SHADES OF COLOR BLINDNESS: RETHINKING RACIAL IDEOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

Ashley (“Woody”) Doane
University of Hartford

Color-blindness—the claim that race no longer “matters” in American society—serves as the dominant framework for making claims about the role of race in the United States. For many analysts (Carr 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2010a; Brown et al. 2003; Doane 2003; Gallagher 2003a), it has become the primary framework for understanding race in the twenty-first century. At the core of color-blindness is the belief that since the Civil Rights Movement was nearly a half-century ago and white attitudes have demonstrably changed, racism is no longer embedded in the U.S. social structure and no longer serves as an obstacle to success. If racial inequality persists, then it is due to actions (or inactions) on the part of minority group members.

It is also important to recognize that—as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) have argued in their seminal book Racial Formation in the United States—racial ideologies are constantly being rearticulated in response to political and social challenges. And as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010a, p. 10) observes, the “loose character” of the elements of color-blind racial ideology “allows for accommodation of contradictions, exceptions, and new information.” This means that color-blindness is not static—that it can adapt to new situations. Moreover, while color-blindness can be described as a dominant or hegemonic ideology in the United States in 2012, it is certainly not monolithic. I would suggest that it is opposed (at a minimum) by a perspective that claims that racism is embedded in the social and political institutions of the United States (a perspective that—following Feagin 2006—we might refer to as “systemic racism”) and a perspective that articulates an overt form of white supremacy or white nationalism. In short, color-blind racial ideology is continually evolving or changing in response
to both changing social and political circumstances and counter claims made by proponents of opposing ideologies.

As I have noted elsewhere (Doane 2006, 2007, 2010), this political struggle occurs via racial discourse—the collective text and talk of society in terms of issues of race. Public and private discourse serves as the link between macro-level racial ideologies and the micro-level understandings of groups and individuals—it is how our ideas about race both spread and evolve. Contemporary racial ideologies are communicated and contested through various media both print and electronic. In the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of the screen (television and computer) and the speed (and accessibility) of the internet both mean that racial discourse occurs at an increasingly rapid pace. If we think of racial discourse as a political arena, one in which ideologies are rearticulated as actors respond to both the challenges of racial events and the arguments of their ideological opponents, then we need to acknowledge that it is undergoing constant evolution.

For the purposes of this paper, it is also useful to consider the relationship between the media and color-blind racial ideology. In general, the media can be viewed as an institution, a set of social arrangements whose main role or function is to transmit information among and between social groups. Yet institutions reflect the divisions of wealth and power and the dominant ideologies of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Because the contemporary media exists in an increasingly globalized, post-industrial capitalist society, media outlets are increasingly consolidated under the control of a few large corporate actors McChesney 2008). This also means that media is a product and that decisions regarding programming and news coverage are driven, or at least shaped by, profit considerations (ratings, circulation, advertising, competition). Stories are followed not only for their newsworthiness, but
also for their presumed marketability. Individual actors—writers, directors, producers, editors and reporters—find that their roles (and their career prospects) take place within this context.

What does this mean for color-blind racial ideology? As the dominant explanation for the role of race in the United States, color-blindness shapes the lens through which the media presents racial issues to the larger society. To the extent that color-blindness downplays systemic racism and claims that racism is an individual issue, then the media will reflect this perspective. In particular, this would mean that news coverage would more likely focus more upon individual acts of racism (e.g., hate crimes or racially insensitive language) than subtle systemic issues (e.g., the disproportionate impact of mortgage lending upon blacks and Latinos).²

My goal in this paper is not to attempt a reanalysis of the nature of color-blind racial ideology—although we do need to recognize that frames and storylines are constantly evolving. While Bonilla-Silva (2010a) has called attention to the fluid nature of color-blind racial ideology, I believe that there is a general tendency among analysts to focus upon the structure of color-blindness rather than the ways in which it adapts and changes.³ I argue the case for a more nuanced view of color-blind racial ideology, one that moves beyond a simple focus on the denial of racism and instead emphasizes the ability to hold simultaneous—and contradictory—positions; for example, that racial inequality (and white privilege) persist but that racism is not widespread. This allows for such conflicting phenomena as color-blind diversity, the condemnation of racists, minority racism/white victimization, racial awareness in a “color-blind” society and reverse exceptionalism, all supported by an overarching belief that American society is fundamentally meritocratic. I conclude with the assertion that colorblind racial ideology is best understood as a fluid set of claims about the nature of race in the United States.
Seeing Color in a Color-Blind World: Color-Blind Diversity

Contrary to its name, color-blind racial ideology is not about the inability to see color or the lack of awareness of race. Even the often-used line “I don’t care if they are black, white, purple or green” demonstrates both an awareness of color/race and a centering of the black-white binary. The point of color-blindness is how we see color/race: in a “color-blind” world, race is most often (but not always) defined as a characteristic of individuals in a world where racism is no longer a major factor and race plays no meaningful role in the distribution of resources. In essence, race is reduced—in theory but not in practice—to another descriptor along the lines of “tall” or “left-handed.” To paraphrase Bonilla-Silva (2010a), what is left is “race without races.”

Interestingly, the view of race as an individual characteristic opens the door for color-blindness to embrace racial diversity. Over the past few decades, the idea of “diversity” has taken on iconic status in American society (Doane 2007; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Sherwood 2010). Communities, corporations, educational institutional institutions, the military and others have embraced the virtues of diversity and inclusion. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the media, as the “color-blind screen” displays diversity everywhere. Contemporary viewers see images of diversity (often carefully chosen) on news staffs, advertisements, sports coverage, entertainment, popular shows (crime, “reality” television) and even the self presentation of colleges and universities (on ads during football games and on university websites). This is not to imply that representation of peoples of color in the media is even remotely approaching parity, but that given the often hypervisibility of peoples of color to whites, the impact of diversity is likely to be exaggerated.

What makes diversity work from a color-blind standpoint is that it ostensibly supports its major ideological linchpin—the claim that race no longer matters. If we see that peoples of color
are visible participants in most spheres of life—and the “color-blind” eye has a tendency to exaggerate diversity—then have we not made great strides towards racial equality? If we turn on the television and see multimillionaire minority athletes and entertainers, then is racism truly a barrier? And if we see minority justices, high ranking government officials and, since 2008, a black president, have we not truly realized Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of living in a land where people are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character? It is through this logic that diversity and color-blindness are intertwined.

For individuals, diversity is generally very compatible with a color-blind worldview. As Joyce Bell and Douglas Hartmann (2007, p. 899) found, many people saw diversity as making life “more interesting” or “more exciting.” It then becomes possible to “consume” diversity through a kind of cultural tourism—going out for “ethnic” food, attending a multicultural festival—which in turn further solidifies the feeling of living in a post-racial society. For example, as Jason Rodriguez (2006) demonstrated, color-blind ideology enabled white youths to engage with and even appropriate hip-hop. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010a) discovered that white respondents often emphasized the nature of diversity in their lives—having friends of color, living in a diverse neighborhood—even if the degree of diversity or friendship was greatly exaggerated. In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, it is increasingly socially desirable for individuals to embrace diversity in order to substantiate their non-racist or post-racial standpoint. Beyond the psychological benefits of feeling virtuous (most of us want to live in a society where race does not matter) “doing” diversity also provides individuals with a credential to use in racially challenging situations.

Diversity, however, has its limits. What is often implicit (or explicit) is the assumption that diversity involves a degree of assimilation to white middle class/upper middle class norms
(Bell and Hartmann 2007). It is as if color-blindness has finally expanded the “melting pot” beyond its Eurocentric focus (Zangwill 1906) to include blacks, Latinos and Asians. To the extent that diversity rests upon assimilation, it is truly symbolic. There are also quantitative limits: token or symbolic inclusion is one thing, but the white majority has shown itself to become increasingly uncomfortable with being in the numerical minority in social settings, schools, neighborhoods and the United States as a whole (Gallagher 1997, 2003b; Farley and Frey 1994; Alba et al. 2005). Diversity is fine in a color-blind world, as long as things do not become too diverse.

What is most important about “color-blind diversity”—beyond the way in which it reinforces the claim that we have moved beyond race—is the absence of any meaningful challenge to the racial status quo. Diverse casts and commercials, successful athletes and entertainers, can all coexist along with racial disparities in income, wealth, poverty, education and incarceration. The inclusion and upward mobility of “diverse” individuals does not necessarily challenge the logic and the structure of an unequal racial order. Even the election of Barack Obama to the presidency—often cast as the symbolic pinnacle of American society—does not change the larger picture (Bonilla-Silva 2010b). As Gary Younge (2011) observed when discussing the brief elevation of African-American Herman Cain to “frontrunner” status in the 2011-2012 Republican primary campaign, “so long as the system remains intact, the identity of those administering it holds only symbolic relevance.”

**Racism in a Color-Blind World**

Given that one of the cornerstones of color-blind ideology is the rejection of race as a meaningful force in society, it would be reasonable to conclude that racism would be on the
periphery of the color-blind landscape—something to be downplayed or denied. In the post-Civil Rights era, ideologies of racial superiority and overt displays of racism are generally universally condemned. Indeed, charges of racism and the label of “racist” carry a social stigma that is so extreme that individuals will go to great lengths to avoid them. Speakers use rhetorical shields (e.g., I am not a racist, but . . .), code words and other tactics (including embracing diversity) in an attempt to inoculate themselves against possible accusations of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010a; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). When claims of racism are made, a strong defensive reaction is evoked and the focus of discussion shifts from the issue at hand to the charge itself (Doane 1996, 2006). What follows is a series of claims and counter-claims, where persons leveling accusations of racism can be problematized as engaging in “name-calling,” being “oversensitive” or “playing the race card” (Essed 1991; Doane 1996).

Nevertheless, color-blindness and claims of racism can coexist quite comfortably. In the color-blind world, racism is defined not as a group-based system of oppression that is embedded in social institutions, but instead as individual prejudice or discrimination. This individualization of racism means that it is generally viewed as the isolated acts of “ignorant” individuals or extremist “hate groups” on the fringes of society. Even seemingly institutional acts—e.g., racial profiling by police—can be reduced to the actions of racist individuals. The near universal condemnation of these actions can then be taken as evidence of the fact that the United States has truly moved beyond race. If action is needed, it is more education to address racial “ignorance.”

So what happens when a potential case of racism emerges? In the “color-blind” society, this involves individual actions—most often racially charged or insensitive statements. Here, a few high profile national cases can prove instructive:
• In November of 2006 actor and comedian Michael Richards, best known for his role as Cosmo Kramer in the popular television sitcom *Seinfeld*, responded to hecklers during his stand-up routine in a Hollywood comedy club with a series of racial epithets and a reference to lynching before walking off the stage. As video recordings of the incident spread across the country, Richards responded with apologies on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, on civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson’s radio show, and in a telephone call to activist Rev. Al Sharpton (Farhi 2006; CBS News 2006; CNN 2006). Richards explained the tirade as the result of flying into a “rage” and asserted that he was “not a racist” (MSNBC 2006); however, he subsequently announced his retirement from comedy and has generally remained out of the public eye.

• In early April of 2007, noted radio personality Don Imus sparked a firestorm after making racially derogatory remarks about players from the NCAA tournament runner-up Rutgers University women’s basketball team. After a week of debate, which included an apology by Imus and calls for his firing by Rev. Jackson and Rev. Sharpton, CBS first suspended Imus for two weeks and then fired him (CBSnews 2007). After a period off the air, Imus eventually returned to radio later that year with another network and has continued broadcasting up to the present.

• In January of 2008, Golf Channel anchor Kelly Tilghman commented that young golfers who wanted to challenge star golfer Tiger Woods for supremacy in the world of golf should “lynch him in a back alley.” As word of the comment spread and a national discussion began, Tilghman’s situation was helped by a statement from Woods that “there was no ill-intent in her comments” (Golf 2008). Despite calls for her firing, including from the Rev. Sharpton, the Golf Channel responded by suspending Tilghman
for two weeks and stating that there was “no place on our network for offensive language like this” (Golf 2008). Tilghman continues to work as an anchor and commentator on the Golf Channel.

Each of these cases serves as a “racial morality play” in three acts: a cycle of transgression, “trial” and either exoneration or atonement/punishment. In the contemporary United States, racial transgressions may be public words and acts, or less visible writings that are unearthed at a later date (sometimes by political opponents). The “trial” is public, and takes place in newspapers, on television, talk radio, websites (including You Tube) and the blogosphere. Outcomes are determined by a range of factors (this is an issue worthy of separate investigation), including the power of advocates, responses of the parties involved, economic interests, and media coverage. This cycle of crime and punishment, especially when it involves public figures, is also attractive to a media that is concerned with audience attention. A resolution is reached and the media’s (and society’s) gaze turns elsewhere, much in the same manner that other news stories lose their currency after a brief period of interest.

With respect to color-blind racial ideology, what is significant is that whatever the outcome of the racial morality play, the institutions involved (e.g., CBS, the Golf Channel) and, by extension, the larger community have reaffirmed their commitment to “tolerance” and “diversity”—to being “non-racist.” Following the classical sociologist Emile Durkheim (1933), it is a transgression that ultimately strengthens the social order. What is overlooked is that none of this remotely addresses larger issues of structural racism and racial inequality. Any mention of such issues is consigned to the periphery of public discourse amidst the overarching focus on the charge of racism. And in the end, the dominant claim that society is color-blind emerges all the stronger because society has “dealt” with racism.
This process also takes place on smaller stages—the regional, local and even institutional levels. One such event occurred in my local media. Following a lengthy federal investigation, four East Haven, Connecticut police officers were charged with a range of crimes involving the long term abuse of power (harassment of motorists, false arrests, illegal searches and intimidation) towards the city’s Latino community (Altimari et al., 2012). At the conclusion of a media interview, the mayor of the city responded to a question about what he was going to do for the Latino community by saying “I might have tacos when I go home” (Hernandez and Charlton 2102:A7). Not surprisingly, this remark produced a barrage of criticism from community activists, the governor (who called the mayor’s comments “repugnant”) and the largest statewide newspaper, the Hartford Courant, which ran a lead editorial titled “The Mayor is an Idiot” (Munoz 2012; Hartford Courant 2012). The mayor apologized and defenders cited his dedication to the community but calls for his resignation continued, including a protest that involved delivering hundreds of tacos to the mayor’s office (Munoz et al. 2012). Whether or not the mayor will ride out the storm (another outcome of the morality play) remains to be determined. What did happen, however, is that the larger issues of police abuse and systemic racism were deflected to the side; for example, a comment by the president of the local NAACP that “the issue of racism is embedded in the community. It’s pervasive” (Munoz 2012) was buried in the inside pages of the newspaper and not addressed in the larger debate. Once again, the story of the individual “racist” was much more compelling to the media and its audience than the broader sociological issues.

There is another dimension to this process through which the “color-blind society” cleanses itself of racism. Because societal racism is viewed as a thing of the past, and because racism is defined as a deed (prejudice and/or discrimination) committed by a dwindling number
of isolated individuals, it then “logically” follows that anyone—white, black, Latino, Asian or Native American—can be racist (Doane 2006). In other words, black racism, white racism, Latino and other racisms are all on a par with each other in an analytical framework that is torn from history and separated from social institutions. This idea is so embedded in American society that to suggest—as a university professor did when proposing a course titled “White Racism”—that the only relevant form of racism in the United States is white racism is to invite an avalanche of criticism (Doane 2006). The idea of “minority racism” has become a basic tenet of colorblind racial ideology, which in turn means that people of color can also be subjected to the “racial morality play.”

Once again, a few recent examples of so-called “minority racism” help illustrate this point.

- During the 2008 presidential campaign, racism became an issue when the media—led by ABC News—began airing video recordings and citing quotations from sermons given by then-candidate Barack Obama’s pastor—the Reverend Jeremiah Wright—over a 20 year period. In segments that were shown on television, Wright was harshly critical of racism in American society, with such statements as "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme" (Ross and El-Buri 2008). While Obama immediately sought to distance himself from Rev. Wright’s comments, the media debate that followed—including charges of racism against Wright (Limbaugh 2008; Sowell 2008)—threatened to derail Obama’s candidacy. In response, Obama delivered a speech on race on March
18, 2008 that was generally very well received and eventually quieted the controversy. Interestingly, in the course of the speech, Obama talked about (and essentially equated) both black anger and white resentment. He spoke of how for black Americans “the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and bitterness of those years.” After acknowledging the reality of this anger, Obama then immediately observed that “a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race” (New York Times 2008). Without this device—what might be regarded as a concession to color-blind ideology—it is less likely that Obama’s speech would have been so successful in ending the controversy. Later that spring, after a second controversy involving Rev. Wright and another issue involving a guest speaker, the Obamas resigned from the church and ended any affiliation with Rev. Wright (Raum 2008).

- In the spring of 2009, President Obama nominated federal appeals court judge Sonia Sotomayor to fill a vacancy on the United States Supreme Court. Following her nomination, media attention focused upon a 2001 speech in which she said that “I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life” (Savage 2009). Opponents of the nomination criticized Sotomayor, claiming that the implication that Latinas could make better decisions proved that Sotomayor was a racist (Ellerson 2009). The issue did come up during Sotomayor’s confirmation hearings during the summer, but she deflected criticism by stating that “I want to state up front, unequivocally and without doubt: I do not believe that any ethnic, racial or
gender group has an advantage in sound judging” (CNN 2009). Justice Sotomayor was eventually confirmed by the Senate.

- In the summer of 2010, a racially-based controversy emerged when videos surfaced (posted by a conservative activist) that showed a United States Department of Agriculture official, Shirley Sherrod, giving a speech to a NAACP audience discussing how she withheld assistance from a white farmer the first time that one came to her for help (Fox News 2010). In the wake of widespread criticism, the Department of Agriculture soon announced that Sherrod had resigned her position. Shortly thereafter, it was found that the clip had been taken out of context and that Sherrod was actually telling a story about how the request had evoked conflicting feelings within her (her father had been murdered by unidentified whites) but that she eventually helped the couple save their farm (Stolberg et al. 2010). The story immediately shifted from one of racism to one of change and embarrassed administration officials offered Sherrod an apology and a new job (which she declined).

As before, the racial morality plays ground to their various outcomes and society’s attention eventually turned elsewhere. And as before, the color-blind society buttressed its non-racist credentials by calling to account individuals who were perceived as racist. But by putting “racists of color” on trial, color-blind America has demonstrated that racism is a ubiquitous phenomenon. And if anyone can be racist, then there is no reason to consider issues of systemic racism. Once again, the final outcome of these public discussions of racism was to affirm the hegemonic status of color-blindness.
Both color-blind racial ideology and the United States as a “color-blind society” are rife with contradictions. One of the purposes of ideologies is to manage contradictions, most notably conflicts between ideological claims and gaps between ideological claims and material conditions. Throughout the history of the United States, racial ideologies have worked to explain the contradictions between slavery, segregation, conquest and exclusion and the ideals of democracy. In the twenty-first century, the role of color-blindness is to manage the contradictions between the realities of race and the ideal of a post-racial society. As I have outlined above, color-blind ideology has proven itself more than capable of coexisting with both “diversity” and “racism.”

I think that there is a tendency among social theorists and social scientists to expect too much ideological and behavioral consistency from human beings. Nowhere is this more true than with respect to race. Perhaps the ideal metaphor for our view of race in the United States is the scene in the movie The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy opens the door after her house has landed in Oz and the movie (initially set in Kansas) changes from black and white to color. The difference is that in the “color-blind” United States, we continually shift back and forth from color-blindness to seeing color. And, like Dorothy, we continually struggle to balance our understandings nurtured in color-blind Kansas with the challenges of life in Oz where colors are powerfully visible.

As the idea of color-blind racial ideology has emerged as a core concept for analyzing race in the contemporary United States, those of us who study the issue tend to cast matters into a dichotomy between classical/old racism with overtly racist ideologies and new racism/color-blindness as a more subtle form of racism. I am not convinced that matters are this clear. While
all evidence indicates that there has been a steep decline in those who advocate ideas of biological superiority and inferiority, the ongoing influence of racial stereotypes and “cultural racism” (claims of group-based pathologies in family, work and educational values) suggest that we should be careful in pushing too far with claims of color-blindness. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010a: 39-41), who includes “cultural racism” as one of the key frames in his analysis of color-blind racial ideology, also notes the tendency of respondents to use it in a “crude” or overt manner. When we make broad claims about group cultural deficiencies, has our worldview really changed that much? We may deny the existence of systemic racism, but we are clearly saying that race still “matters.”

I would like to put forward the idea that for many individuals, it is possible to move back and forth between color-blindness and more traditional forms of racism. As some researchers have observed (Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007), overt racism is common in private or “backstage” settings. What has changed is that the overwhelming majority of people have—despite complaints about “political correctness”—learned to be more guarded in expressing thoughts or ideas that are more openly racist. And if they are called to account, there are an array of strategies that can be used, including explanations (“I was tired” or “I wasn’t thinking”), apologies (and stressing one’s nonracist credentials), and a range of rhetorical devices (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2010a:53-72 on “how to talk nasty about minorities without sounding racist”).

Race awareness also comes to the fore in choices that people make. As Michael Emerson et al. (2001) found, the presence of blacks in a neighborhood matters—and it matters more for families with children. And once a neighborhood becomes 15 percent black, whites are very unlikely to move in. Similarly, Heather Beth Johnson and Thomas Shapiro (2003:186) found that “race is on the minds of white Americans, and they are thinking about it when it comes to
neighborhood and school choice.” Images of “good neighborhoods” and “good schools” are racially bounded. Multiple other studies support this point. I contend that these decisions are reached in a framework that is not color-blind—even if they are masked in code words.

And, in an area often overlooked by color-blind theorists, race awareness occurs at the level of the subconscious. The media plays a key role in the creation and reproduction of racial stereotypes. Television news transmits images that highlight the perceived relationship between race and crime (Bjornstrom et al. 2010). Drama shows reproduce racial stereotypes using nonverbal cues (Weisbuch et al. 2009). Sportscasts reinforce the connection between race and ability (Buffington and Fraley 2011). And research shows that resumes with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely to be called for interviews than resumes with African-American sounding names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). In short, even when the screen is black and white—when we are not focusing upon race—the reception is in color.

**Inequality and Color-Blindness: The Ultimate Contradiction**

Without a doubt, the cornerstone of color-blind racial ideology is its attempt to address the persistence of racial inequality in the United States in the twenty-first century. If race no longer matters in American society, then why—nearly 50 years after the main accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement—are there such stark differences in terms of income, wealth, poverty and education? This is the ultimate contradiction, the ultimate hurdle. Any other issue is secondary. Unless color-blind racial ideology can provide a reasonable answer to this question, it fails.

Given the centrality of this issue—indeed, the claim that racism no longer matters in explaining racial inequality is often presented as one of the defining features of color-blind racial
ideology—it is surprising that color-blind theorists have not devoted more analytical attention to how racial inequality is explained in contemporary American society. Bonilla-Silva (2010a, 2) has—quite correctly, in my view—emphasized “cultural racism” and “naturalization” (the claim that racial inequality is due to a combination of market forces and the aggregate choices of individuals—which “happen” to produce unequal outcomes) as two dominant frames that are used to explain racial inequality. While both frames are evident in current discourse, I think that there is a deeper problem. Because the cultural racism frame relies upon more overt statements of racial difference, it becomes more difficult to sustain in a color-blind context. To make broad public statements about the deficient values of racial groups is to risk condemnation for being “racist.” Similarly, the claim of “naturalization” is difficult to sustain as it is statistically impossible for existing racial disparities to be due to chance. It might be possible, given the general atmosphere of color-blind racial ideology, that many Americans are as unaware of the scope of racial inequality as they are of the demographic composition of the United States (I know that my students are regularly surprised by the extent of racial gaps in income, wealth, poverty, and education). Mainstream media coverage of racial inequality is generally limited to a brief mention of disparities in income, poverty and unemployment when data are released by government agencies—and where race is generally not the focus of the article. Some antiracist organizations present studies of racial inequality; however, their work is usually buried amidst more “interesting” news. Nevertheless, ignorance and/or denial of racial inequality do not make a sustainable explanation.

Available research on social explanations for racial inequality shows a pattern that is notable for its inconsistency. Matthew Hunt (2007), using General Social Survey data, traced beliefs about black/white inequality over nearly three decades. Among his interesting findings
was that respondents used a variety of conflicting explanations, with relatively equal percentages selecting person-centered (ability and/or motivation), structural (lack of educational opportunities and/or discrimination) and mixed (both person-centered and structural) modes of explanation. Similarly, Paul Croll (2011; see also Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll 2009) found that most American Mosaic Survey respondents used both structural and individual explanations to understand black disadvantages and white advantages. And Heather Beth Johnson (2006), in a qualitative study of race, wealth and inequality, found that white respondents simultaneously employed structural (inherited wealth) and individual (hard work) explanations for their success.

Interestingly, all three researchers found similar mixed and contradictory patterns among respondents of color in explanations for racial inequality, although there are differences from whites in the greater use of structural as opposed to individual explanations. This is compatible with other work that finds blacks influenced by color-blindness but less so that whites, with Asian-Americans and Latinos in the middle (Bonilla-Silva 2010; O’Brien 2008). I contend that this illustrates the strength of the two dominant ideologies for explaining inequality in American society: color-blindness and meritocracy. I also suspect that for respondents of color, some belief in the openness of the system is necessary to retain hope for oneself and one’s children. Students of color in my race classes often write in essays that there may be barriers that they will have to face, but they can be surmounted—a perspective that combines optimism and realism.

Another issue in understanding explanations of racial inequality is the defensive aspect of color-blindness. If “anyone” can be racist, then it is possible for whites, particularly during times of economic stress or when privileges are challenged to respond in a reactive manner and claim that “they [people of color] are the racist ones” (Bonilla-Silva 2010a, 62-66). Over the past few years, claims of “minority racism”—such as those mentioned in this chapter—received
considerable attention in the conservative media. Likewise, politicians inveighing against “illegal” immigrant workers, food stamps, and “sharia law” all contribute to a picture of (white) America under attack. With often exaggerated views of the scope of affirmative action, it is easy to claim that “reverse discrimination”—viewed as a violation of the norms of equality in a post-racial society—is a pervasive problem. Not surprisingly, recent studies (Norton and Summers 2011; Jones et al. 2011, Blake 2011), show that white Americans are increasingly likely to see racism against whites as a more significant social problem than racism against minorities. These studies found that a plurality of whites support the view that when it comes to racism, whites are the new victims. This is the “white resentment” that Barack Obama felt compelled to address in his 2008 speech on race (New York Times 2008). In this context, it is certainly possible to imagine an increase in overt racial mobilization among whites in the future.

This matrix of contradictory perspectives on racial inequality presents complications for color-blind racial ideology. Indeed, to continue with the screen metaphors, explanations for racial inequality are reminiscent (for those of us of a certain age) of the early color television sets that required viewers to adjust “hue” and “tint” and still be left with a distorted image. It is more difficult to sustain the claim that race doesn’t matter in explaining racial inequality when a significant number of Americans use—at least in part—structural explanations for racial inequality. While “cultural racism” and “naturalization” will continue to be used, buttressed by a seemingly global belief in meritocracy, color-blind racial ideology will need to continue to evolve if it is to maintain its hegemonic status.

I think that one possible outcome will be linked to ongoing changes in the racial and ethnic demography of the United States—and the prediction that by 2050 the United States will be a “majority minority” society (Passel and Cohn 2008). Some theorists (Bonilla-Silva 2004;
Yancey 2003) have predicted the eventual restructuring of racial boundaries and the U.S. racial order. In his “Latin-Americanization” thesis, Bonilla-Silva (2004) predicts that race in the United States will become fluid—along the lines of Latin-American and Caribbean societies—which, ironically, will make racial inequality and color-blindness more difficult to challenge. Along with this restructuring of boundaries, I think it likely that social status will increasingly be determined by a socially defined combination of race and class. “Color-blind diversity” as described above makes it possible for whites to consider “successful” blacks and Latinos as part of the social mainstream. From the *Cosby Show* to sports to the White House, more whites are willing to accept peoples of color as family members, neighbors, classmates, co-workers and even leaders—especially if they “assimilate” to white middle class/upper class society. Where class comes in is that while white-dominated society will increasingly be willing to accept upper class and middle class blacks and Latinos, it will exclude those who are poor or who live in hypersegregated and low income neighborhoods.

This outcome may be described as “reverse exceptionalism.” In the past, when being black carried a heavy social stigma, a successful black was viewed as “exceptional,” as a “credit to his race” (which was otherwise degraded). If my prediction comes to pass, the new racial order will find blacks and Latinos increasingly accepted as a group, but those on the economic margins will be viewed as a “discredit” to their race (which is otherwise viewed positively). So instead of the “not all blacks are lazy but most are” that Bonilla-Silva (2010a p. 48) describes, the discourse will shift to “many/most blacks and Latinos are hardworking, but some are really lazy.” This nuanced use of race and class would enable the use of individualistic explanations (family values, work ethic) instead of cultural racism to explain the status of lower class blacks and Latinos without fear of being called racist (after all, the speaker has just claimed that most
minorities are hardworking). In the past, the question was often “if Italians and Jews and Japanese can be successful, why can’t blacks?” In the future, the question may well be “if Oprah can create an economic empire and Obama can become President, why can’t other blacks and Latinos succeed?” This singling out of a small segment of minority communities is, in my opinion, well underway, particularly in areas such as poverty, welfare, and crime (Quadagno 1994; Alexander 2010). To the extent that “reverse exceptionalism” becomes embedded in color-blind racial ideology, racial inequality will become even more difficult to challenge.

Conclusion

What are the implications of the above for color-blind racial ideology? In this paper, I have presented a view of color-blindness that is complex—to the extent that it is appropriate to speak of “shades of color-blindness.” I have argued that color-blind racial ideology is constantly being rearticulated in response to political challenges and changing social contexts. And I have attempted to demonstrate how color-blindness is fluid enough to incorporate both “diversity” and “racism.” Finally, I have explored the hole in the center of color-blindness: the contradictions that lie underneath its central task, that of explaining (or explaining away) the persistence of racial inequality in the United States. I believe that it is essential that those seeking to understand and critique color-blindness emphasize its complexity and fluidity as well as its structure. Our analyses must be as adaptable as the ideologies that we seek to explain.12

In pointing toward a direction for future research, I think that it is important to recognize that meritocracy—the claim that success reflects ability and effort (but not inherited advantages)—plays an important and understudied role in color-blind racial ideology. While the claim of meritocracy has been used to defend class-based inequality in the United States for
more than a century (and has become embedded in American culture), it has received much less attention from those studying racial ideologies. For the most part, this reflects the history of racial domination, where claims of racial superiority and inferiority were long used to justify racial differences (and any “merit” was biologically based). But as Johnson (2006) has emphasized, meritocracy is important to color-blindness as the flip side of cultural racism. If we turn our attention from the disadvantages of minorities to the advantages of whites, then the first explanation that surfaces from meritocracy is the role of “hard work.” In many ways, this is the hidden component of color-blindness. If so, then any meaningful challenge to color-blindness will have to contest the hegemony of meritocracy.

What is the road ahead for those who seek to contest the hegemony of color-blindness? It is important to continue to illustrate the reach of color-blindness into virtually every aspect of popular discourse and to provide a critical assessment of its claims. The work of scholars (e.g., Montagu 1974) played an important role in undermining the intellectual credibility of classical racism. And the media, while it does not create change, can play an important role in the spread of new ideas and demands for change—as we saw during the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011. Yet institutions change slowly and only in response to changes in the larger society. Despite the contributions of academics and the media, it eventually took the work of social movements (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement) to change the U.S. racial order. A current challenge to the claim that meritocracy is a defining feature of American society has been mounted by the Occupy Wall Street Movement with its assertion of the fundamental unfairness of an economic system that is run for the benefit of the 1% of wealthiest Americans. This claim, if it gains traction in the media and in popular culture, creates new possibilities for countering color-blind ideology.

While the mainstream media has become increasingly controlled by large corporations, the expansion of the internet has allowed space for voices that challenge the hegemony of color-blind racial ideology. For an example of a site that provides a critical perspective on color-blindness, see www.racismreview.com. For an analysis of the use of the internet by white supremacists, see Daniels (2009). The sides may be unequal, but ideological competition still takes place.

In many ways the study of society embodies a tension between the study of social structure (the organization of society at any one point in time) and the study of social change. Given the complexity of change, the eye of the analyst is often more readily drawn to understanding society at a particular moment.

Entering the *exact* phrase “I don’t care if they are black, white, purple or green” into Google’s advanced search produced 2000 results. Entering the *exact* phrase “I don’t care what color they are” produced 246,000 results. The point is that phrases such as these are widely used in an attempt to demonstrate the speaker’s indifference to race.

When I asked students in my race and ethnic relations class what happened when there was a racial incident in their town or high school, the overwhelming response was that “we would have an assembly.” Such events provide a forum for expressions of hurt and outrage. The assembled group then reaffirms its commitment to “tolerance” and the community moves to place the episode in the past.

For additional information on this episode, see www.courant.com/maturo.

“Cultural racism” differs from classical racism in that social and economic differences are *not* attributed to biological/genetic causes but are instead viewed as grounded in deficient group values or culture. Blame is placed upon a poor work ethic, single-parent families and a lack of commitment to education and it is claimed that these “dysfunctional” values are then passed from one generation to the next. The problem with this is that it involves stereotyping all members of a racial group (with perhaps a few exceptions) as sharing the same negative values.

At the core of “naturalization” is the view that racial disparities are not due to racism or race-conscious choices, but instead reflect individual preferences and social/market forces that have “nothing to do with race.” For example, as I found in a study of a school desegregation debate (Doane 1996), concentrations of whites in certain neighborhoods and schools were claimed to be the simple result of housing choices made by individual families. And as Bonilla-Silva (2010a) points out, speakers may combine naturalization with other types of explanations such as “cultural racism” in a discussion of racial issues.
For example, the organization United for a Fair Economy released a report of racial inequality in the United States, “State of the Dream 2012” (Sullivan et al. 2012), on Martin Luther King Day. It was only briefly mentioned in the national media.

The General Social Survey or GSS is a series of national surveys that have been conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago since 1972 to track how the opinions of Americans have changed over the past four decades. It is one of the most widely used sources of survey data by social scientists. For more information, see www.gss.norc.org.

The American Mosaic Project was a multiyear, multimethod study of issues of diversity in the United States. Conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota, survey results in the study came from a nationally representative sample contacted by telephone (random-digit dialing). For further details, see Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2006).

My point is that while theorists such as Omi and Winant and Bonilla-Silva have mentioned the fluid nature of racial ideologies, the tendency in practice is to apply existing frameworks—such as Bonilla-Silva’s masterful analysis of color-blindness—rather than look for changing patterns.
References


Younge, Gary. “What’s Race Got to Do with Herman Cain?” The Nation 26 December 2011, 10.