The Possessive

Investment

in Whiteness

George Lipsitz

Bill Moore's Body

*I began to suspect that white people did not act
as they did because they were white, but for
some other reason, and I began to try to locate
and understand the reason.*   -JAMES BALDWIN

This book argues that both public policy and private prejudice have cre-
ated a "possessive investment in whiteness" that is responsible for the
racialized hierarchies of our society. I use the term "possessive invest-
ment" both literally and figuratively. Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for
advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing se-
cured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educations allocated to
children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment
opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from
present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational
transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to suc-
ceeding generations. I argue that white Americans are encouraged to invest in
whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources,
power, and opportunity. This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and
cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology
or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and
continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, pres-
tige, and opportunity.

   The term "investment" denotes time spent on a given end, and this book
also attempts to explore how social and cultural forces encourage white people

to expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness. Despite intense and frequent disavowal that whiteness means anything at all to those so designated, recent surveys have shown repeatedly that nearly every social choice that white people make about where they live, what schools their children attend, what careers they pursue, and what policies they endorse is shaped by considerations involving race.' I use the adjective "possessive" to stress the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society, to connect attitudes to interests, to demonstrate that white supremacy is usually less a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt than a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility. Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others. While one can possess one's investments, one can also be possessed by them. I contend that the artificial construction of whiteness almost always comes to possess white people themselves unless *they* develop antiracist identities, unless they disinvest and divest themselves of their investment in white supremacy.

I hope it is clear that opposing whiteness is not the same as opposing white people. White supremacy is an equal opportunity employer; nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards. One way of becoming an insider is by participating in the exclusion of other outsiders. An individual might even secure a seat on the Supreme Court on this basis. On the other hand, if not every white supremacist is white, it follows that not all white people have to become complicit with white supremacy, that there is an element of choice in all of this. White people always have the option of becoming antiracist, although not enough have done so. We do not choose our color, but we do choose our commitments. We do not choose our parents, but we do choose our politics. Yet we do not make these decisions in a vacuum; they occur within a social structure that gives value to whiteness and offers rewards for racism.

I write this book in response to the crisis that confronts us in regard to race. But as with most books, its origins are complex and complicated. Perhaps the best way I can situate my engagement with the possessive investment in whiteness is to relate my connection to a crime that took place more than thirty-five years ago when I was a teenager. On April 23, 1963, Bill Moore was shot to death at close range alongside a highway in northern Alabama. The thirty-five-year-old father of three children received two .22 caliber slugs in his head and one in his neck.

When Moore was murdered, he was just beginning a one-man civil rights

march from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. A white man raised in the deep South but working as a postman in Baltimore, Moore had been horrified in 1962 by Mississippi governor Ross Barnett's role in fighting the desegregation of the University of Mississippi. When a federal court judge had to intervene to order the university to admit a fully qualified twenty-nine-year-old air force veteran as its first black student, Barnett pledged resistance, declaring the state's authority to be superior to that of the federal government. President Kennedy sent National Guard troops to Mississippi to force compliance with the court's order, but a rioting mob of whites resisted with a rampage that left two people dead and almost four hundred injured. [2]

Distressed by the violence in Mississippi, Moore asked himself what he could do to help. He had recently moved from Binghamton, New York, to Baltimore for the express purpose of becoming active in the front lines of the civil rights movement. Encouraged by the positive publicity surrounding a march on the Maryland state capital that had been organized by the Baltimore chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality earlier that year, Moore decided that he would stage his own one-man march. Playing on his identity as a postman, he decided to "deliver a letter" expressing support for integration to Governor Barnett. In his message, Moore advised the Mississippi governor "not to go down in infamy as one who fought the democracy for all which you have not the power to prevent." [3]

Born in upstate New York, Moore had moved to Mississippi as a child. As an adult, he continued to express great affection for the South and its people. He felt particularly embarrassed by Mississippi's image as a bastion of white supremacy. "I dislike the reputation this state has acquired as being the most backward and most bigoted in the land," he asserted in his letter to Barnett. "Those who truly love Mississippi must work to change this image." Before starting his journey, Moore left a letter for President Kennedy at the White House advising the president, "I am not making this walk to demonstrate either Federal rights or state rights, but individual rights. I am doing it to illustrate that peaceful protest is not altogether extinguished down there. I hope that I will not have to eat those words." [4]

Moore rode by bus from Washington, D.C., to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he began his march on April 21, pulling a small two-wheeled postal cart containing his belongings. He wore two placards, sandwich-board style, on his chest and back. One read, "Equal Rights for All: Mississippi or Bust"; the other read, "Black and White: Eat at Joe's." On the first days of his trip one white woman smiled at him and another bought him a milkshake, but most of the

whites he encountered (and at least one of the blacks) greeted him with jeers and arguments. In Georgia, one group of young white males shouted threats at Moore from a passing car, and another group pelted the postman with rocks and stones. A news broadcaster for WGAD reported that the Gadsden, Alabama, radio station had received an anonymous telephone call hours before the shooting reporting Moore's entrance into Etowah County, advising that "there might be a news story of consequence."[5] Moore walked through Gadsden on the afternoon of April 23; a passing motorist discovered his body that night on the pavement of U.S. Highway 11 near Attalia, about ten miles from Gadsden. The sandwich board signs, stained with blood, lay a few feet from his body. Investigators found fifty-one dollars in Moore's pocket and a diary among his possessions. An entry for April 23 noted that he had been confronted by two men who had learned about his walk from television news reports and warned him that he would not finish the march alive. In a final entry he wrote that "a couple of men who had talked to me before, drove up and questioned my religious and political beliefs and one was sure I'd be killed for them."[6]

Even Alabama's segregationist governor George Wallace publicly condemned the shooting as "a dastardly act," and he offered a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Moore's assailant.[7] Alabama authorities filed charges almost immediately against the operator of a store and filling station near Fort Payne, Alabama, Floyd L. Simpson, who had been seen speaking with Moore on the day of the murder. The indictment accused Simpson of killing William L. Moore "unlawfully and with malice aforethought."[8] An FBI ballistics test on the bullets found in Moore's body and on a .22 caliber rifle belonging to Simpson led to Simpson's arrest. The case was referred to a grand jury, and Simpson was released on $5,000 bond. Outside the glare of national publicity the grand jury deliberated slowly and in mid-September announced its refusal to indict Simpson-or anyone-for Moore's murder. The results of the ballistics tests were not made public. Grand jury foreman Robert Tinsley explained that several witnesses had been called, but he refused to explain why no indictment was issued.[9]

In the meantime, civil rights activists had responded immediately to Moore's murder. An integrated group of more than one hundred students in Nashville, Tennessee, marched from the chapel at Fisk University, a historically black institution, to the city's Federal Building carrying signs proclaiming "Moore Died for Love. Let's Live and Act in Love" and "William Moore. Who Will Be Next?"[10] Diane Nash Bevel led a delegation of eight black civil rights workers from Birmingham to Gadsden to take up the letter carrier's march at

the spot where he was killed. Not sponsored by any organized civil rights group, the eight participants in the march told reporters that "they hoped to prove that a person preaching love of his fellow man, as Mr. Moore had, could walk safely though Alabama."[11] Members of the group intended to walk all the way to Jackson and were encouraged during the first hour of their march when they received positive comments from white spectators along their route. But Etowah County Sheriff's Office deputies soon arrested all eight marchers, charging them with "peace disturbance."

One week later, civil rights advocates announced another attempt to resume Bill Moore's march. Marvin Rich, community relations director of the Congress of Racial Equality, explained from the group's national headquarters in New York, "This is to give the people of Alabama and America another chance. William Moore traveled through this country to express his hopes for equality and justice and he died. This was a failure for the people of Alabama and the people of America."[12] When the group of six white and six black demonstrators started their walk from the Greyhound Bus Station in Chattanooga, bystanders taunted them and threatened them with violence. "Hope you stop a.22," one white man shouted to the group, in reference to the bullets that killed Bill Moore. On the second day of the marchers' journey, a convoy of cars filled with whites chased them across the Alabama-Tennessee border, throwing rocks and bottles and screaming, "Throw them niggers in the river" and "Kill them." Officers of the Alabama Highway Patrol met the march at the border and arrested the civil rights demonstrators for "breach of peace," manhandling them and attacking them repeatedly with electric-shock cattle prods as they lay on the pavement in nonviolent protest. From their cells in the Kilby State Prison in Montgomery, the arrested demonstrators announced that they would not accept bail, that they intended to remain incarcerated as a way of calling attention to the assault on their rights of free speech and free assembly. They remained in jail for nearly a month.[13]

In mid-May, civil rights groups tried once again to deliver Bill Moore's letter to Governor Barnett. When marchers held a memorial service on the spot where Moore had been killed, Alabama highway patrol officers and Etowah County sheriff's deputies arrested and jailed the entire delegation of five whites and six blacks for breach of the peace.[14] Later, about thirty African American men, women, and children from a local church joined civil rights workers from around the nation for a memorial service honoring Moore at a roadside park. James Peck, editor of the Congress of Racial Equality's national newsletter, praised Moore as "a genuine idealist-he worked for brotherhood all his life."

Reverend E. W. Jarrett of Galilee Baptist Church in Gadsden eulogized Moore as having "died but not in vain." A twenty-six-year-old white participant in the march, a native of Chattanooga then living in New York, explained, "I have come down here to make amends for the way this thing has been going on for the last 200 years. If Christ was on this earth today, I'm sure he would be killed just like William Moore." [15]

Bill Moore's murder made many people feel that they had to act, that it was no longer acceptable to be a spectator in the struggle over civil rights. To be sure, many others claimed that Moore had no one to blame but himself, that he had brought about his own death through provocative actions that he should have known would inflame the anger of white supremacists. *A New York Times* editorial on April 26 condemning the murder nonetheless described Moore's march as "a pitifully naive pilgrimage." An investigator for the Alabama State Police reported that he had spoken with Moore thirty minutes before his death and asked the postman to cancel his march or at least remove his signs. "I warned him about the racial situation in Alabama but he wouldn't listen," A. G. McDowell related. "He told me in a very nice way that he wanted to prove something and he couldn't if he turned back." [16] U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy withheld the support of the Department of Justice to those attempting to complete Moore's march, arguing that "perhaps their energies might be better used in a different direction than taking a walk." [17]

About six weeks after Moore's murder, Medgar Evers, field secretary for the Mississippi chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), addressed a mass meeting in Jackson, vowing to carry on the struggle against all forms of segregation in that city. When he returned to his home that night, Evers was killed, shot in the back by a sniper. Although his assassin, Byron de la Beckwith, would successfully avoid a conviction for more than thirty years, the brutal repression required to silence people like Moore, Evers, and their supporters exposed the venomous pathology of white supremacy to people across the nation. [18] In Los Angeles and San Francisco mass rallies protesting the murders of Moore and Evers attracted more than twenty thousand participants. [19] All across the nation during the summer of 1963, the deaths of Bill Moore and Medgar Evers made people ask themselves what they were prepared to do about the pervasive presence of white supremacy in their society.

I was one of those people. The bullets that killed Bill Moore changed my life. I remember hearing news reports about his disappearance and death on the old gray radio in my bedroom on the second story of my family's home in Pa-

terson, New Jersey. I was fifteen years old. The first broadcasts advised that Moore was missing; the next morning newscasters reported his death. I can still remember the impression that his murder made on me: Moore was a white man murdered by other white men because he opposed white supremacy. I had never encountered a story like that. It made me look into myself and provoked me to think about what I was willing to risk for my own beliefs.

The city that I grew up in was racially diverse, and I had seen enou   even at the age of fifteen to realize that good and bad people came in all colors, that both virtue and vice characterized every community. But Bill Moore made me think harder about what it meant for me to be white in a world where the advantages of whiteness were carved out of other people's disadvantages. I knew that those of us in the almost exclusively white neighborhoods on the east side of Paterson lived in better houses and had more money than our classmates in minority or mixed neighborhoods. I did not know then the way residential segregation and home-loan discrimination skewed life chances along racial lines and inhibited opportunities for asset accumulation among members of aggrieved "minority" groups. Yet I did know that my own neighbors included slumlords who failed to provide decent, sanitary, or even safe living conditions for the tenants they gouged, that profits produced by charging high rates for broken-down tenements in slum neighborhoods in another part of town paid country club dues and college tuition fees for people in my part of town.

The murder of Bill Moore opened up new possibilities and personalized the civil rights struggle for me in dramatic ways. For Bill Moore, disapproving of white supremacy in principle wasn't enough; he felt he needed to put his life on the line trying to end it. Bill Moore fought against white racism because he personally found it intolerable, not just because he imagined it might be intolerable for someone else. Certainly I had been aware of many of the black martyrs before him in the civil rights movement, whose deaths were equally tragic and dramatic. Over the years many writers have justifiably criticized the dynamics whereby white people martyred in the civil rights movement have received a disproportionate share of attention compared to the overwhelmingly greater number of black people killed in that struggle. As Rita Schwerner noted when the murder of her husband, Michael, and his fellow civil rights workers James Chaney and Andrew Goodman led to a massive federal investigation and search in Mississippi's rivers and coastal waters for the three victims' missing bodies in *1964,* "We all know this search with hundreds of sailors is because Andrew Goodman and my husband are white. If only Chaney was involved, nothing would have been done." [20] Hollywood films, made-for-television movies, and

books have similarly honored white seminarian James Reeb but not Jimmy Lee Jackson, a black youth. They have chronicled the killing of white civil rights volunteer Viola Liuzzo, but not that of Herbert Lee, a black farmer and voting rights activist shot and killed by a member of the Mississippi state legislature who was never prosecuted for the killing.[21] History textbooks still routinely credit President Lincoln with freeing the slaves or Presidents Kennedy and Johnson with ending segregation without mentioning the grass roots pressures from people of color that forced those leaders to act as they did.

In addition, films about the murders of Medgar Evers (*Ghosts of Mississippi*) and Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman (*Mississippi Burning*) rewrite the historical record by placing white FBI agents and white attorneys at the center of a struggle for social justice that actually depended almost entirely upon the determination and persistence of black people in the face of indifference and even outright hostility among most whites, including those in law enforcement agencies. I hope that my attention to Bill Moore does not contribute to the erasure of black people from the story of their own struggle for emancipation. I have to admit, however, that the murder of Bill Moore did affect me to an unusual degree, even more than the many reports of the deaths of dozens of blacks in the civil rights struggle. It is only fair to ask myself if my own conditioning as a white person did not make me somehow value a white life more than a black life. Yet I also now see that our society does not often produce or even imagine genuinely antiracist white people. To be sure, many whites are embarrassed by the benefits they receive from white supremacy, and other are inconvenienced or even threatened by the resentments it creates. Some view white supremacy as economically wasteful and socially destructive, while others wish they could live in a society without racial distinctions. Yet individuals like Bill Moore are rare, people willing to risk their lives in the fight against white supremacy, eager to join a movement with minority leadership, and cognizant of the fight as something for themselves rather than for others. Our history and our fiction contain all too many accounts of whites acting with unctuous paternalism to protect "helpless" people of color, but very few stories about white people opposing white supremacy on their own. Members of aggrieved racialized groups appear most often as threatening strangers or servile sidekicks in the stories we tell about our past and present, and only rarely as self-active agents operating in their own behalf. The difficulty of imagining an antiracist white subject is part of what made Bill Moore's story so compelling to me thirty-five years ago and what makes it resonate for me even today.

At the moment I learned of Bill Moore's death, I found myself thinking

about commitment as well as color. What would it mean to believe in something so powerfully that you would give your life for it? I thought I understood how Moore felt, how tormented he must have been by the terrible injustices in our society and by his own inability to do anything meaningful about them. Later I would learn about the dangers of individual action, about the ways in which any one person's intentions-no matter how sincere-need to be coordinated with a collective social movement and connected to carefully thought out strategies and tactics produced by a democratic process that changes individuals and society at the same time. I learned later that Moore had been advised against his one-man march by officers of national civil rights organizations, that he had been a mental patient at the Binghamton State Hospital between *1953* and *1955,* and that personal desperation as well as social commitment shaped his decision to march on Mississippi and deliver a letter to the governor.[22] Yet I think it would be a mistake to let Bill Moore's human problems and contradictions overshadow the basic idea that he got absolutely right. Like another man often described as mentally ill-John Brown-Bill Moore found white supremacy an abomination even though he was white. He did not imagine himself innocent of the privileges he had received as a result of being white, nor did guilt drive him to seek the approval of those he might have oppressed. He correctly identified white supremacy as the problem and took resolute action toward a solution.

Bill Moore's murder was a terrible crime, but culpability for it does not rest solely with the person who fired the shots that killed him. Bill Moore was murdered because too few people had his kind of courage and commitment, because too many white people kept silent about white supremacy even though they knew it was wrong. Today, I think his example remains more relevant than ever, not because dramatic moments of individual heroism will solve our problems, but because white Americans like myself have not yet come to grips with the structural and cultural forces that racialize human rights, opportunities, and life chances in our country. Too many of us continue to imagine that we would have supported the civil rights struggle of thirty years ago, when our actions and opinions today conform more closely to the record of that struggle's opponents. We have so demonized the white racists of *1960s Mississippi* that we fail to see the ways in which many of their most heinous practices and policies have triumphed in our own day.

At the time of Bill Moore's murder, Mississippi began to emerge as a public symbol of the sickness at the center of race relations in the United States. In some ways the state deserved that reputation. The rioters in Oxford opposing

the desegregation of their state's university knew that they could count on overt and covert support from Mississippi's elected officials and leading citizens. Antiblack vigilantes operated with impunity throughout the state, burning the homes and churches of civil rights leaders, bombing black-owned businesses, and shooting civil rights workers. A state agency, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, gave covert support to white supremacist groups, including those distributing license plate holders emblazoned with slogans like "Federally Occupied Mississippi, Kennedy's Hungary" and "Most Lied About State in The Union." The Sovereignty Commission helped Byron de la Beckwith escape a conviction for the murder of Medgar Evers by helping the defense screen jury members, and its agents conspired with Klansmen to set up the murders of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman.[23]

In 1964, the challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the openly white supremacist state delegation to the Democratic National Convention, coupled with the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, attracted national and international attention. Magazine articles and best-selling books attempted to diagnose the conditions that gave rise to the state's racial antagonisms, while popular songs by the Chad Mitchell Trio, Phil Ochs, and Nina Simone criticized Mississippi's practices as outside the pale of civilized society. Nightclub and television audiences viewed Mississippi through the bitter and biting satire of black comedians Moms Mabley and Dick Gregory, whose topical humor singled out the state's white supremacist culture for special ridicule and critique.[24] Gregory joked that the state was so racist that "a white moderate in Mississippi is a cat who wants to lynch you from a *low* tree."[25]

At the same time, however, a different side of the state of Mississippi became visible through the actions and ideas of the state's African American residents as they mobilized for change along with a small number of white allies. I remember watching the televised testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer before the Credentials Committee at the 1964 Democratic National Convention as she described her attempts to register to vote as well as the harassment and retaliation she suffered for those efforts. As a warning, local authorities once charged her with failure to pay a one-month water bill of $9,000, even though her family's cabin had no running water.[26] Hamer told the committee that she had been fired from her job, evicted from her home, and beaten by sheriff's deputies, but she continued to battle for her rights. "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we are threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings?" she asked.[27]

In an election supervised by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

(MFDP) and open to all voters regardless of race, Mississippi voters had chosen Hamer and her colleagues to represent their state at the convention. The national Democratic Party, however, seated the all-white segregationist delegation of party regulars, many of whom had already pledged to support Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, who campaigned as an opponent of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As I learned later, President Johnson sent liberal senator Hubert Humphrey as his representative to a secret meeting at the convention with members of the MFDP in an attempt to persuade them to drop their demands to be seated as official delegates. Hamer had been eager to meet the senator, whom she had admired because of his reputation as a proponent of civil rights, but she was disappointed to find "a little round-eyed man with his *eyes* full of tears." When warned by the MFDP attorney, Joseph Raugh, that their effort to be seated at the convention would damage Humphrey's chances for nomination as Johnson's running mate, Hamer asked, "Well, Mr. Humphrey, do you mean to tell me that your position is more important to you than four hundred thousand black people's lives?"[28] Humphrey's inability to answer that question embodied a larger inability among white liberals to distance themselves sufficiently from the possessive investment in whiteness, an inability that plagues them to this day.

At college in St. Louis in 1964, I encountered some Mississippians who had worked with Fannie Lou Hamer and who displayed the same kinds of courage and commitment. Joyce and Dorie Ladner especially impressed me. They had worked almost alone in Natchez, Mississippi, as civil rights organizers in the early 1960s when nearly everyone else was afraid to challenge white supremacy in that section of the state. I heard the Ladner sisters speak at the campus YMCA at meetings organized by civil rights supporters, and their knowledge, tactical insights, and commitment left a lasting impression on me. As Charles Payne shows in his excellent study of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi, people like Fannie Lou Hamer and the Ladner sisters emerged from an entire community that made up for a lack of material resources and political power with an abundance of courage and vision. Their example provided hope and inspiration to many people living in circumstances far different from their own.[29]

With the passage of the 1964 and 1965 civil rights laws, Mississippi's brand of white supremacy was revealed as symptomatic of a much broader psychosis. Ending de jure (by law) segregation in the South did little or nothing to end de facto (by fact) segregation in the North. Mississippi, the home of William Faulkner, Chester Himes, and Eudora Welty, of Elvis Presley, Jimmie Rodgers, and Robert Johnson, was not an aberration isolated from the rest of the United

States. Although the form differed from state to state and from region to region, the possessive investment in whiteness that poisoned political and private lives in Mississippi was a quintessentially American problem. We discovered that laws guaranteeing the right to eat at a lunch counter did little to correct the elaborate web of discrimination in housing, hiring, and education that left minorities less able to pay for a lunch-counter meal, let alone raise the capital necessary to own a lunch counter. We found that school segregation and unequal education did not end when courts banned "separate but equal" Jim Crow schools, but left intact segregated neighborhoods and school districts. Even the right to vote meant less than we thought when gerrymandering and the high costs of political campaigns left aggrieved minority communities with no one to vote for who would be likely to represent their interests accurately. Those of us who might have been inclined to view white racism as a particularly Southern problem at the time of Bill Moore's murder soon saw the wisdom in Malcolm X's observation that as long as you're south of the Canadian border, you're in the South.

This book identifies the ways in which power, property, and the politics of race in our society continue to contain unacknowledged and unacceptable allegiances to white supremacy. I write it, in part, to pay the debts I owe to Joyce and Dorie Ladner, to Fannie Lou Hamer, and to many other Mississippians. I want to make it clear that Fannie Lou Hamer's appeals did not fall on deaf ears and that Bill Moore's letter can still be delivered after all these years.

Yet I would not be honoring the work of these Mississippians properly if I let it go at that. I now live and work in California, a state where demagogic political leaders and a frightened electorate have recently launched a series of decidedly racist attacks on communities of color. The mendacity and meanness of Governor Pete Wilson, the passage of the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 and the anti-affirmative action Proposition *209,* initiatives against bilingual education, and the refusal by legally constituted authorities to enforce laws protecting the civil rights, wages, and working conditions of the people of the state have made California in the *1990s* the human rights equivalent of Mississippi in the *1960s.*

Thirty years ago, Californians could afford to view the events transpiring in Mississippi with pity and contempt. California then was a high-wage and high-employment state where taxpayer support provided quality schools and social service programs geared toward bringing chances for upward mobility to an impressively broad range of its population. The state's political leaders acted with foresight and vision, preparing for the future by speaking honestly and openly with the citizens of their state about the things they needed to do to insure the common good. Mississippi, on the other hand, used the power of the state to maintain a low-wage, low-employment economy characterized by vivid contrasts between the dire poverty and financial anxiety of most state residents and the monopoly power and luxury life-styles of a handful of wealthy plutocrats. It trailed most of the other states in educational expenditures per pupil. Its political leaders rarely leveled with citizens, resorting instead to demagogic scapegoating of powerless and nonvoting populations to divide and conquer. As John Dittmer points out in his fine book *Local People,* one of the intended consequences of racially segmenting the labor force in Mississippi in the *1950s* and *1960s* was to preserve wealth in a few hands by deterring workers from joining together to seek union representation or legislation regulating the conditions of labor.[30]

Today, California has caught up with the Mississippi of *1963.* State agencies fail to enforce laws regulating wages, hours, and working conditions, much less bans on discrimination in housing, hiring, and education. The growth of unregulated low-wage labor has launched a race to the bottom that enables wealthy consumers to pay less for foodstuffs and food preparation, for construction and maintenance, for child care and domestic cleaning, while the majority of the population confronts the stagnation and even the decline of its real wages. California now stands near the bottom in state school spending per pupil-in no small measure because most public school students are now members of racial "minorities." We discover to our sorrow that our elected officials cannot lead us so they lie to us, fomenting hatred against the poor, immigrants, and racial minorities to hide the ways in which their own policies are destroying the economic and social infrastructure of our state. If this book represents an effort to deliver at last the letter that Bill Moore wished to bring to Ross Barnett in *1963, I* hope that it will also help send a message to Sacramento as well.

I think I now know why Bill Moore's murder affected me so deeply in *1963.* His actions forced my first confrontations with the possessive investment in whiteness-a poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground. Exposing, analyzing, and eradicating this pathology is an obligation that we all share, white people most of all. I hope that this book will be a step in that direction.

In the darkest days of the *1990s,* as the governor of California and his political puppets on the board of regents were resorting to the crudest kinds of racist scapegoating to protect the possessive investment in whiteness, a group of

young students at the University of California, San Diego, where I teach, created an interethnic antiracist coalition that expressed and enacted a compelling vision of social justice. Their dignity, discipline, and determination to fight every measure designed to increase the "wages of whiteness" (including Proposition 209, Proposition 187, and SP1 and SP2) have provided an inspiring alternative to the unjust and immoral policies advanced by the most powerful and wealthy individuals in their state. They have learned the lessons of history well, and their actions point the way toward a better and more just future. The members of the No Retreat! coalition have inherited the vision and the courage of Fannie Lou Hamer, Bill Moore, and many others. I dedicate this book to them, with deep respect and gratitude.

The Possessive Investment in Whiteness

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*Blacks are often confronted, in American life, with
such devastating examples of the white descent from
dignity; devastating not only because of the enormity
of white pretensions, but because this swift and
graceless descent would seem to indicate that white
people have no principles whatever.*

-JAMES BALDWIN

Shortly after World War II, a French reporter asked expatriate Richard Wright for his views about the "Negro problem" in America. The author replied, "There isn't any Negro problem; there is only a white problem."' By inverting the reporter's question, Wright called attention to its hidden assumptions-that racial polarization comes from the existence of blacks rather than from the behavior of whites, that black people are a "problem" for whites rather than fellow citizens entitled to justice, and that, unless otherwise specified, "Americans" means "whites."[2] But Wright's formulation also placed political mobilization by African Americans during the civil rights era in context, connecting black disadvantages to white advantages and finding the roots of black consciousness in the systemic practices of aversion, exploitation, denigration, and discrimination practiced by people who think of themselves as "white."

Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see. As Richard Dyer suggests, "[W]hite power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular."[3] As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.[4] To identify, analyze, and oppose the destructive consequences of whiteness, we

need what Walter Benjamin called "presence of mind." Benjamin wrote that people visit fortune-tellers less out of a desire to know the future than out of a fear of not noticing some important aspect of the present. "Presence of mind," he suggested, "is an abstract of the future, and precise awareness of the present moment more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events." [5] In U.S. society at this time, precise awareness of the present moment requires an understanding of the existence and the destructive consequences of the possessive investment in whiteness that surreptitiously shapes so much of our public and private lives."

Race is a cultural construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans. Studies of culture too far removed from studies of social structure leave us with inadequate explanations for understanding racism and inadequate remedies for combating it.

Desire for slave labor encouraged European settlers in North America to view, first, Native Americans and, later, African Americans as racially inferior people suited "by nature" for the humiliating subordination of involuntary servitude. The long history of the possessive investment in whiteness stems in no small measure from the fact that all subsequent immigrants to North America have come to an already racialized society. From the start, European settlers in North America established structures encouraging a possessive investment in whiteness. The colonial and early national legal systems authorized attacks on Native Americans and encouraged the appropriation of their lands. They legitimated racialized chattel slavery, limited naturalized citizenship to "white" immigrants, identified Asian immigrants as expressly unwelcome (through legislation aimed at immigrants from China in 1882, from India in 1917, from Japan in 1924, and from the Philippines in 1934), and provided pretexts for restricting the voting, exploiting the labor, and seizing the property of Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans [6]

The possessive investment in whiteness is not a simple matter of black and white; all racialized minority groups have suffered from it, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. The African slave trade began in earnest only after large-scale Native American slavery proved impractical in North America. The abolition of slavery led to the importation of low-wage labor from Asia. Legislation banning immigration from Asia set the stage for the recruitment of low-wage labor from Mexico. The new racial categories that emerged in each of these eras all revolved around applying racial labels to "nonwhite" groups in order to stigmatize and exploit them while at the same time preserving the value of whiteness.

Although reproduced in new form in every era, the possessive investment in whiteness has always been influenced by its origins in the racialized history of the United States-by its legacy of slavery and segregation, of "Indian" extermination and immigrant restriction, of conquest and colonialism. Although slavery has existed in many countries without any particular racial dimensions to it, the slave system that emerged in North America soon took on distinctly racial forms. Africans enslaved in North America faced a racialized system of power that reserved permanent, hereditary, chattel slavery for black people. White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another. Fearful of alliances between Native Americans and African Americans that might challenge the prerogatives of whiteness, white settlers prohibited slaves and free blacks from traveling in "Indian country." European Americans used diplomacy and force to compel Native Americans to return runaway slaves to their white masters. During the Stono Rebellion of 1739, colonial authorities offered Native Americans a bounty for every rebellious slave they captured or killed. At the same time, British settlers recruited black slaves to fight against Native Americans within colonial militias.[7] The power of whiteness depended not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations.

Aggrieved communities of color have often curried favor with whites in order to make gains at each other's expense. For example, in the nineteenth century some Native Americans held black slaves (in part to prove to whites that they could adopt "civilized" European American ways), and some of the first chartered African American units in the U.S. army went to war against Comanches in Texas or served as security forces for wagon trains of white settlers on the trails to California. The defeat of the Comanches in the 1870s sparked a mass migration by Spanish-speaking residents of New Mexico into the areas of West Texas formerly occupied by the vanquished Native Americans. [8] Immigrants from Asia sought the rewards of whiteness for themselves by asking the courts to recognize them as "white" and therefore eligible for naturalized citi-

zenship according to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1790; Mexican Americans also insisted on being classified as white. In the early twentieth century, black soldiers accustomed to fighting Native Americans in the Southwest participated in the U.S. occupation of the Philippines and the punitive expedition against Pancho Villa in Mexico .[9] Asian American managers cracked down on efforts by Mexican American farm workers to unionize, while the Pullman Company tried to break the African American Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters by importing Filipinos to work as porters. Mexican Americans and blacks took possession of some of the property confiscated from Japanese Americans during the internment of the *1940s,* and Asian Americans, blacks, and Mexican Americans all secured advantages for themselves by cooperating with the exploitation of Native Americans.

Yet while all racialized minority groups have sometimes sought the rewards of whiteness, they have also been able to come together in interethnic antiracist alliances. Native American tribes often harbored runaway slaves and drew upon their expertise in combat against whites, as in 1711 when an African named Harry helped lead the Tuscaroras against the British.[10] Native Americans secured the cooperation of black slaves in their attacks on the French settlement near Natchez in colonial Louisiana in *1729,* and black Seminoles in Florida routinely recruited slaves from Georgia plantations to their side in battles against European Americans." African Americans resisting slavery and white supremacy in the United States during the nineteenth century sometimes looked to Mexico as a refuge (especially after that nation abolished slavery), and in the twentieth century the rise of Japan as a successful non-white world power often served as a source of inspiration and emulation among African American nationalists. Mexican American and Japanese American farm workers joined forces in Oxnard, California, in *1903* to wage a successful strike in the beet fields, and subsequently members of the two groups organized an interracial union, the Japanese Mexican Labor Association.[12] Yet whether characterized by conflict or cooperation, all relations among aggrieved racialized minorities stemmed from recognition of the rewards of whiteness and the concomitant penalties imposed upon "nonwhite" populations.

Yet today the possessive investment is not simply the residue of conquest and colonialism, of slavery and segregation, of immigrant exclusion and "Indian" extermination. Contemporary whiteness and its rewards have been created and recreated by policies adopted long after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s and even after the outlawing of *de jure* segregation in the *1960s.* There has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same

racism. Political and cultural struggles over power have shaped the contours and dimensions of racism differently in different eras. Antiracist mobilizations during the Civil War and civil rights eras meaningfully curtailed the reach and scope of white supremacy, but in each case reactionary forces engineered a renewal of racism, albeit in new forms, during succeeding decades. Racism has changed over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in each time period.

Contemporary racism has been created anew in many ways over the past five decades, but most dramatically by the putatively race-neutral, liberal, social democratic reforms of the New Deal Era and by the more overtly race-conscious neoconservative reactions against liberalism since the Nixon years. It is a mistake to posit a gradual and inevitable trajectory of evolutionary progress in race relations; on the contrary, our history shows that battles won at one moment can later be lost. Despite hard-fought battles for change that secured important concessions during the *1960s* in the form of civil rights legislation, the racialized nature of social policy in the United States since the Great Depression has actually increased the possessive investment in whiteness among European Americans over the past half century.

During the New Deal Era of the *1930s* and *1940s,* both the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, effectively denying those disproportionately minority sectors of the work force protections and benefits routinely afforded whites. The Federal Housing Act of *1934* brought home ownership within reach of millions of citizens by placing the credit of the federal government behind private lending to home buyers, but overtly racist categories in the Federal Housing Agency's (FHA) "confidential" city surveys and appraisers' manuals channeled almost all of the loan money toward whites and away from communities of color.[13] In the post-World War II era, trade unions negotiated contract provisions giving private medical insurance, pensions, and job security largely to the white workers who formed the overwhelming majority of the unionized work force in mass production industries, rather than fighting for full employment, medical care, and old-age pensions for all, or even for an end to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices by employers in those industries.[14]

Each of these policies widened the gap between the resources available to whites and those available to aggrieved racial communities. Federal housing policy offers an important illustration of the broader principles at work in the possessive investment in whiteness. By channeling loans away from older inner-city neighborhoods and toward white home buyers moving into segregated

suburbs, the FHA and private lenders after World War II aided and abetted segregation in U.S. residential neighborhoods. FHA appraisers denied federally supported loans to prospective home buyers in the racially mixed Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1939, for example, because the area struck them as a "'melting pot' area literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements."[15] Similarly, mostly white St. Louis County secured five times as many FHA mortgages as the more racially mixed city of St. Louis between 1943 and 1960. Home buyers in the county received six times as much loan money and enjoyed per capita mortgage spending 6.3 times greater than those in the city.[16]

The federal government has played a major role in augmenting the possessive investment in whiteness. For years, the General Services Administration routinely channeled the government's own rental and leasing business to realtors who engaged in racial discrimination, while federally subsidized urban renewal plans reduced the already limited supply of housing for communities of color through "slum clearance" programs. In concert with FHA support for segregation in the suburbs, federal and state tax monies routinely funded the construction of water supplies and sewage facilities for racially exclusive suburban communities in the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1960s, these areas often incorporated themselves as independent municipalities in order to gain greater access to federal funds allocated for "urban aid."[17]

At the same time that FHA loans and federal highway building projects subsidized the growth of segregated suburbs, urban renewal programs in cities throughout the country devastated minority neighborhoods. During the 1950s and 1960s, federally assisted urban renewal projects destroyed 20 percent of the central-city housing units occupied by blacks, as opposed to only 10 percent of those inhabited by whites.[18] More than 60 percent of those displaced by urban renewal were African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, or members of other minority racial groups.[19] The Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration financed more than $120 billion worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962, but less than 2 percent of this real estate was, available to nonwhite families-and most of that small amount was located in segregated areas.[20]

Even in the 1970s, after most major urban renewal programs had been completed, black central-city residents continued to lose housing units at a rate equal to 80 percent of what had been lost in the 1960s. Yet white displacement declined to the relatively low levels of the 1950s.[21] In addition, the refusal first to pass, then to enforce, fair housing laws has enabled realtors, buyers, and sellers to profit from racist collusion against minorities largely without fear of legal retribution. During the decades following World War II, urban renewal helped construct a new "white" identity in the suburbs by helping to destroy ethnically specific European American urban inner-city neighborhoods. Wrecking balls and bulldozers eliminated some of these sites, while others were transformed by an influx of minority residents desperately competing for a declining supply of affordable housing units. As increasing numbers of racial minorities moved into cities, increasing numbers of European American ethnics moved out. Consequently, ethnic differences among whites became a less important dividing line in U.S. culture, while race became more important. The suburbs helped turn Euro-Americans into "whites" who could live near each other and intermarry with relatively little difficulty. But this "white" unity rested on residential segregation, on shared access to housing and life chances largely unavailable to communities of color.[22]

During the 1950s and 1960s, local "pro-growth" coalitions led by liberal mayors often justified urban renewal as a program designed to build more housing for poor people, but it acfi _al_lydestroyed more housing than it created. Ninety percent of the low-income units removed for urban renewal during the entire history of the program were never replaced. Commercial, industrial, and municipal projects occupied more than 80 percent of the land cleared for these projects, with less than 20 percent allocated for replacement housing. In addition, the loss of taxable properties and the tax abatements granted to new enterprises in urban renewal zones often meant serious tax increases for poor, working-class, and middle-class home owners and renters.[23] Although the percentage of black suburban dwellers also increased during this period, no significant desegregation of the suburbs took place. From 1960 to 1977, 4 million whites moved out of central cities, while the number of whites living in suburbs increased *by 22* million; during the same years, the inner-city black population grew by 6 million, but the number of blacks living in suburbs increased by only 500,000.[24] By 1993, 86 percent of suburban whites still lived in places with a black population below 1 percent. At the same time, cities with large numbers of minority residents found themselves cut off from loans by the FHA. For example, because of their growing black and Puerto Rican populations, neither Camden nor Paterson, New Jersey, in 1966 received one FHA-sponsored mortgage.[25]

In 1968, lobbyists for the banking industry helped draft the Housing and Urban Development Act, which allowed private lenders to shift the risks of financing low-income housing to the government, creating a lucrative and thor-

oughly unregulated market for themselves. One section of the *1968* bill authorized FHA mortgages for inner-city areas that did not meet the usual eligibility criteria, and another section subsidized interest payments by low-income families. If administered wisely, these provisions might have promoted fair housing goals, but FHA administrators deployed them in ways that actually promoted segregation in order to provide banks, brokers, lenders, developers, realtors, and speculators with windfall profits. As a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights investigation later revealed, FHA officials collaborated with blockbusters in financing the flight of low income whites out of inner city neighborhoods, and then aided unscrupulous realtors and speculators by arranging purchases of substandard housing by minorities desperate to own their own homes. The resulting sales and mortgage foreclosures brought great profits to lenders (almost all of them white), but their actions led to price fixing and a subsequent inflation of housing costs in the inner city by more than *200* percent between *1968* and *1972*. Bankers then foreclosed on the mortgages of thousands of these uninspected and substandard homes, ruining many inner-city neighborhoods. In response, the Department of Housing and Urban Development essentially red-lined inner cities, making them ineligible for future loans, a decision that destroyed the value of inner-city housing for generations to come.[26]

Federally funded highways designed to connect suburban commuters with downtown places of employment also destroyed already scarce housing in minority communities and often disrupted neighborhood life as well. Construction of the Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles, the Gulf Freeway in Houston, and the Mark Twain Freeway in St. Louis displaced thousands of residents and bisected neighborhoods, shopping districts, and political precincts. The processes of urban renewal and highway construction set in motion a vicious cycle: population loss led to decreased political power, which made minority neighborhoods more vulnerable to further urban renewal and freeway construction, not to mention more susceptible to the placement of prisons, incinerators, toxic waste dumps, and other projects that further depopulated these areas.

In Houston, Texas-where blacks make up slightly more than one quarter of the local population-more than *75* percent of municipal garbage incinerators and 100 percent of the city-owned garbage dumps are located in black neighborhoods.[27] A *1992* study by staff writers for the *National Law Journal* examined the Environmental Protection Agency's response to *1,177* toxic waste cases and found that polluters of sites near the greatest white population received penalties *500* percent higher than penalties imposed on polluters in minority areas-an average of *$335,566* for white areas contrasted with *$55,318*

for minority areas. Income did not account for these differences-penalties for low-income areas on average actually exceeded those for areas with the highest median incomes by about *3* percent. The penalties for violating all federal environmental laws regulating air, water, and waste pollution were *46* percent lower in minority communities than in white communities. In addition, superfund remedies left minority communities waiting longer than white communities to be placed on the national priority list, cleanups that began from *12* to *42* percent later than at white sites, and with a *7* percent greater likelihood of "containment" (walling off a hazardous site) than cleanup, while white sites experienced treatment and cleanup *22* percent more often than containment.[28]

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's *1988* survey of children suffering from lead poisoning showed that among families with incomes under *$6,000* per year, *36* percent of white children but *68* percent of black children suffered from excess lead in their bloodstreams. Among families with incomes above *$15,000* per year, only *12* percent of white children but *38* percent of black children suffered from toxic levels of lead.[29] In the Los Angeles area, only *34* percent of whites inhabit areas with the most polluted air, but *71* percent of African Americans and *50* percent of Latinos live in neighborhoods with the highest levels of air pollution.[30] Nationwide, *60* percent of African Americans and Latinos live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.[31]

Scholarly studies reveal that even when adjusted for income, education, and occupational status, aggrieved racial minorities encounter higher levels of exposure to toxic substances than white people experience.[32] In *1987,* the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ found race to be the most significant variable in determining the location of commercial <u>hazardous</u> waste facilities.[33] In a review of sixty-four studies examining environmental disparities, the National Wildlife Federation found that racial disparities outnumbered disparities by income, and in cases where disparities in race and income were both present, race proved to be more important in twenty-two out of thirty tests [34] As Robert D. Bullard demonstrates, "race has been found to be an independent factor, not reducible to class" in predicting exposure to a broad range of environmental hazards, including polluted air, contaminated fish, lead poisoning, municipal landfills, incinerators, and toxic waste dumps.[35] The combination of exposure to environmental hazards and employment discrimination establishes a sinister correlation between race and health. One recent government study revealed that the likelihood of dying from nutritional deficiencies was two and a half times greater among African Americans than among European Ameri-

cans.[36] Another demonstrated that Asian and Pacific Islander recipients of aid for at-risk families exhibited alarming rates of stunted growth and underweight among children under the age of five.[37] Corporations systematically target Native American reservations when looking for locations for hazardous waste incinerators, solid waste landfills, and nuclear waste storage facilities; Navajo teenagers develop reproductive organ cancer at seventeen times the national average because of their exposure to radiation from uranium mines."[38] Latinos in East Los Angeles encounter some of the worst smog and the highest concentrations of air toxins in southern California because of prevailing wind patterns and the concentration of polluting industries, freeways, and toxic waste dumps.[39] Environmental racism makes the possessive investment in whiteness literally a matter of life and death; if African Americans had access to the nutrition, wealth, health care, and protection against environmental hazards offered routinely to whites, seventy-five thousand fewer of them would die each year.[40]

Minorities are less likely than whites to receive preventive medical care or costly operations from Medicare. Eligible members of minority communities are also less likely than European Americans to apply for food stamps 4[1] The labor of migrant farm workers from aggrieved racialized groups plays a vital role in providing adequate nutrition for others, but the farm workers and their children suffer disproportionately from health disorders caused by malnutrition.[42] In her important research on health policy and ethnic diversity, Linda Wray concludes that "the lower life expectancies for many ethnic minority groups and subgroups stem largely from their disproportionately higher rates of poverty, malnutrition, and poor health care."[43]

Just as residential segregation and urban renewal make minority communities disproportionately susceptible to health hazards, their physical and social location gives these communities a different relationship to the criminal justice system. A 1990 study by the National Institute on Drug abuse revealed that while only 15 percent of the thirteen million habitual drug users in the United States were black and 77 percent were white, African Americans were four times more likely to be arrested on drug charges than whites in the nation as a whole, and seven to nine times more likely in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. A 1989 study by the Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education discovered that African American high school students consistently showed lower levels of drug and alcohol use than their European American counterparts, even in high schools populated by residents of low-income housing projects. Yet, while comprising about 12 percent of the U.S population, blacks accounted for 10 percent of drug arrests in 1984,40 percent in

1988, and 42 percent in 1990. In addition, white drug defendants receive considerably shorter average prison terms than African Americans convicted of comparable crimes. A U.S..Sentencing Commission study found in 1992 that half of the federal court districts that handled cases involving crack cocaine prosecuted minority defendants *exclusively*. A *Los Angeles Times* article in 1995 revealed that "black and Latino crack dealers are hammered with 10-year mandatory federal sentences while whites prosecuted in state court face a minimum of five years and often receive no more than a year in jail." Alexander Lichtenstein and Michael A. Kroll point out that sentences for African Americans in the federal prison system are 20 percent longer than those given to whites who commit the same crimes. They observe that if blacks received the same sentences as whites for these offenses, the federal prison system would require three thousand fewer prison cells, enough to close completely six of the new five-hundred bed institutions.[44]

Racial animus on the part of police officers, prosecutors, and judges accounts for only a small portion of the distinctive experience that racial minorities have with the criminal justice system. Economic devastation makes the drug trade appealing to some people in the inner city, while the dearth of capital in minority neighborhoods curtails opportunities for other kinds of employment. Deindustrialization, unemployment, and lack of intergenerational transfers of wealth undermine parental and adult authority in many neighborhoods. The complex factors that cause people to turn to drugs are no more prevalent in minority communities than elsewhere, but these communities and their inhabitants face more stress while having fewer opportunities to receive private counseling and treatment for their problems.

The structural weaknesses of minority neighborhoods caused by discrimination in housing, education, and hiring also play a crucial role in relations between inner-city residents and the criminal justice system. Cocaine dealing, which initially skyrocketed among white suburban residents, was driven into the inner city by escalating enforcement pressures in wealthy white communities. Ghettos and barrios became distribution centers for the sale of drugs to white suburbanites. Former New York and Houston police commissioner Lee Brown, head of the federal government's antidrug efforts during the early years of the Clinton presidency and later mayor of Houston, noted, "There are those who bring drugs into the country. That's not the black community. Then you have wholesalers, those who distribute them once they get here, and as a rule that's not the black community. Where you find the blacks is in the street dealing.,,[45]

You also find blacks and other minorities in prison. Police officers in large

cities, pressured to show results in the drive against drugs, lack the resources to effectively enforce the law everywhere (in part because of the social costs of deindustrialization and the tax limitation initiatives designed to shrink the size of government). These officers know that it is easier to make arrests and to secure convictions by confronting drug users in areas that have conspicuous street corner sales, that have more people out on the street with no place to go, and that have residents more likely to plead guilty and less likely to secure the services of attorneys who can get the charges against them dropped, reduced, or wiped off the books with subsequent successful counseling and rehabilitation. In addition, politicians supported by the public relations efforts of neo-conservative foundations often portray themselves to suburban voters as opponents of the "dangerous classes" in the inner cities.

Minority disadvantages craft advantages for others. Urban renewal failed to provide new housing for the poor, but it played an important role in transforming the U.S. urban economy from one that relied on factory production to one driven by producer services. Urban renewal projects subsidized the development of downtown office centers on previously residential land, and they frequently created buffer zones of empty blocks dividing poor neighborhoods from new shopping centers designed for affluent commuters. To help cities compete for corporate investment by making them appealing to high-level executives, federal urban aid favored construction of luxury housing units and cultural centers like symphony halls and art museums over affordable housing for workers. Tax abatements granted to these producer services centers further aggravated the fiscal crisis that cities faced, leading to tax increases on existing industries, businesses, and residences.

Workers from aggrieved racial minorities bore the brunt of this transformation. Because the 1964 Civil Rights Act came so late, minority workers who received jobs because of it found themselves more vulnerable to seniority-based layoffs when businesses automated or transferred operations overseas. Although the act initially made real progress in reducing employment discrimination, lessened the gaps between rich and poor and between black and white workers, and helped bring minority poverty to its lowest level in history in 1973, that year's recession initiated a reversal of minority progress and a reassertion of white privilege.[46] In 1977, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission reported on the disproportionate impact of layoffs on minority workers. In cases where minority workers made up only 10 to 12 percent of the work force in their area, they accounted for from 60 to 70 percent of those laid off in 1974. The principle of seniority, a trade union triumph designed to protect workers from age dis

crimination, in this case guaranteed that minority workers would suffer most from technological changes, because the legacy of past discrimination by their employers left them with less seniority than white workers 4[7]

When housing prices increased dramatically during the 1970s, white homeowners who had been able to take advantage of discriminatory FHA financing policies in the past realized increased equity in their homes, while those excluded from the housing market by earlier policies found themselves facing even higher costs of entry into the market in addition to the traditional obstacles presented by the discriminatory practices of sellers, realtors, and lenders. The contrast between European Americans and African Americans is instructive in this regard. Because whites have access to broader housing choices than blacks, whites pay 15 percent less than blacks for similar housing in the same neighborhood. White neighborhoods typically experience housing costs 25 percent lower than would be the case if the residents were black.[48]

A recent Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study revealed that Boston bankers made 2.9 times as many mortgage loans per 1,000 housing units in neighborhoods inhabited by low-income whites than in neighborhoods populated by low-income blacks.[49] In addition, loan officers were far more likely to overlook flaws in the credit records of white applicants or to arrange creative financing for them than they were with black applicants.[50] A Los Angeles study found that loan officers more frequently used dividend income and underlying assets as criteria for judging black applicants than for whites.[51] In Houston, the NCNB Bank of Texas disqualified 13 percent of middle-income white loan applicants but 36 percent of middle-income black applicants.[52] Atlanta's home loan institutions gave five times as many home loans to whites as to blacks in the late 1980s. An analysis of sixteen Atlanta neighborhoods found that home buyers in white neighborhoods received conventional financing four times as often as those in black sections of the city.[53] Nationwide, financial institutions receive more money in deposits from black neighborhoods than they invest in them in the form of home mortgage loans, making home lending a vehicle for the transfer of capital away from black savers toward white investors 5[4] In many locations, high-income blacks were denied loans more often than low-income whites.[55]

When confronted with evidence of systematic racial bias in home lending, defenders of the possessive investment in whiteness argue that the disproportionate share of loan denials to members of minority groups stems not from discrimination, but from the low net worth of minority applicants, even those who have high incomes. This might seem a reasonable position, but net worth

is almost totally determined by past opportunities for asset accumulation, and therefore is the one figure most likely to reflect the history of discrimination. Minorities are told, in essence, "We can't give you a loan today because we've discriminated against members of your race so effectively in the past that you have not been able to accumulate any equity from housing and to pass it down through the generations."

Most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a discriminatory housing market. In their prize-winning book *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro demonstrate how the history of housing discrimination makes white parents more able to borrow funds for their children's college education or to loan money to their children to enter the housing market. In addition, much discrimination in home lending is not based on considerations of net worth; it stems from decisions made by white banking officials based on their stereotypes about minority communities. The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study showed that black and Latino mortgage applicants are *60* percent more likely to be turned down for loans than whites, even after controlling for employment, financial, and neighborhood characteristics.[56] Ellis Cose reports on a white bank official confronted with evidence at a board of directors' meeting that his bank denied loans to blacks who had credit histories and earnings equal to those of white applicants who received loans. The banker replied that the information indicated that the bank needed to do a better job of "affirmative action," but one of his colleagues pointed out that the problem had nothing to do with affirmative action-the bank was simply letting prejudice stand in the way of its own best interests by rejecting loans that should be approved.[57]

Yet bankers also make money from the ways in which discrimination creates artificial scarcities in the market. Minorities have to pay more for housing because much of the market is off limits to them. Blockbusters profit from exploiting white fears and provoking them into panic selling. Minority home owners denied loans in mainstream banks often turn to exploitative lenders who make "low end" loans at enormously high interest rates. If they fail to pay back these loans, regular banks can acquire the property cheaply and charge someone else exorbitant interest for a loan on the same property.

Federal home loan policies have put the power of the federal government at the service of private discrimination. Urban renewal and highway construction programs have enhanced the possessive investment in whiteness directly through government initiatives. In addition, decisions about where to locate

federal jobs have also systematically subsidized whiteness. Federal civilian employment dropped by *41,419* in central cities between *1966* and *1973*, but total federal employment in metropolitan areas grew by *26,558*.[58] While one might naturally expect the location of government buildings that serve the public to follow population trends, the federal government's policy of locating offices and records centers in suburbs aggravated the flight of jobs to suburban locations less accessible to inner-city residents. Because racial discrimination in the private sector forces minority workers to seek government positions disproportionate to their numbers, these moves exact particular hardships on them. In addition, minorities who follow their jobs to the suburbs must generally allocate more for commuter costs, because housing discrimination makes it harder and more expensive for them than for whites to relocate.

The policies of neoconservatives in the Reagan and Bush administrations during the *1980s* and *1990s* greatly exacerbated the racialized aspects of more than fifty years of these social welfare policies. Regressive policies that cut federal aid to education and refused to challenge segregated education, housing, and hiring, as well as the cynical cultivation of an antiblack consensus through attacks on affirmative action and voting rights legislation clearly reinforced possessive investments in whiteness. In the U.S. economy, where *86* percent of available jobs do not appear in classified ads and where personal connections prove the most important factor in securing employment, attacks on affirmative action guarantee that whites will be rewarded for their historical advantage in the labor market rather than for their individual abilities or efforts.[59]

Attacking the civil rights tradition serves many functions for neoconservatives. By mobilizing existing racisms and generating new ones, neoconservatives seek to discredit the egalitarian and democratic social movements of the post-World War II era and to connect the attacks by those movements on wealth, special privilege, and elite control over education and opportunity to despised and unworthy racial "others."

Attacks on the gains made by civil rights activism also act as a wedge to divide potentially progressive coalitions along racial lines, a strategy that attained its peak moment with the defection of "blue collar" trade unionists from the Democratic Party in the *1980s* to become "Reagan Democrats." In addition to protecting centralized power and wealth and dividing its opponents, the neoracism of contemporary conservatism also functions as an important unifying symbol for a disparate and sometimes antagonistic coalition that includes Hamiltonian big-government conservatives as well as antistate libertarians, and that incorporates born-again Christians into an alliance with

"objectivist" free market thinkers who celebrate selfishness and view the love of gain as the engine of human progress. This coalition often has trouble agreeing on the things it favors, but it has no difficulty agreeing about the alleged bad behavior and inferior morality of minority individuals and communities. Most important, by generating an ever repeating cycle of "moral panics" about the family, crime, welfare, race, and terrorism, neoconservatives produce a perpetual state of anxiety that obscures the actual failures of conservatism as economic and social policy, while promoting demands for even more draconian measures of a similar nature for the future. The neoracism of contemporary conservatism plays a vital role in building a countersubversive consensus because it disguises the social disintegration brought about by neoconservatism itself as the fault of "inferior" social groups, and because it builds a sense of righteous indignation among its constituents that enables them to believe that the selfish and self-interested politics they pursue are actually part of a moral crusade.

Yet even seemingly race-neutral policies supported by both neoconservatives and liberals in the 1980s and 1990s have increased the absolute value of being white. In the 1980s, changes in federal tax laws decreased the value of wage income and increased the value of investment income-a move harmful to minorities, who suffer from a gap between their total wealth and that of whites even greater than the disparity between their income and white income. The failure to raise the minimum wage between 1981 and 1989 and the decline of more than one-third in the value of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments injured all poor people, but they exacted special on costs on nonwhites, who faced even more constructed markets for employment, housing, and education than poor whites.[60]

Similarly, the "tax reforms" of the 1980s made the effective rate of taxation higher on investment in actual goods and services than on profits from speculative enterprises. This change encouraged the flight of capital from industrial production with its many employment opportunities toward investments that can be turned over quickly to allow the greatest possible tax write-offs. Government policies thus discouraged investments that might produce high-paying jobs and encouraged investors to strip companies of their assets to make rapid short-term profits. These policies hurt almost all workers, but they fell particularly heavily on minority workers, who because of employment discrimination in the retail and small business sectors were overrepresented in blue-collar industrial jobs.

On the other hand, while neoconservative tax policies created incentives for employers to move their enterprises elsewhere, they created disincentives for home owners to move. Measures like California's Proposition 13 (passed in 1978) granting tax relief to property owners badly misallocate housing resources, because they make it financially unwise for the elderly to move out of large houses, further reducing the supply of housing available to young families. While one can well understand the necessity for protecting senior citizens on fixed incomes from tax increases that would make them lose their homes, the rewards and punishments provided by Proposition 13 are so extreme that they prevent the kinds of generational succession that have routinely opened up housing to young families in the past. This reduction works particular hardships on those who also face discrimination by sellers, realtors, and lending institutions.

Subsidies to the private sector by government agencies also tend to enhance the rewards of past discrimination. Throughout the country, tax increment financing for redevelopment programs offers tax-free and low-interest loans to developers whose projects use public services, often without having to pay taxes to local school boards or county governments. In St. Louis, for example, tax abatements for wealthy corporations deprive the city's schools (and their majority African American population) of $17 million a year. Even if these redevelopment projects eventually succeed in increasing municipal revenues through sales and earnings taxes, their proceeds go to funds that pay for the increased services these developments demand (fire and police protection, roads, sewers, electricity, lighting, etc.) rather than to school funds, which are dependent upon property tax revenues.[61] Nationwide, industrial development bonds resulted in a $7.4 billion tax loss in 1983, which ordinary taxpayers had to make up through increased payroll taxes. Compared to white Americans, people of color, more likely to be poor or working class, suffer disproportionately from these changes as taxpayers, as workers, and as tenants. A study by the Citizens for Tax Justice found that wealthy Californians spend less than eleven cents in taxes for every dollar earned, while poor residents of the state pay fourteen cents out of every dollar in taxes. As groups overrepresented among the poor, minorities have been forced to subsidize the tax breaks given to the wealthy.[62] While holding property tax assessments for businesses and some home owners to about half of their market value, California's Proposition 13 deprived cities and counties of $13 billion a year in taxes. Businesses alone avoided $3.3 billion to $8.6 billion in taxes per year under this statute.[63]

Because they are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive in-

vestment in whiteness-generated by slavery and segregation, immigrant exclusion and Native American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented by liberal and conservative social policies as well-Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. The increased possessive investment in whiteness generated by disinvestment in U.S. cities, factories, and schools since the 1970s disguises as *racial* problems the general social problems posed by deindustrialization, economic restructuring, and neoconservative attacks on the welfare state. It fuels a discourse that demonizes people of color for being victimized by these changes, while hiding the privileges of whiteness by attributing the economic advantages enjoyed by whites to their family values, faith in fatherhood, and foresight-rather than to the favoritism they enjoy through their possessive investment in whiteness.

The demonization of black families in public discourse since the 1970s is particularly instructive in this regard. During the 1970s, the share of low-income households headed by blacks increased by one-third, while black family income fell from 60 percent of white family income in 1971 to 58 percent in 1980. Even adjusting for unemployment and for African American disadvantages **in** life-cycle employment (more injuries, more frequently interrupted work histories, confinement to jobs most susceptible to layoffs), the wages of full-time year-round black workers fell from 77 percent of white workers' in**come to** 73 percent by 1986. In 1986, white workers with high school diplomas earned $3,000 per year more than African Americans with the same education.[64] Even when they had the same family structure as white workers, blacks found themselves more likely to be poor.

Recent economic gains by blacks brighten the picture somewhat, but the deindustrialization and economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s imposes yet another racial penalty on wage earners from minority communities, who suffered setbacks while members of other groups accumulated equity-producing assets. And even when some minority groups show improvement, others do not. In 1995, for example, every U.S. ethnic and racial group experienced an increase in income except the twenty-seven million Hispanics, who experienced a 5.1 percent drop in income during that year alone.[65]

Forty-six percent of black workers between the ages of twenty and twenty-four held blue-collar jobs in 1976, but only 20 percent by 1984. Earnings by young black families that had reached 60 percent of white families' income in 1973, fell to 46 percent by 1986. Younger African American families experienced a 50 percent drop in real earnings between 1973 and 1986, with the de-

cline in black male wages particularly steep.[66] Many recent popular and scholarly studies have delineated the causes for black economic decline over the past two decades.[67] Deindustrialization has decimated the industrial infrastructure that formerly provided high wage jobs and chances for upward mobility to black workers. Neoconservative attacks on government spending for public housing, health, education, and transportation have deprived members of minority groups of needed services and opportunities for jobs in the public sector. A massive retreat at the highest levels of government from the responsibility to enforce antidiscrimination laws has sanctioned pervasive overt and covert racial discrimination by bankers, realtors, and employers.

Yet public opinion polls of white Americans reflect little recognition of these devastating changes. Seventy percent of whites in one poll said that African Americans "have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites," and nearly three-fourths of white respondents to a 1989 poll believed that opportunities for blacks had improved under Reagan.[68] If such optimism about the opportunities available to African Americans does not demonstrate ignorance of the dire conditions facing black communities, it indicates that many whites believe that blacks suffer deservedly, because they do not take advantage of the opportunities offered them. In opinion polls, favorable assessments of black chances for success often accompanied extremely negative judgments about the abilities, work habits, and character of black people. A National Opinion Research Report in 1990 disclosed that more than 50 percent of U.S. whites viewed blacks as innately lazy and less intelligent and less patriotic than whites.[69] More than 60 percent said that they believed that blacks suffer from poor housing and employment opportunities because of their own lack of will power. Some 56.3 percent said that blacks preferred welfare to employment, while 44.6 percent contended that blacks tended toward laziness.[70] Even more important, research by Mary Edsall and Thomas Byrne Edsall indicates that many whites structure nearly all of their decisions about housing, education, and politics in response to their aversions to black people.[71]

The present political culture in this country gives broad sanction for viewing white supremacy and antiblack racism as forces from the past, as demons finally put to rest by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.[72] Jurists, journalists, and politicians have generally been more vocal in opposing what they call "quotas' and "reverse discrimination"-by which they usually mean race-specific measures, designed to remedy existing racial discrimination, that inconvenience or offend whites-than in challenging the thousands of well-documented cases every year of routine, systematic,

and unyielding discrimination against minorities. It is my contention that the stark contrast between nonwhite experiences and white opinions during the past two decades cannot be attributed solely to individual ignorance or intolerance, but stems instead from liberal individualism's inability to describe adequately the collective dimensions of our experience. [73] As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberative individual activities, we will be able to discern as racist only *individual* manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight. Collective exercises of power that relentlessly channel rewards, resources, and opportunities from one group to another will not appear "racist" from this perspective, because they rarely announce their intention to discriminate against individuals. Yet they nonetheless give racial identities their sinister social meaning by giving people from different races vastly different life chances.

The gap between white perception and minority experience can have explosive consequences. Little more than a year after the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion, a sixteen-year-old high school junior shared her opinions with a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*. "*I* don't think white people owe anything to black people," she explained. "We didn't sell them into slavery, it was our ancestors. What they did was wrong, but we've done our best to make up for it." A seventeen-year-old senior echoed those comments, telling the reporter, "I feel we spend more time in my history class talking about what whites owe blacks than just about anything else when the issue of slavery comes up. I often received dirty looks. This seems strange given that I wasn't even alive then. And the few members of my family from that time didn't have the luxury of owning much, let alone slaves. So why, I ask you, am I constantly made to feel guilty?" [74]

More ominously, after pleading guilty to bombing two homes and one car, vandalizing a synagogue, and attempting to start a race war by planning the murder of Rodney King and the bombing of Los Angeles's First African Methodist Episcopal Church, twenty-year-old Christopher David Fisher explained that "sometimes whites were picked on because of the color of their skin.. . . Maybe we're blamed for slavery." [75] Fisher's actions were certainly extreme, but his justification of them drew knowingly and precisely on a broadly shared narrative about the victimization of "innocent" whites by irrational and ungrateful minorities.

The comments and questions raised about the legacy of slavery by these young whites illuminate broader currents in our culture, with enormous implications for understanding the enduring significance of race in our country.

These young people associate black grievances solely with slavery, and they express irritation at what they perceive as efforts to make them feel guilty or unduly privileged because of things that happened in the distant past. The claim that one's own family did not own any slaves is frequently voiced in our culture. It is almost never followed with a statement to the effect that of course some people's families did own slaves and we will not rest until we track them down and make them pay reparations. This view never acknowledges how the existence of slavery and the exploitation of black labor after emancipation created opportunities from which immigrants and others benefited, even if they did not personally own slaves. Rather, it seems to hold that, because not all white people owned slaves, no white people can be held accountable or inconvenienced by the legacy of slavery. More important, having dispensed with slavery, they feel no need to address the histories of Jim Crow segregation, racialized social policies, urban renewal, or the revived racism of contemporary neoconservatism. On the contrary, Fisher felt that his discomfort with being "picked on" and "blamed" for slavery gave him good reason to bomb homes, deface synagogues, and plot to kill black people.

Unfortunately for our society, these young whites accurately reflect the logic of the language of liberal individualism and its ideological predispositions in discussions of race. In their apparent ignorance of the disciplined, systemic, and collective *group* activity that has structured white identities in U.S. history, they are in good company. In a 1979 law journal article, future Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia argued that affirmative action "is based upon concepts of racial indebtedness and racial entitlement rather than individual worth and individual need" and is thus "racist." [76] Yet liberal individualism is not completely color-blind on this issue. As Cheryl I. Harris demonstrates, the legacy of liberal individualism has not prevented the Supreme Court from recognizing and protecting the group interests of *whites* in the Bakke, Croson, and Wygant cases . [77] In each case, the Court nullified affirmative action programs because they judged efforts to help blacks as harmful to whites: to white expectations of entitlement, expectations based on the possessive investment in whiteness they held as members of a group. In the Bakke case, for instance, where the plaintiff argued that medical school affirmative action programs disadvantaged white applicants like himself, neither Bakke nor the Court contested the legitimacy of medical school admissions standards that reserved five seats in each class for children of wealthy donors to the university or that penalized Bakke for being older than most of the other applicants. The group rights of not-wealthy people or of people older than their classmates did not compel the Court or Bakke

to make any claim of harm. But they did challenge and reject a policy designed to offset the effects of past and present discrimination when they could construe the medical school admission policies as detrimental to the interests of whites as a group-and as a consequence they applied the "strict scrutiny" standard to protect whites while denying that protection to people of color. In this case, as in so many others, the language of liberal individualism serves as a cover for co-ordinated collective group interests.

Group interests are not monolithic, and aggregate figures can obscure serious differences within racial groups. All whites do not benefit from the possessive investment in whiteness in precisely the same ways; the experiences of members of minority groups are not interchangeable. But the possessive investment in whiteness always affects individual and group life chances and opportunities. Even in cases where minority groups secure political and economic power through collective mobilization, the terms and conditions of their collectivity and the logic of group solidarity are always influenced and intensified by the absolute value of whiteness in U.S. politics, economics, and culture. [78]

In the 1960s, members of the Black Panther Party used to say that "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.",But those of us who are "white" can only become part of the solution if we recognize the degree, to which we are already part of the problem-not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it. Neither conservative "free market" policies nor liberal social welfare policies can solve the "white problem" in the United States, because both reinforce the possessive investment in whiteness. But an explicitly antiracist interethnic movement that acknowledges the existence and power of whiteness might make some important changes. Antiracist coalitions also have a long history in the United States-in the political activism of John Brown, Sojourner Truth, and the Magon brothers among others, but also in our rich cultural tradition of interethnic antiracism connected to civil rights activism of the kind detailed so brilliantly in rhythm and blues musician Johnny Otis's book, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue*. These all too infrequent but nonetheless important efforts by whites to fight racism, not out of sympathy for someone else but out of a sense of self-respect and simple justice, have never completely disappeared; they remain available as models for the present. [79]

Walter Benjamin's praise for "presence of mind" came from his understanding of how difficult it may be to see the present. But more important, he called for presence of mind as the means for implementing what he named "the only true telepathic miracle"-turning the forbidding future into the fulfilled present. [80] Failure to acknowledge our society's possessive investment in whiteness prevents us from facing the present openly and honestly. It hides from us the devastating costs of disinvestment in America's infrastructure over the past two decades and keeps us from facing our responsibility to reinvest in human resources by channeling resources toward education, health, and housing-and away from subsidies for speculation and luxury. After two decades of disinvestment, the only further disinvestment we need is from the ruinous pathology of whiteness, which has always undermined our own best instincts and interests. In a society suffering so badly from an absence of mutuality, an absence of responsibility and an absence of justice, presence of mind might be just what we need.