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# How Race Is Conjured

AN INTERVIEW WITH
BARBARA J. FIELDS / KAREN E. FIELDS

The fiction of race hides the real source of racism and inequity in America today.

In the three years since Trayvon Martin was killed, the realities of police racism and violence, of segregation from schools to swimming pools, and of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow have returned to mainstream discussions. And now as Confederate flags disappear in the wake of the murders in Charleston, racism is once again at the center of the popular consciousness.

There is a window, then, for the US left to push a deeper and broader conversation about the implications of racism and to build working-class organizations that fight for social justice for all.

But that opportunity will only be open to the degree we can overcome the ideological legacy of the last three decades. Since the 1980s, structural inequality has been increasingly replaced by personal responsibility as the main explanation for gross inequality. At the same time, attention to persistent and structural racism faded, supplanted by a focus on race and "race relations."

This could not have been possible without the enshrinement of race as a natural category, the spread of the fiction that certain traits define members of one "race" and differentiate them from members of other races.

No one has better articulated why race cannot serve as the starting point for discussions about inequality in the United States — and what we miss when they are — than Barbara and Karen Fields, authors of the 2012 book *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*.

Barbara and Karen were interviewed for *Jacobin* last week by Jason Farbman, a member of the International Socialist Organization in New York.

INTERVIEW BY

JASON FARBMAN

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**Jason Farbman**

Many events in the past year have forced attention to the problems of racism in the United States — most recently the terrorist attack in Charleston. But debates around Rachel Dolezal, which captured everyone's attention in the week before Charleston, were very unlike these other discussions. What was striking about those debates is that they weren't much about racism at all, and much more about what race Dolezal is.

**Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields**

## Barbara Fields

The focus on Dolezal seemed to trivialize other recent events that put racism on people's horizons. Karen and I don't talk about race, except to explain the relationship between race and racism and racecraft. Race is a category that means something to most Americans, but in *Racecraft* we're trying to explain exactly what it cannot mean. It cannot mean visible physical differences that, by themselves, produce consequences in everyday life.

We see race not as a physical fact, but as a product of racism. And we see racism not as an attitude or a state of mind, like bigotry: it's an action. It's acting on a double standard, with that double standard itself based on ancestry or supposed ancestry.

Extreme individual bigotry, like that exhibited by Dylann Roof in Charleston, may figure in racist action. But it is incomparably less frequent than the vast background of workaday racism against which it occurs.

When people act on a racist double-standard regularly — as people do in our society — then race starts to look like something that comes from nature. In other words it turns racism into race, through racecraft. The Dolezal matter moves us away from actions and practices.

**Jason Farbman**

For most people, race is the obvious starting point for discussions of racism. You invert that assumption in *Racecraft,* arguing that race has no biological basis and therefore can't be the starting point for any reasonable discussion. You created the word "racecraft" to identify how —

when those practices are repeated widely and persevere for decades and centuries — racist practice produces a general belief in race.

**Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields**

## Karen Fields

My breakthrough, personally, came from work I had done in colonized African societies where witchcraft was believed in widely. Not just believed in, but taken for granted as real.

The British colonial officials, there to rule the country, said that it was not real. But in order to control the communities they were seeking to control, those very officials found they had to operate within the idiom of witchcraft. Indeed, one of them said, "Let's find one of the better class witch doctors!"

What a thing to say, but it is ideology in the same sense we mean race is. It's a vocabulary of everyday life. It's a commonplace idiom of thought. It's a commonplace language. It's given. If you say there's no such thing as race people will look at you and say you're crazy. How is it they came to believe in witchcraft? In much the same way that Americans come to believe in racecraft.

Racecraft shares characteristics with witchcraft, two in particular. First, there's no rational causality. We often speak as if black skin causes segregation or shootings. Second, there's (witting or unwitting) reliance on circular argument. For example, blood serves as a metaphor of race but is often taken as a feature of race, even by scientifically trained people. So we find explanations meant to be scientific that end up using  logic has to deny causality.

For instance, they say black people get this disease or that black people have more of a certain blood factor than others, with a certain statistical frequency, but you can't derive a causal explanation from a statistical frequency. If everyone takes race for granted, there's no reason that scientists would wean themselves from doing the same.

Race is the category they start and end with.

## Barbara

When you have arguments or observations that do without workaday causality in the twenty-first century, you are on a terrain very similar to that of believers in witchcraft.

In *Racecraft* we tell a story about a study of asthma among children living in the Bronx. The researchers had children wear monitors so they could find out exactly what emissions were in the air and what the children were actually breathing in. They reported the results and concluded the high volume of truck traffic, because of the nearby highways, contributed to the high incidence of asthma.

The story as reported in the *New York Times* featured commentary by an expert, who agreed that the study showed this and that environmental factor had been shown to be contributors. But he

said the high incidence of asthma also had to do with the high percentage of Hispanic and black children in the area.

It was reported uncritically that being Hispanic or black ranked along with the actual causes of their susceptibility to asthma. That reasoning makes as much sense as claiming the things that cause asthma are pollution but also speaking Spanish in the household. Everybody would see that was ridiculous, but miss the anomaly when the subject is race. That's what racecraft is.

## Karen

What witchcraft and racecraft have in common is they are part of something that cannot have a regular causal explanation — the cause of good and bad fortune such as sicknesses and draughts. What we do in America is to explain inequality by saying there are certain characteristics of people who come out on the wrong end of things.

Since we can't talk about inequality in America, or at least until very recently we could not, the explanation becomes something inherent in black and Hispanic people.

### Jason Farbman

Racism is not just the product of interpersonal interactions (although it frequently plays out at the level of individual interactions). We get plenty of encouragement from politicians, corporations, and the media to justify unequal outcomes for different groups.

### Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields

## Karen

People are captives of ideology, but they also can understand it just as the witch doctors knew how to produce the tricks to keep people faithful to the rituals they performed. There are racecraft artists who understand how to push those levers.

One was the guy who did public relations for Republican Sen. Jesse Helms's reelection. He mobilized fear of white people losing their jobs to black people, when the main agenda, as he surely knew very well, was everybody losing their manufacturing jobs in North Carolina. Which happened very rapidly in the following decade.

There's also the funding and propagation of the blood industry. Blood may be the deepest metaphor and mobilizing image of race. We find American Red Cross now promoting — at least as late as 2010, if not more recently — the notion that people do best if they get blood from their own race or ethnic group.

They have gotten funds for studies that purport to demonstrate that. But there were studies in the 1930s that fell far short of proof. So when I saw this donor recruitment from the Red Cross, I asked them where the science was on which they were basing this claim. They sent me a 1992 paper from the *New England Journal of Medicine* that was heavily criticized by some doctors, but nevertheless

appeared in a distinguished journal. That means people know, and simultaneously don't know, what is wrong with claims of that kind.

There's no harm from the ruling class point of view in letting people think blood differs by race. It's such a motivating image. I've been kept up at nights thinking that I might get to a hospital where someone thinks this is truth, and I would be denied blood that matched my blood type because it was not "racially matched."

**Jason Farbman**

Its fairly common on the US left to hear "race is a social construction," which seems to support what you two argue. But what is often meant, though, is that race is just made up, that race could mean anything to anybody.

**Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields**

## Barbara

There is an important difference between identity and identification, which Karen and I have talked about in our book *Racecraft*. Rachel Dolezal was able to define her identity well enough to become what she said she was in her environment, in Spokane. And that's something available to her partly because of the way that we as a society define who is black and who is not.

Anybody can be black — black is defined as any known or visible ancestry — or "one drop of blood." So it's really not based on what you look like, even if you go to the trouble of tanning and wearing a wig and whatnot.

Most Afro Americans don't have any control over identification. Their identity, how they define themselves, how they perceive themselves, can be overruled by that identification. That's what happens when we see Afro-American police officers killed by their comrades by mistake. Their identity as a police officer is overruled instantly and fatally because the identification takes precedence.

That's what happens to people who are visibly Afro American or who are identified that way in our racist society, if not always in so dramatic and terminal a way. Mistaken identification can put an end to one's identity by terminating the human being it's attached to.

## Karen

We should hammer on identification, and not identity. For instance, how someone is treated when they go into a store. Trayon Christian went into a boutique in New York, and he might have had the identity of a student and a consumer of expensive goods, using money he earned. But he was identified immediately as a black person, and the police were called on him by someone at the store. He was arrested by police, who examined his valid sales slip, and the valid debit card, he had used to purchase the merchandise, but then arrested him anyway.

## Barbara

Another feature of what we talk about as racecraft is the sumptuary code, which applies to a skin color or a social status. Trayvon Martin was in a largely white subdivision, so he was identified as an anomaly because the sumptuary code said he shouldn't be there. Racism and racecraft is the collection of those mechanical things people do in a routine way, when someone's presence is anomalous in a store or a residential area, that is primed in us as an equation of other people's "race."

**Jason Farbman**

Is it possible to fruitfully discuss racism at the individual level? In *Racecraft* you argue the social construction of race is social — a relationship, between an individual and the world, something negotiated. Not just something people determine for themselves or that nature determines for them.

**Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields**

## Karen

Well, you have put your finger on something very important and contested. Psychology, which operates on the individual level, can't bring much to the discussion. Some psychologists go so far as to discover features of the brain. But that doesn't account for somebody not having legitimate access to housing.

The socially constructed part of race is not that it is unreal, but that it is invisible in its construction, and that it is being done by people all the time, in action and in understanding. We all are pushing the levers every day.

It's easier on the conscience of people who benefit from these codes of exclusion and preferences for professional advancement, if the notion is that we have dealt with racism because people quickly say, "I don't have a racist bone in my body!"

In the minds of some people, once you've gotten rid of the intention you've gotten rid of the thing. But they will continue to do the opposite spontaneously and without taking moral account or accepting moral accountability for what that means.

## Barbara

Race appears to be self-evident to people, so that when people throw around the expression "it's a social construction," you'll get two reactions. (I don't use the expression either in writing or in teaching.)

One of them, that man or woman in the street reaction is, "What do you mean it's not real?" And the man and the woman in the street, especially if the man or the woman in the street is of African descent, knows that you can't say it's not real because people get killed because of it! And people

are affected in all kinds of ways in their daily life, short of death. To say that race is not real is not to say that racism is not real and that it does not have real consequences.

The other way "race is a social construction" can be apprehended, which is also wrong, is to say race is infinitely malleable. That has come up quite a bit in discussions about the Dolezal situation, that people should have the freedom to decide who they are. Well, we don't have the freedom to decide for ourselves — although some people do have a greater ability than others to to decide for themselves. Identity is one thing; identification is another.

## Karen

When my daughter was growing up, my husband and I in our fallible wisdom put her into a private school where everyone else was white. And it wasn't long before she was heard sitting by herself one day saying, "I am a black child, I am a black child, I am a black child." She was five years old.

That singling out was not part of her subjective awareness before she got to the school, but she had to take it in from what was being done at school. So the racecraft went on for her but it also went on for them, because the other children learn that is what you do to somebody of her complexion and hair type.

**Jason Farbman**

You talk about how the word black has been the virtual equivalent of "poor" and "lower class" since very early in the country's history. When this equivalence becomes a commonsense notion, you argue, "It is easy to overlook the fact that the apparatus of Jim Crow, like that of slavery, imposed relations of dominance and subordination among Euro Americans, and not just between Afro Americans and Euro Americans . . . One group of white people outranked the other precisely because it was in a position to oppress and exploit black people."

**Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields**

## Barbara

That equivalence between "black" and "poor" obscures the class structure of inequality in this country, which is something studiously avoided. For a long time our public mythology has been that our political system has a genius for compromise, and that it doesn't fracture on class lines the way it does in other countries.

That story isn't working now, but over the years when it was working we paid a very high price for that. It meant the real experiences of people's everyday lives couldn't be talked about as what they were. That goes for white people as well as black people.

In the book, we used one example to illustrate this. When our father was a baby, our great-grandmother would take him to a park in Charleston and ride him around in a baby carriage that she had fancied up with her own handwork — crocheted ruffles and flourishes and so on. It looked

from the outside like the equipment of an upper-class white baby. She would go to the park every day taking my father around, where a white Irish police officer would smile at her.

He thought he knew what he was looking at: a servant in an upper-class white family, taking the baby of that family for an outing. But when he came close enough to see there was a black baby in the carriage then everything changed, and he tried to order our great-grandmother out of the park.

What that episode also illustrates is a relationship of class hierarchy between white people. When that police office smiled and was congenial toward the black woman pushing along the baby carriage, he was expressing his sense of subservience to the employers he assumed she was working for. In other words a class relationship between white people took the form of a relationship between white and black people.

Much of the substance was beneath the surface, but his attitude changed after kowtowing to white employers only to realize they weren't there, that he had actually been kowtowing to a black woman.

## Karen

I have told that story again and again because people have a stick-figure version of what Jim Crow meant, that a mechanism went off as soon as black and white people encountered one another. This doesn't allow us to see white people as a differentiated group. In that story the police officer is not a respected category or person, Irish on top of it, meaning an immigrant who was not well viewed at the time.

Another example is when our grandmother was a teacher on James Island, not far from Charleston. She decided one day she was going to have a bang-up closing program for the year. She wanted some special things for it and so approached her supervisor, who was a well-to-do white landowner.

In her spirit of uplift to show white people (whom she thought of as an undifferentiated group) what black people could accomplish, she told him, "I want to invite all the neighbors." And he said, "Oh no. There are white people and there are crackers, and they have nothing to do with one another. Don't you think about inviting them, they'll burn it down!"

Grandma came home that night to tell her husband and they exploded, because they realized there was not a united front the Southern ideology had worked so hard to establish: all white folks together, behind the Confederate flag. They laughed until they cried; it was discovery of something new!

But in our time lower-class white people are still kept much out of sight. Inequality among white people, and the solution and the nature of inequality as a social problem, is easily submerged by this racist discourse. Racist discourse may allow a satisfying explanation of why people do badly, but not a true one.

**Jason Farbman**

If racism creates race, as you argue, can we undo a belief in race by attacking racism?

Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields

## Barbara

We certainly need to attack racism when we see its tracks, which are all over our public life. But we also need to understand if we simply see that as a matter of antiracism then we're back tilting at the smoke, fighting "race."

## Karen

And we're affirming race.

## Barbara

I would like to refer you to one of the great authorities on antiracism, Adolph Reed. What he says is that antiracism by itself can't be a sufficient content for politics. That it does not work.

## Karen

A broader struggle has to go on. The restoration of unions and their old functions is part of the politics needed alongside antiracism. But in and of itself antiracism only points out what the racists are doing, which gets us in a devilish circle.

Jason Farbman

In the chapter "Slavery, Race, and Ideology," you draw a clear connection between a ruling group's ability to oppress another group, and the latter's ability to organize and resist or fight back.

Barbara J. FieldsKaren E. Fields

## Barbara

I think it's true that there is a relationship between how people are oppressed and what those oppressing them can or think they can get away with. We're seeing that today, we're living in a period where there has been a major onslaught against organized labor. We've seen many of the protections that labor fought for and achieved over decades being unraveled. We may be at the start of a reversal of that process. I hope so. It's not going to be pretty, and it's not going to be automatic. It's going to be hard-fought, and it's going to be nasty.

## Karen

That onslaught against labor was accompanied by the racist politics of the 1980s, beating the drums of racism. That's the time when every form of racism was deployed. With that deployment we saw the return of race to science in a way that had been absent for several decades. Republican support was strong for a new multiracial census category, patents were issued for treating "black" congestive heart failure as distinct from white, and so on.

## Barbara

One of the hopeful signs to me, even if it's starting very small and locally, is the mobilizations about substandard wages in the fast-food industry. The people who have those jobs are now demanding they be decent jobs that provide decent wages, etc. And there have been mobilizations from people who do housekeeping in hotels. Those mobilizations have the advantage that they come from people who know what they're talking about and they know what they're demanding.

Mobilization along those lines has to be a good indicator of unrest where there needs to be unrest in this society. People are being told they have to live without the resources that have been put before people for decades as the Standard American Package: a decent place to live, a decent neighborhood, decent public schools and the prospect of higher education, and so on.

## Karen

There are some potential teachable moments emerging. We're talking about what we can do with our understanding of how the political dynamic that has evolved in our country historically handles inequality among citizens.

You have to be looking at these and other movements, and be prepared to take advantage of the blowup that happens, that will happen, from the top. You have to be able to make it not, as the economists imply, merely a "they" problem for someone else, but a "we" problem. That's the training we need to be able to do.

If I could put a pin in someone who is sometimes well thought of, Jeffrey Sachs in his book asks in *Common Wealth* why is it in the United States where inequality is growing, it hasn't been possible to establish a welfare state such like those of northern Europe. He said, the problem was that in the United States we have our racial difficulties. "Within the US race is the single most important predictor of support for welfare. America's troubled race relations are clearly a major reason for the absence of an American welfare state."

He argued that if we did the statistics state by state, we'd find that places with more homogenous populations tend to have the greater tendency at state level to enact social welfare legislation.

## Barbara

Which is on a par with saying that the reason for the high level of asthma in the Bronx is that there are a lot of black or Hispanic people there.

## Karen

But this one has genocidal implications, does it not?

### Jason Farbman

The US ruling class has had enormous success in dividing working people by convincing one group to accept poor outcomes for other groups, or even that there are meaningful biological or cultural distinctions between groups of workers.

## Barbara

We need to keep going on about the falsity of biological racism. Because that's the root, the source and resource, of racist discourse in public life that short-circuits arguments about inequality in general and reroutes them into conversations about what's unequal naturally between "black" people and "white" people. We have to be teaching that to the point it looks ridiculous and a joke.

## Karen

That brings us back where we began. Dolezal erred by not telling the truth about her race. And there has been an attempt to get a doctor's examination, presumably to establish by some kind of family what race she is, and somehow connect that back to what she was doing.

There was a man at the Yale School of Medicine in the 1930s named George H. Smith who was trying to find a definitive way to distinguish between black, Indian, and European blood. In the paper he wrote at the end of it all, he confessed he had not yet found the correct method for doing it. But he never let go of his assumptions, that the right method was out there somewhere.

That was at the eve of World War II, in which blood was segregated blood even though the secretary of war had to say there was no scientific basis for doing so. I think we have to go after the (supposed) science, because good lord they're passing these notions on to practitioners. So there's an intellectual function that's part of the struggle even though it may not appear to be.

## Barbara

Belief in witchcraft didn't disappear because science disproved it, but because it ultimately became something people couldn't take seriously in the world of everyday life. Right now people take race seriously, they think its something that nature has bestowed. Even the people who think they don't, who say "race is a social construction," also take it seriously as something that nature has bestowed.

## Karen

We'd like to see more people blowing through the smoke instead of breathing it in.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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