot kitchen” to make money to take care of him – and an admonition to never, never, under any conditions, fight *white* folks again. Throughout the years, Wright had to relearn that lesson – the gist of which was “know your place” – until he was able to “play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live” (Wright 2001:21-30).

Despite the repeal of “Jim Crow” laws, African-Americans and people of color can’t simply ignore the implications of race in their everyday lives, whether overt or not. In order to “fit in” with others they also may choose to play down their differences and uniqueness. There is sometimes a tendency for members within a subordinated group to imitate those who are dominating them in order to gain acceptance – or to protect themselves from actual danger. While a few manage to be partially accepted by the dominants, they are never wholly accepted, and it is usually at the cost of their acceptance and identity with fellow subordinates. In the case of race, it can mean being labeled an “Uncle Tom” or in the case of women, it might take the form of a back-handed compliment, “she thinks like a man” (Miller 2001:92).

Although race relations in the United States are dominated by the black and white lines drawn through decades of slavery, other people of color also wrestle with questions of identity and the impact of racism in America. Asian-Americans are represented by at least a dozen distinct cultures and language groups – including Chinese and Japanese Americans, as well as immigrants from India, Pakistan, Korea, and Southeast Asia among others – yet they are often lumped together by government and immigration policies as well as by popular attitudes. Asian-Americans are often held up as an example of a “model minority” who have achieved the American Dream of upward mobility through hard work (Hess 2001:327-28).

As an Asian-American Angela Ragaza was relieved to be a member of a racial group associated with academic and professional success, but in the workplace she has often found herself “slapped in the fact for not straddling the racial divide. In some situations I was considered virtually white and not “minority” enough. In others, it was the other way around” (Ragaza 2001:209). Chandra Talpade Mohanty was born in India and came to the United States on a student visa in 1977. She quickly found that as a foreign student, and a woman at that, she was subject to several Asian-American

stereotypes. She was dismissed as an irrelevant quiet Asian woman, asked by teachers if she could understand English and if they should speak slower despite her Queen's English, or else told she was so smart – and her accent was even better than that of Americans (Mohanty 2001:338).

Treatment against Asian-Americans sometimes goes beyond mere thoughtless comments by sometimes well-meaning people. When Yuri Kochiyama was growing up in the fishing village of Terminal Island, California, he was “red, white and blue.” That is, until Pearl Harbor. Soon afterwards, Kochiyama and his family were forcibly removed to an internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas for the duration of the war (Kochiyama 2001:349). More recently, a poor economy in the 1980s helped spur another round of anti-Asian violence. In 1982, unemployed autoworkers beat Chinese American Vincent Chin to death with a baseball bat because they thought he was Japanese. In 1987, Navraz Mody was beaten to death by a gang of youths in New Jersey, home of the “infamous ‘dotbusters’ (a vicious reference to the Indian bindhi) (Shah 2001:352). Ignorance of others can be deadly.

The latest wave of immigration into the United States comes from South and Central America and the Middle East. These “new ethnics” are made up of Latinos (Mexican Americans – Chicano/as, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans) and Middle Easterners (Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanian, Lebanese, Iranians and Iraqis) (Hess 2001:331-34). Although is it much more difficult to be an Arab-American in the United States since 9/11, the tendency to demonize Arabs in the American media isn't necessarily a new phenomena. As an Arab-American, Jack G. Shaheen, a CBS News Consultant on Middle East Affairs, decries the negative portrayals his children watched on TV and the movies. He notes that “his children and others with Arab roots grew up without ever having seen a humane Arab on the silver screen, someone to pattern their lives after (Shaheen 2001:354-55). This complaint is voiced by virtually every minority within the U.S. at some point in time – and it has been valid for all. For Latinos, their growing numbers have helped to “Latinize” many Hispanic people so they can affirm, rather than deny their heritage. Younger generations are growing up with more ethnic pride as a Latin influence starts permeating fields like entertainment, publishing, advertising, and politics (Navarro 2001:364). Despite the fact that Latinos are expected to surpass African-Americans as the largest minority group in the U.S. in the next five

years, however, Latinos haven't yet been able to translate their cultural visibility into a political power (Bonnekessen Class Lecture, 14 June 2003).

Although African-Americans have some visibility these days in America's power elite, most blacks struggle with some form of overt or passive racism almost every day – whether the whites who perpetuate this racism do so knowingly or not. In Chicago, it was shown that black and white homeowners often deal with vastly different lenders when they refinance their mortgages. A study of home mortgage practices indicated a strong concentration of black mortgages being held by subprime lenders compared to white home homeowners. And, it was shown that “race was a stronger factor predicting the pattern of loans than household income, home value, real estate debt, age of housing, education and location in city or suburb.” Although researchers note the racial pattern does not prove discrimination, housing groups in 34 cities have put together a test for racial discrimination in home-equity lending nationwide to see if blacks are being single out for more costly loans when they could qualify for cheaper ones (Dedman 2001:228-9).

Racism against blacks in the workplace continues, sometimes with little understanding or action on the part of management or those involved other than to deny its existence. When black American Eagle airline maintenance mechanic crew chief, Tony Lee, filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the company in 1997, the company did have diversity –training classes in place for most its employees – although “mechanics at the maintenance arm don't attend because they would have to be pulled off flight-line duty, an expensive proposition” (McCartney 2001:223-24). The company is arguing that what Mr. Lee – and others – found racially offensive was not so “exceedingly outrageous and reprehensible as to be beyond civilized standards.” In addition, they contend the black mechanics should have been “more aggressive about tearing down cartoons and posters themselves.” Finally, Mr. Rygeil, a white mechanic, bemoans the changes put in place since the lawsuit. “Freedom of expression is gone. The good joking back and forth is gone” (McCartney 2001:223-27). Perhaps American Eagle should require all of their employees to attend their diversity programs. Maybe then they might learn how one man's joke can be another man's insult.

Blacks and other people of color can also face the effects of racism simply walking or driving down the street. The Catholic order running Harlem's only Roman Catholic High School was so concerned about dozens of separate incidents where

students in their school uniform were stopped by police for no reason that they arranged a day of workshops with the police at the school. The focus was on teaching the young men how to “conduct themselves in the right way so they don’t escalate the situation” (Roane 2001:249). While admirable, it seems like it might be just as appropriate – if not more so – to ask the police to attend the workshops to also increase their awareness of their own racism in starting the incidents to begin with. But, it isn’t only young black men in Harlem who are stopped and questioned by the police without explanation. It can and did happen in 1999 to Mr. Dennis Archer, Jr., the son of the Mayor of Detroit. “When his son called, the Mayor said, ‘I had flashbacks to when I was stopped’” over 15 years earlier (Meredith 2001:197).

Finally, I never thought I could feel a twinge of sympathy of any sort for Mike Tyson. Yet June Jordan’s piece, “Requiem for the Champ” seemed to be a culmination of the weight of everything that can go wrong in America for people of color who are born into the poverty of a “war zone.” Jordan, who also learned to fight on the streets of Brooklyn, says that, “in this America where Mike Tyson and I live together and bitterly, bitterly, apart, I say he became what he felt. He felt the stigma of a priori hatred and intentional poverty. He was given the choice of violence or violence: the violence of defeat or the violence of victory” (Jordan 2001:388). Did Mike Tyson have another choice than to be what so many wanted him to be – a violent black man in a violent sport? Of course he did. We all have free will, don’t we? Yet, I cannot possibly imagine the relentless bleakness of living in abject poverty and the feeling when someone offers you a way out – no matter how much you might be exploited. Does that say it’s okay for a man to abuse a woman? Never. Ever. In no way. I absolutely deplore Mike Tyson’s actions. Yet, I feel sad for all the little boys whose life choices are so severely limited before they are even born.

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ANTH 580: Diversity & You
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