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7. ON THE IMPOSSIBILITIES OF A POST-RACIST AMERICA IN THE OBAMA ERA

KARANJA KEITA CARROLL

THIS CHAPTER INTERROGATES THE REALITY OF RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY in what some today refer to as “the Obama era” and what others regard as evidence of a “post-racist America.” By utilizing an African-centered conceptual framework, centering on culture and worldview, this discourse constitutes a critical examination of the impossibilities of a post-racist America by investigating the lived experiences of African-descended people and other communities of color. Through this analysis, it will be evident that while we may be in “the Obama era,” we are far from a post-racist society. Thus, discussions of post-racism are assessed as conceptual masks used to conceal the philosophical and structural realities of global white supremacy as exemplified through continuous racist practices.

The election of Barack Hussein Obama is a significant event in American history. To some, it reflects a new era in the history of American race relations, while to others, the election of President Obama signals the declining significance of race in America; and possibly the “end” of racism (Matt 2008, 34; Romano and Ammah-Tagoe, and No 2009, 42–45; Halewood 2009, 1047–52; Robinson III 2009, 212–23; J. James 2009, 459–81; Staples 2010, 128–44; Ossei-Owusu 2009, 64–75; Gines 2010, 370–84; Thomas 2010, 22–23). Although these interpretations are held valid among pundits, including some within the African American community, both views lack a clear understanding of racism, global white supremacy, and the history of American race relations. These “pundits” are misguided in heralding the “end of race” and fail to take notice of the everyday obstacles to social equality endured by African-descended people and other groups of color. In order to clearly understand the nature of this misreading and lack of fundamental change in the social reality of people of color, it is necessary to investigate the concepts of culture, worldview, race, racism, and global white supremacy. Clarity on these concepts and their impact upon the lived reality

of African-descended peoples, and other people of color, sheds a more accurate light on the reality of race and racism within the Obama era.

It is essential to investigate the unique cultural and philosophical foundations that are the basis of this particular thought system and the behavioral tendencies connected to it (i.e., racism and white supremacy). Culture and worldview are essential tools of analysis when attempting to understand human reality as has been the conclusion of numerous scholars. This is especially the case within a culturally diverse environment where certain cultural assumptions, ways of knowing and ways of existing within the world, that are actually cultural particularities, are posed as cultural universals. Following a review of culture and worldview as discussed by African-centered scholars and a discussion of an epistemological investigation of racism, a number of examples are examined that reflect the little changed reality among people of African descent and other people of color. The goal of this chapter is to accentuate the core components of racism and white supremacy that are still found within the Obama era. Rather than looking for the end of racism as linked to the gaining of access to more resources, or to the election of people of color to political office, the demise of racism will only come about with the critical investigation and later destruction of certain culturally specific ways of knowing and being within the world that impose one value system over others.

CULTURE AND WORLDVIEW¹

African-centered scholars posit that culture and worldview are essential tools in the analysis of human and social relations (Kambon 1992; Kambon 1996, 57–69; Kambon 1998; Kambon 2004, 73–92; Myers 1991, 15–32; Myers 1988; Banks 1992, 262–72; Nobles 1978, 679–88; Richards 1979, 240–55; Azibo 1999, 1–31; Azibo 2001, 420–41; Schiele 1994, 5–25; Graham 1999, 103–22; Semaj 1996, 193–202). These scholars suggest that the cultural variation which is pervasive throughout all of humanity significantly impacts the responses one has to social phenomena. African-centered scholars argue that only by taking into account these varied cultural realities does the social theorist and social scientist truly engage in meaningful social analysis.

Culture, as defined by Wade Nobles, refers to “a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality” (Nobles 1985, 102). African-centered scholars have relied upon this understanding of culture to generate a model of culture based upon two levels. Nobles and others posit that we can understand culture as it relates to a deep structure and surface structure of

culture. From the above definition, the surface structure correlates with “a general design for living,” while the deep structure correlates with the “patterns for interpreting reality” (Myers 1987, 72–85; Myers 1991, 15–32; Myers 1993; Azibo 1999, 1–31; Azibo 2001). Together, the deep and surface structures of culture encompass the depth and pervasiveness of culture, especially as it relates to the investigation of social phenomenon.

“A general design for living” or the surface structure of culture refers to any aspect of one’s lived reality that is engaged through the five senses. Thus, most aspects that we use to define cultural differences are reflective of the surface structure. Whether we speak of food, dress, or beauty, each aspect is accessible through reliance upon what we can see, touch, taste, hear and, smell. Surface structure manifestations represent culture at its most simplistic level. While cultural variance at the surface level is important, it is also important to recognize variance on other levels.

The “patterns for interpreting reality,” or deep structure, of culture provides a more profound understanding of culture and refers to the manner in which we engage social and lived phenomena on a conceptual level. That is, how do we understand that which we engage with the five senses? Noble’s understanding of deep structure is interchangeable with the concept of worldview. Both are concerned with philosophical questions that are essential in understanding varied experiences based upon that which is materially apprehensible. Generally speaking, “a worldview refers to the way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and of the universe” (Ani 1980, 4). Mack Jones adds clarity to this definition by stating that all “people have a worldview that is a product of [their] lived experience and that constitutes the lens through which the world of sense perceptions is reduced to described fact” (Jones 1992, 30). However, what exactly is a worldview?

As the above definitions suggest, worldview can be understood on multiple levels, from the simplistic “how one sees the world” to the more complex articulation suggested by Jones. Building upon the work of Vernon Dixon, African-centered scholars (especially those who have been called “Black psychologists”) posit that the concept of worldview centers on the role of philosophical assumptions (Dixon 1971, 119–56; Dixon 1976, 51–102). These philosophical assumptions include: cosmology, ontology, axiology, epistemology, teleology, and logic.

Given that African-centered analysis is concerned with accurately interpreting the lived reality of African-descended people, the majority of cultural and worldview analysis within this area of research prioritizes the cultural and worldview distinctions between Africans and Europeans.

This should not negate the potential similarities and differences between non-African and non-European communities. However, given the historical continuous and contentious relationship between global Africans and global Europeans, this relationship is predominant. Furthermore, this does not negate the impact of global European peoples on other non-Europeans. In fact, the analysis that will follow supports the cultural and worldview based response of global European peoples to non-Europeans. However, the current priority focuses on clarifying the cultural and worldview distinctions between African and European peoples.

Some may also question the validity of encapsulating the worldviews of such large and internally diverse populations under the nomenclature of an “African worldview” or “European worldview.” This is done with good reason and skepticism. However, neither concept should suggest a static means of interpreting either cultural world. As Kwame Gyekye suggests in regards to traditional African culture and by extension African diasporic culture, “[a] painstakingly comparative study of African cultures leaves one in no doubt that despite the undoubted cultural diversity arising from Africa’s ethnic pluralism, threads of underlying affinity do run through the beliefs, customs, value systems, and sociopolitical institutions and practices of the various African societies” (Gyekye 1995, 192). Furthermore, Daudi Ajani ya Azibo, relying upon the arguments of Jacob Carruthers, argues that the African worldview is “the universal and timeless worldview characteristic of African people throughout space and time” (Azibo 2001, 422). While intra-cultural variance is acknowledged, it is not acknowledged at the expense of unity. Marimba Ani clearly grasps this idea when she argues that

our oppressors have emphasized the loss of language, dress, living patterns and other tangible and surface aspects of culture, just as they do in discussions of African culture on the continent. They emphasize difference in language, and customs—even physique—from one society to another. They do this with good reason. It is an emphasis that serves their objectives. Until we learn that it serves our objectives to emphasize the similarities, the ties, the unifying principles, the common threads and themes that bind and identify us all as “African,” we will continue to be politically and ideologically confused. (Ani 1980, 1)

It is with these realities in mind that we now precede with a comparative model of the African and European worldviews.

As previously stated, a worldview consists of concepts such as cosmology, ontology, axiology, epistemology, and other philosophical assumptions.

Together, a cultural group's understanding of the universe (cosmology), nature of being (ontology), values (axiology), and knowledge (epistemology), all contribute to the ways in which a people make sense of reality, i.e., their worldview.

Beginning with the cosmological assumption, the etymological origin of the term cosmology (*cosmos*—Greek, universe) refers to the nature/structure of the universe (Myers 1993; Kambon 1992; Kambon 1996; Kambon 1998). African-centered scholars contend that the African cosmology is based upon “an interconnected and interdependent edifice,” where “all things in the universe are interconnected and interdependent” (Azibo 2001, 424). The cosmological assumption of independence and separation is reflective of the European worldview and guides the majority of Western social reality. However, this assumption requires separation between inter-related areas contributing to unnecessary divisions of human and social experiences.

Etymologically, the concept of ontology is rooted in the Greek root *on-*tos, referring to being. The ontological assumption of the worldview concept engages questions pertaining to the nature of reality and/or nature of a being. An African ontology suggests that the nature of reality and being is spirit/energy. Dona Richards argues that

the essence of the African cosmos is spiritual reality; that is its fundamental nature, its primary essence. But realities are not conceived as being in irreconcilable opposition, as they are in the West, and spirit is not separate from matter. Both spiritual and material being are necessary in order for there to be meaningful reality. While spiritual being gives force and energy to matter, material beings give form to spirit. (Richards 1990, 210)

Therefore, at the fundamental level of all existence is a spiritual force/energy manifesting itself on all levels of human reality. However, the ontological assumption manifests itself as solely material reality within the European worldview orientation. This reliance solely on material reality to define existence will manifest itself in the predominance of material and physical mechanisms to define self, worth, and beingness.

The concept of axiology is concerned with the nature of values. The etymological origin of the term axiology (*axios*—Greek, values) confirms this understanding. Put another way, axiology addresses the questions: What do you value? What do your values consist of? Linda James Myers argues that the distinctions between axiologies is found within an optimal (African)

axiology where the “highest value [is] in positive interpersonal relationships among people,” and a suboptimal (European) axiology where the “highest value [is] in objects or acquisition of objects” (Myers 1993, 97). Kambon also distinguishes between values among the two worldviews, by arguing that the African worldview’s axiological basis is grounded in cooperation and collective responsibility; corporateness and interdependence; and spiritualism and circularity. This is in contradistinction to the European axiology which is founded on competition and individual rights; separateness and independence; and materialism and ordinality (Kambon 1996, 61).

As the following section will outline, essential to this discussion of worldview and its impact on racism, is the concept of epistemology. Following its etymological origin (*episteme*—Greek, knowledge/to know), epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge, but more importantly, how one knows what s/he knows? It asks the question: What are the processes that are used in order to know something? The central distinction between African and European conceptions of epistemology centers on what Vernon Dixon has referred to as “perceptual space” (Dixon 1976). This refers to the relational distance between that which one is trying to know and the knower. This manifests itself in notions of objectivity, in which the only valid means of knowing within a Western epistemology is through separation, while according to an African epistemology, knowledge comes through positive relational connections.

Objectivity as an outgrowth of the European epistemology determines the manner in which one comes to know and/or attain information about phenomena. In discussing the ideological nature of objectivity, Richards states,

The knowing subject must disengage himself from that which he wishes to know. He must become emotionally uninvolved—detached. Indeed, he must become remote from it. By doing this, he successfully controls that which he wishes to know and thereby makes of it an object. The object has been created by the distance of the knowing self from the thing to be known. (Richards 1989, 24)

By objectivity functioning within this manner, and by it being a key component of Western social reality, it is obvious that this concept is detrimental to accurately and holistically understanding social phenomenon. In reality, the assumption of objectivity is an affront to the African cosmological and epistemological assumptions, as previously mentioned. But more importantly,

the African worldview immerses us in a vibrant universe. It seeks to close gaps—to do away with discontinuity—to bring us close to the essence of life. The epistemology it generates does away with distance. Since there is no distance, there are no mediators. The mode of our epistemological method is that of participation, and relationship rather than separation and control. (Richards 1989, 24, 31)

The epistemological differences between African and European worldviews become another key distinction negatively impacting an accurate assessment of human and social reality.

Together, the cultural and worldview differences of Africans and Europeans leads one to infer that social reality is not only lived differently, but also understood differently. While the African worldview prioritizes an interconnected and interrelated reality that relies upon the immaterial aspects of reality to make sense of the lived experience and favors relations of the whole, the European worldview prioritizes the separation of social reality, only utilizing that which can be apprehended with the five senses to validate and provide meaning for that which we engage through our lived experience. It is these aspects of the European worldview that directly correlate to the development and manifestation of racism and white supremacy. The components of the African worldview suggest a different model of viewing the world that is beyond separation, hierarchy and control, some of the very basic components that are foundational for racism and white supremacy.

This comparative analysis of components of the African and European worldviews implies basic distinctions at their fundamental core. As Kobi Kambon argues,

Our worldview system determines our definitions, our concepts and our values; whether we consider events that we experience important, true, good, etc. or whether we attend to them at all. Thus, we make assumptions about events that we experience based on our “predisposed” values, beliefs and attitudes toward the nature of things. These values, beliefs and attitudes comprise an organized body of ideas or a conceptual framework for viewing, defining and experiencing the nature and meaning of events that constitute our phenomenal reality, and even determine what phenomenal reality will in fact be. (Kambon 1992, 4)

Thus, one's worldview is essential to their very being and the basis of how they come to know, make sense of, and engage their social reality.

Reliance upon the concepts of culture and worldview provide an alternative means of making sense of modern racism. Rather than seeing racism and white supremacy as obscure and abnormal behavioral tendencies, we can in fact see them as realities consistent with a particular cultural and worldview orientation. The following analysis builds upon this discussion through a look at racism as it relates to a culturally specific epistemological framework.

RACISM: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS

The epistemological basis of American racism is rooted in a unique western European proclivity toward separation, hierarchy, dominance, and control. This is embedded in the philosophical assumptions which guide the very essence of Western thought. Marimba Ani, in *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Practice*, outlines this framework as the basis of what she refers to as the European utamawazo (Ani 1994, 104–108). This system of logic and epistemology is then extended into areas of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and a host of other socially constructed and validated components of human existence. While this current application of Ani's model is specific to issues of race and racism, the application is valid beyond race and is essential in understanding the nature of Western thought and those who rely upon this culturally based thought system as they engage "the other."

After a thorough review of some consistent themes in Western epistemological thought, Marimba Ani argues that there are several components that are essential in recognizing the unique cognitive style of western Europeans and their descendents. While Ani outlines nine components which make up the basis of her understanding of the European utamawazo, the very essence of modern day racism and white supremacy becomes self-evident within the first three components. These begin with a process of dichotomization in which "all realities are split into two parts" (Ani 1994, 104–108, 105). As applied to issues of race, rather than acknowledge that the various phenotypical differences across humanity, we must instead make precise lines of demarcation as they relate to so-called races.

Building upon dichotomization is the process of oppositional, confrontational, and antagonistic relationships which takes the originally dichotomized human group and suggests that these separate "races" are in conflict and therefore have a confrontational relationship between one another.

Rather than seeing human variation through a lens of interrelated components, the epistemological assumptions of Western thought automatically construct reality centering on issues of differences as opposed to complementarities. These two components lead into the third component of hierarchical segmentation, in which the varied human groups are then valued in relation to one another along a given hierarchy. Ani clarifies this component by arguing that

the original splitting and separating mental process assigns qualitatively different (unequal) value to the opposing realities of the dichotomies and a stratification of value to all realities within a given set or category. This process of valuation and devaluation is accompanied by that of segmentation and compartmentalization of independently derived entities. The effect is to eliminate the possibility of organic or sympathetic relationship, thereby establishing grounds for the dominance of the "superior" form or phenomenon over that which is perceived to be inferior: the power-relationship. (Ani 1994, 104–108, 106)

Thus, in relation to issues of race and racism, we find that within the Western world the physical differences that distinguish human beings are used as the basis to categorize races. This categorization is then used as the basis for some assumed conflict between these varied human groupings. In a society based upon the assumed dominance of Europe, and her descendants, this valuation system is assigned to those who are phenotypically white with the highest-ranking position in the hierarchy and those labeled as black the lowest-ranking. All other colors are placed within the white-black binary, as Latino/as, Asians, and Native Americans all attempt to position themselves closest to the highest-ranking position (whiteness) and farthest away from the lowest-ranking position (blackness).

Arguably, it is a logic and epistemology of separation, conflict, hierarchy, and control that is unique to Europe and her descendants, which characterizes the reality of racism within the modern world. This reading of racism and white supremacy indicates a cultural foundation, grounded in the worldview and unique philosophical assumptions of Europeans. Thus, racism and white supremacy are culturally specific to people of European ancestry. However, the cultural specificity of racism draws non-European peoples into the discussion determining the manner in which we in fact see, make sense of, and understand racism and white supremacy. Speaking broadly about the far-reaching implications of a worldviews analysis, Kobi

Kambon argues that “every person operates according to some group’s conception of reality, whether they are aware of it or not; and it is a conception which they share with their reference group, the group with which they are identified (in terms of values, beliefs, customs, etc.)” (Kambon 2004, 73). Living in a multicultural and multiracial society dominated by the culture and worldview of Euro Americans leads to conceptions of racism and white supremacy on the terms of the dominant group; in fact, it impacts how we define these concepts.

However, an African-centered interpretation of racism stresses the cultural and worldview foundations of this phenomenon. While in agreement with many of the radical interpretations of racism, most deny racism’s cultural and worldview basis. In doing so, these readings suggest that anyone can be racist rather than connecting racism with a culturally specific thought system. Seeing racism and white supremacy as a culturally specific phenomena rooted in the unique culture and worldview of European-descended people provides an expansive model of racism and supports a more nuanced explanation of its institutional nature as expounded on by many scholars of racial theory.

An explanation of racism in relation to the European worldview also suggests that the manner by which we determine the end of racism must move beyond mere surface level examples (i.e., an African American president, CEOs of color, etc.). Linda James Myers supports this assessment in her extended explanation of the myth of cultural pluralism and assimilation. She argues that

society may espouse a value for cultural pluralism, but at the same time perpetuate institutional structures that prevent it and insure assimilation (Myers, 1981). On a conscious level an individual in that society may say, “I support the right of every ethnic group to participate.” Unconsciously they may mean, “as long as they do it my way, like me.” The same individual may be unconscious of feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and/or inadequacy surrounding what would happen to his/her own sense of self, if the ethnically different were to be accepted for their difference. Between individuals, continuing the same example, we might find that the nonacceptance of “true” cultural difference is totally outside of the awareness of the dominant cultural group (nonconscious). On a conscious level members of the dominant group are likely not to really know what the “other” culture is like except on a superficial level (i.e., based on the perception and understanding their own cul-

ture's system allows). Therefore, it will be easy for the dominant group in seeking additional members to make itself more heterogeneous to select those potentially (superficial appearing) different candidates with essential characteristics (i.e., beliefs, world view, conceptual systems) most like themselves. As a consequence, the status quo is reinforced, and no substantive change takes place. Although we may now have added blacks or women to our group, we chose only those blacks or women who think and see the world as we do. (Myers 1991, 18–19)

POST-RACE, POST-RACIAL AND/OR POST-RACISM?

This argument is directly applicable to the current presidency of Barack Hussein Obama and is rather evident as one analyzes the first year of his term, along with other telltale signs prior to his election. Indeed, the concepts of post-race, post-racial, and post-racism have now come into vogue (Matt 2008; Romano, Ammah-Tagoe, and No 2009, 42–45; Halewood 2009, 1047–52; Robinson III 2009, 212–23; James 2009, 459–81; Staples 2010, 128–44; Ossei-Owusu 2009, 64–75; Gines 2010, 370–84; Thomas 2010, 22–23). In doing so, these terms provide the much relied upon terminologies to classify and clarify the current state of race relations within the United States. While on the surface each term seems to suggest we are beyond and done with race and racism in the age of Obama, these terms also support the assumption of colorblindness as an American ideal (Halewood 2009, 1047–52; James 2009, 459–81; Staples 2010, 128–44; Gines 2010, 370–84; Thomas 2010, 22–23).

Race within America is best understood as a social construct with real life consequences. Thus, while race may be biologically questionable, the differences that beset a person of African descent from a person of European descent are in fact real and impact their life chances in the job market, education, healthcare, politics, and so on. The suggestions of a post-racial America fly in the face of the fact that within a society dominated by white supremacy, “race” will always have real life consequences. The only means by which we can undermine this reality is to do away with the concept of race. Yet to deny the reality of race leads to the utter fallacy of colorblindness and suggests an America that is “race-free.” As Dawn G. Williams and Roderic R. Land argue, “Non-recognition of race reinforces and reproduces the flawed structure of society because it does not allow for the analysis

of social inequality at the core of the problem” (Williams and Land 2006, 579–88). To postulate the existence of a post-race America will only function to maintain the current system of white supremacy without referring to it as “racism” or even considering it as “race-related.”

Kathryn T. Gines provides a critical discussion on the current usages of “post-racial,” along with all of its variants used within American popular culture today. She argues that “the term gained considerable momentum during Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign—as if the election of President Obama is a singular event of such magnitude that it has altogether ended racism, and further rendered racial categories insignificant and even nonexistent” (Gines 2010, 379). She further adds that all too many times the usage of this term “implies that America is not only post-*racial* but also post-*racist*.” While these terms are not interchangeable given the flimsy definitions of “race,” “racial,” “racism,” and “racist” within American popular culture, it is only logical that these terms are used interchangeably and incorrectly. However, Gines provides her most critical insight when she argues that if by “post-racial” people in fact mean “post-white,” then this might be a worthy desire. “Post-white” would entail “displacing whiteness as the universal and the presume to be non-raced standard, as well as disrupting the hierarchies that have resulted from the myth of whiteness” (Gines 2010, 379–80). “Post-racial” in this sense “offer[s] a beginning step toward the project of dis-lodging white privilege” (Gines 2010, 379, 380), yet this is not the manner in which “post-racial” is used and thus “post-racial” refers to the all too mythic beliefs that America and American society have moved beyond race and racism as realities that impact the lives of people of color.

While “post-race” and “post-racism” may speak to the intentions of a colorblind America, these terms do nothing in regards to illuminating the continued persistence of race for people of color in a society dominated by white supremacy. As Joy James correctly asserts, “*Postracial* is not synonymous with postwhite supremacy. Whiteness retains its hegemonic normativity” (James 2009, 470). By maintaining systems of white dominance these terms solely help to perpetuate the fallacy of meritocracy and an equal playing field that plays into the current social structure. Instead of finding the systematic means of racial inequality, post-racist logic and terminologies continuously lead to blaming those of African descent and other people of color for not taking advantage of all of their newfound opportunities since race and racism are no longer impediments to their success. In addition, Peter Halewood correctly explains the problematic usage of post-racialist terms and concepts, when he argues that “self-congratulation on having

achieved a post-racial society is both premature and suspect, for encoded in claims of post-racialism is a sort of white triumphalism, a sense that race and racism have finally been delegitimized as the basis for black grievance” (Halewood 2009, 1049). However, the current lived realities speak to an accurate picture of the lives of African-descended people and others of color in relation to the realities of racism.

RACISM AND THE LIVED REALITY OF AFRICAN-DESCENDED PEOPLE IN AMERICA

This grasp of racism through the lens of a worldview analysis provides an alternative to most discussions of this topic. Contingent on any discussion of racism is the construct of race. While some argue that race is a social construct, these arguments fail to thoroughly discuss the lived reality connected to race. Race is both a social construct and a *lived* reality. It is this lived reality connected with race and racism that bears the evidentiary fruit of the continued existence of racism within the age of Obama. What follows are exemplary sketches of events that have taken place within the age of Obama that clearly convey that we are not in a post-racism moment.

As Valerie Rawlston Wilson of the National Urban League Policy Institute states in the 2009 Equality Index, “Ironically, even as an African American man holds the highest office in the country, African Americans remain twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty and more than six times as likely to be incarcerated” (Wilson 2009, 15). The conclusions of the 2009 and 2010 Equality Index published by the National Urban League still reflect a lived reality which shows minimal changes within the presidency of Barack Obama. The National Urban League’s Equality Index “can be interpreted as the relative status of blacks and whites in American society, measured according to five areas—economics, health, education, social justice and civic engagement” (Wilson 2010, 11). Of the five areas which the Equality Index measures, it was only in the realm of civic engagement that we see substantive change for 2010. As Wilson further states, “The [civic engagement] score primarily improved because of the large increase in black voter turnout during the 2008 election season.”² However, in regards to economics, health, education, and social justice, African Americans lag behind whites at an index rate of 67.2 percent for 2010, which is a decrease of .5 percent from 2009. The findings lead to an overall conclusion that rather than living in a post-racist America, most

African Americans and other people of color have little to no changes in their lived reality. In fact, these findings suggest that their conditions have not improved but have actually worsened. Yet there are other telltale signs regarding the falsity of a post-racist American in the age of Obama.

Educational opportunities function as one of many barometers in determining the continued maintenance of instructional structures that support the existence of race and racism as factors that impact the life chances of people of African ancestry within the United States. With the varied racial makeup of American classrooms, one would think that the teaching force would reflect these realities. Yet this is far from the truth. In fact, since the historic 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, teachers within American classrooms have continuously become whiter, further impacting the ways in which students of color construct images of educators, understand education, and realize the sociopolitical function of educational institutions.

While many pride the advances of *Brown*, many do not consider the devastating impact this decision had on the teaching profession for the African American community and by extension communities of color. Prior to 1954, 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of 2 million African American children. Within the first ten years of *Brown*, 38,000 African American teachers in Southern and border states lost their jobs. Between 1975 and 1985, African American students majoring in education declined by 66 percent. Throughout the mid-to-late 1980s, 37,000 teachers, including 21,000 African American teachers, were eliminated due to new teacher education requirements (Hudson and Holmes 1994, 389). In 2006, 87 percent of all teachers were caucasian/white, 6 percent African American, 4 percent Latino/a, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent Native American, 3 percent multiracial, and 3 percent self-identified as "other." However, while people of color within the U.S. make up over 25 percent of the population, they only make up just around 13 percent of the teaching population. Take the state of Texas, where 62 percent of the student population are students of color yet less than 33 percent of the teaching population are people of color. Or California, where 70 percent of the teaching force is white and female, with close to 65 percent of the teaching force including people of color.³ Or New York City, we find that in 2008 the rate of African American teachers steadily decreased from its position in 2000. The percentage of African American teachers dropped from 22 percent to 20 percent in 2008 while the rate for white teachers stayed consistent at 60 percent (Green 2008). The examples provided by Texas, California, and New York City support

the notion that through the mechanism of education, it is clear that structural inequality continues to persist. Furthermore, this inequality impacts another generation so much so that many of these students question the profession of education as a worthwhile career choice, especially given the fact that they have rarely experienced educators who look like them, think like them, and/or speak like them.

While education can be a factor in determining the future of people of African descent within American society, the conclusions of Algernon Austin suggest that education may not always trump race. In agreement with the conclusions of Michael Brown, et al., in their 2003 text *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-blind Society* (Brown et al. 2003), Algernon Austin of the Thora Institute concludes that “when one compare blacks and whites with each other, it is clear that whites have a distinct advantage [in regards to employment]. Blacks with high school diplomas have unemployment rates that are equivalent to white high school dropouts. Blacks with college degrees only do modestly better at finding work than whites with high school diplomas.”⁴

The structural barriers of advancement in America for people of African descent should be clear, whether in regards to poor educational outcomes, graduation rates, access to higher education, employment, and incarceration, the most recent data on black life in America is replete with examples that we are far from a post-racist America. In fact, the structural barriers to advancement are only coupled with the outright facts of racist and discriminatory acts towards people of African descent. What follows are exemplary sketches of events that have taken place within the age of Obama that clearly convey that we are not in a post-racism moment.

Since the election and subsequent inauguration of President Barack Hussein Obama, we have experienced telltale examples of the reality of racism and white supremacy living and breathing, alive and well in these United States of America, from simple media images that harken back to America’s racist past to continued discrimination or lack of access to public facilities. Even a close reading of discussions centering on President Obama speak to the reality of white supremacy and racism in this “age of Obama.”

Historically, the American media has been an outlet through which the foundational beliefs of American society are expressed. Sometimes under the guise of free speech, and other times through claims of ignorance, the American popular press has negatively depicted and stereotyped nonwhite populations. The *New York Post* cartoonist Sean Delanos’s February 18, 2009, depiction of a wild and violent chimpanzee being gunned down by

two white police officers reflects numerous assumptions regarding authority, power, and control, all placed within the hands of white police officers.⁵ In response to the proposed stimulus bill of the Obama administration, the caption from the white police officers states, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." Given the outcry by both people of color and white readers of the *Post*, along with high-profile community activists such as Al Sharpton, the *New York Post* would eventually apologize for publishing this cartoon. However, any basic knowledge of American race relations would suggest that the problem with this image is its connection to historical representations of African-descended people as primates or the intimidating control of the white power structure of the United States.

Western racial thought has historically connected blackness and people of African origin with being closely connected to primates. The Great Chain of Being exemplified by racial classificatory systems by the likes of Lord Henry H. Kames (1696–1782), Charles Caldwell (1772–1853) and Robert Knox (1791–1862) represent a sprinkling of the earlier presumptions made about African-descended people and primates, which became a foundational assumption of most monogenetic and polygenetic Enlightenment theories of race and racial difference (Jackson, Jr. and Weidman 2004, 39–54). This belief/assumption continued into the modern era with representations of King Kong's capturing of a white woman to the most recent representation found on the April 2008 edition of *Vogue*, depicting former Cleveland Cavaliers forward LeBron James and supermodel Gisele Bündchen.⁶ Each representation attempts to connect and establish the assumption that blackness is animalistic and supports racially motivated representations of African-descended people. Thus, when we see Delanos's *New York Post* cartoon, we are clearly aware of the historical development of these images in their connection to African-descended people, and more specifically, Barack Obama, with primates.

There is yet another dimension of racially motivated media representation at play here. The fact that the two officers who shoot this chimpanzee are white men seems to suggest that they are the real power brokers, those who have a final say in how change will actually develop. This unconscious assumption of white men being the final authority that stopped this wild chimpanzee from going out of control merely supports the historical assumption of whiteness being correct and normative, and thus the final word. This reading of Delanos's *New York Post* cartoon suggests that although we may have an African American man in office, the very basic thoughts and assumptions related to race and racism are still alive and well.

However, as previously stated, media becomes a rather straightforward outlet for the expression of unconscious racist thought. We can take, for instance, the recent depiction of Ohio state senator Nina Turner as Aunt Jemima in the November 25, 2009, edition of the *Call & Post*.⁷ Walt Carr's racist caricature depicts an older African American woman dressed as Aunt Jemima stirring the contents of a mixing bowl, with Nina Turner on her apron. The caption reads: "I be's the new leader." At face value, this may seem like an ordinary racist caricature but when we learn that the *Call & Post* is a predominately African American-read newspaper funded by Don King, we must rethink what is considered simplistic.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's model of the racialized social system provides clarity on State Senator Turner's representation in *Call & Post*. According to Bonilla-Silva, dominant racial groups develop a racial ideology that is then taken for granted by all socially constructed racial actors (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Thus, given the black-white binary, you will find African-descended people exhibiting a white racial ideology due to this being the functionally established racial ideology in a predominantly white society. On the surface, finding this racist caricature in a predominately African American publication may be surprising, but it only reflects the reality of white racial ideology and its negative consequences on racialized representations of African-descended people and other people of color.

Moving beyond the media, we can take the case of Omar Edwards, a second-year officer for the New York Police Department (NYPD), who was shot and killed by two fellow police officers (the primary shooter was white) on May 28, 2009 (Kovaleski 2009). Edwards, while off duty, drew his gun as he chased someone he found rummaging through his car and was eventually shot and killed by two NYPD police officers, a few blocks away from the Harlem Police Station where he worked.

The shock and outrage by community members and fellow police officers reflects the concerns about how something like this could have actually happened. How is it possible that an African American man could be shot and killed blocks from his precinct by two fellow NYPD officers? On November 16, 2009, a hearing held by law enforcement officials, scholars, and community activists delved into the topic of racially motivated police-on-police shootings.⁸ A similar public hearing took place on December 3, 2009, in Harlem, where Edwards was fatally shot. The shooting and killing of Omar Edwards speaks to the reality of being an African American male within a white dominated society that has historically seen African American men as a threat. Even though two people may both be law enforcers,

each has been affected by sociohistorically constructed images of African-descended people and more specifically African-descended males. Thus, in the case of the African-descended male as a threat, it is safer for a white officer to shoot first and ask questions later, even when it comes at the expense of an African life and a fellow officer.

Historically, conflict with law enforcement officers has represented an aspect of the lived experiences of African Americans. Juan Nunez, off-duty New York Police Department officer, along with four other Latinos participated in the assault of fifty-two-year old Daryl Jackson (Karoliszyn, et al. 2009). Jackson, who was aggressively panhandling, became the victim of this attack that included severe physical abuse and racial epithets including statements about “going back to Africa,” all from law enforcement officers of color. This example clearly supports the internalized racial ideology that people of color have fallen victim to in their attempt to survive in a society based upon white dominance. Latino/as and other people of color are all victims of the dominant racial ideology that has been imposed on them and developed by white Americans. Thus, the actions of Juan Nunez and company only speak to the internalization of white racial ideology among people of color.

Finally, the June 29, 2009, expulsion of over fifty northeast Philadelphia summer campers, from the Valley Swim Club in Huntingdon Valley is reflective of a long history of separate swimming facilities throughout the United States (Nunnally and Tillman 2009). This incident shut down Valley Swim Club for a number of days as they attempted to nullify their rather blatantly racist actions over concerns that these swimmers might “change the complexion” of their facilities. Luckily, in this instance, the U.S. Justice Department accused Valley Swim Club of racism in a federal suit in early January 2010, but the other telltale signs of racism that go uninvestigated suggest the reality of racism and white supremacy in America.

The above-mentioned examples only reflect a sampling of incidents that have taken place within the first 365 days of Obama’s presidency. Interestingly, these incidents fly in the face of post-racism and in fact support the reality of racism in the lived experiences of African-descended people and other people of color. Furthermore, these examples support the assumption that the structural nature of racism will be found in the public and private sector, throughout numerous institutions and rather blatantly, in print media. It is primarily through a well-constructed racial ideology used as the basis of a racialized social system that racism and white supremacy are maintained in the face of such assumed racial progress. Numerous

examples of racism in America abound. The aforementioned incidents provide evidence to refute the notion that America has entered a post-racial phase in the age of Obama.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided the manner by which one can understand the cultural and philosophical foundations of racism that are rooted in a unique European approach to reality. By utilizing an African-centered conceptual framework, centering on culture and worldview, this discourse provided a critical examination of the impossibilities of a post-racist America by investigating the lived experiences of African-descended people and other communities of color. Grasping racism and white supremacy at its cultural and philosophical roots allows for a radical reinterpretation of American racism and global white supremacy. The cultural root of racism institutionally and systematically implicates those of European ancestry. This infers that there is something culturally unique that has allowed a system of thought to develop that is based fundamentally on hierarchy and, more specifically, racial hierarchy. At the same rate, it is the philosophical roots of racism that move the implication of the maintenance of racism and white supremacy beyond white people and pulls people of color into a dialogue of social hierarchy based upon the cultural terms of the socially dominant. Thus, while people of color may be the victims of racism, many of the examples discussed suggest that people of color have internalized the dominant racial ideology and thus work to maintain the racially dominant assumptions developed by people of European ancestry. This analysis attempts to show that while we may be in “the Obama era,” we are far from a post-racist society due to the hegemonic nature of the European worldview and its impact upon people of color.

Notes

1. Many of the arguments in this section were previously developed in a previous publication. See Carroll 2008, 4–27.
2. Wilson, “Introduction to the 2010 Equality Index,” 12.
3. *Educational Data Partnership*, <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/articles/article.asp?title=teachers%20in%20california>.
4. Algernon Austin, “What Obama Did Not Say at Hampton: Education Is Not Enough,” http://thorainstitute.blogspot.com/2010_05_01_archive.html.

5. Available online at: <http://www.nypost.com/opinion/cartoons/delonas.htm>.
6. *Vogue*, April 2008.
7. "Metro Desk," *Call & Post*, November 18, 2009, http://www.cleveland.com/call-and-post/index.ssf/2009/11/an_editorial_frank_sinatra_sai.html.
8. First Deputy Superintendent Pedro J. Perez, *Governor's Task Force on Police-on-Police Shooting*, November 16, 2009.