CHAPTER 1
The White Racial Frame

The better we know our racial past, the better we know our racial present. The United States is a fairly young country, just over 400 years old if we date its beginning from Jamestown's settlement. For much of this history, extreme racial oppression in the form of slavery and legal segregation was our foundational reality. The first successful English colony was founded at Jamestown in 1607, and in 1619 the first Africans were purchased there by English colonists from a Dutch-flagged slave ship. It was exactly 350 years from 1619 to 1969, the year the last major civil rights law went into effect officially ending legal segregation. Few people realize that for most of our history we were a country grounded in, and greatly shaped by, extensive slavery and legal segregation.

In terms of time and space, we are today not far from our famous "founding fathers." There have been just three long human lifetimes since the 1776 Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, a document principally authored by the prominent slaveholder Thomas Jefferson. We are just two long human lifetimes from the 13th amendment (1865) to the U.S. Constitution that ended two-plus centuries of human slavery. And we are only one human lifetime from the era when segregationist mobs brutally lynched African Americans and other Americans of color, and when many whites, including Supreme Court justices and Senators, were members of the Ku Klux Klan, the world's oldest violence-oriented white supremacist group. For a bit more than four decades, we have been an officially "free" country without large-scale legal discrimination. Certainly, that is not enough time for this country to eradicate the great and deep structural

impacts of three and a half centuries of extreme racial oppression that preceded the current era. Much social science analysis of major aspects of this society today reveals the continuing impact and great significance of the *systemic racism* created by these centuries of extreme oppression.

Let us consider briefly some spatial impacts. In its geographical patterns the twenty-first century United States demonstrates the impact of this oppressive past. Even a brief study of the demographic map reveals that a substantial majority of African Americans today live in just fifteen of the fifty U.S. states—and very disproportionately in southern and border states. In these states, as elsewhere, the majority of these "old stock" Americans reside in relatively segregated areas of towns and cities. In many cities there are still the infamous railroad tracks, as well as major highways, that divide them into communities of mostly whites and communities of mostly people of color. Why is this segregated residential pattern still the reality in what is termed an "advanced democracy"? The answer lies in centuries of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racial discrimination that have set firmly in place and maintained this country's important geographical contours.

In a great many cases, these racially segregated areas and geographical dividing lines are not recent creations, but have been shaped by white decisionmakers' actions over a long period of time. Consider too that these distinctive areal patterns signal much more than information about our geographical realities, for they have many serious consequences for much that goes on in society. We can see this clearly, to take one example, in the racially polarized voting patterns for the landmark 2008 election noted in the Preface.

Well into this twenty-first century, racial segregation and separation along the color line are very much a major part of our psychic geography. Racial separation affects the ways in which white Americans view society, especially on racial matters. The evidence of white denial and ignorance of the reality of U.S. racism is substantial. For example, one national survey of 779 whites found that 61 percent viewed the average black person as having health care access at least equal to that of the average white person. Yet, research data show whites are far more likely to have good health insurance and to get adequate medical care than black Americans. About half the white respondents felt that black Americans had a level of education similar to or better than that of whites. Half the white respondents felt that, on average, whites and blacks are about as well off in the jobs they hold. Once again, the research data show that neither view is accurate. When the results of several such questions were combined, 70 percent of whites were found to hold one or more erroneous beliefs about important white-black differentials in life conditions. Only one in five whites evaluated the current

societal situation accurately on a question about how much discrimination African Americans faced. The majority of whites are willfully ignorant or misinformed when it comes to understanding the difficult life conditions that African Americans and other Americans of color face today. Interestingly, in another survey white respondents were asked if they "often have sympathy for blacks" and again if they "often feel admiration for blacks." Only 5 percent of whites said yes to both questions.[1]

One goal of this book is to examine why so many whites believe what is in fact not true about important racial realities. In insisting on apparently sincere fictions about life conditions of African Americans and other Americans of color, a great many whites exhibit serious collective denial in believing what is demonstrably untrue. The principal reason for these strong racialized views is the *white racial frame*. As I noted in the Preface, this dominant frame is an overarching white worldview that encompasses a *broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate.* For centuries now, it has been a dominant and foundational frame from which a substantial majority of white Americans—as well as many others accepting or seeking to conform to white norms and perspectives—view our still highly racialized society.

Mainstream Social Science: The Need for a New Paradigm

Traditional social science and other mainstream academic and popular analysis has mostly portrayed U.S. racism as mainly a matter of racial "prejudice," "bias," and "stereotyping"—of racial attitudes directed at outgroups that indicate an ethnocentric view of the world and incline individuals to take part in bigotry-generated discrimination. Much recent research on racial matters continues to emphasize the prejudice and bias terminology and approach in assessing what are often termed racial "disparities," a common term for inequalities. These concepts, although certainly useful, are far from sufficient to assess and explain the foundational and systemic racism of the United States. We need more powerful concepts like *systemic racism* and *the white racial frame* that enable us to move beyond the limitations of conventional scientific approaches. Traditional approaches do not capture or explain the deep structural realities of this society's racial oppression in the past or present.

The dominant paradigm of an established science makes it hard for scientists to move in a major new direction in thinking or research. Most scientists stay mostly inside the dominant paradigmatic "box" because of concern for their careers or accepted scientific constraints. One important barrier to developing new social science paradigms is that new views of

society are regularly screened for conformity to preferences of elite decision-makers in academia or in society generally. This vetting and validation process is implemented by research-granting agencies, faculty advisors in academic programs, promotion reviews, and media or other public criticism of scholars who significantly deviate.[2]

Today, most mainstream social science analysis of racial matters is undertaken and accepted because it more or less conforms to the preferences of most elite decisionmakers. For this reason, many racial realities of this society have rarely or never been intensively researched by social scientists. Ironically, U.S. social scientists who research societies overseas often accent the importance of uncovering hidden empirical realities and concealing myths of those societies, yet are frequently reluctant to do similar in-depth research on and analysis of their home society.[3]

Since the full emergence of the social sciences in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainstream social scientists have periodically developed influential theories and concepts designed to interpret racial and ethnic "relations" in this society. These mostly white mainstream analysts have historically included such prominent scholars as Robert E. Park, Gunnar Myrdal, and Milton Gordon. These influential scholars and their colleagues have usually had difficulty in viewing U.S. society from any but a white, albeit often liberal, racial framing. Moreover, over more recent decades the analytical perspectives and much conceptual terminology of mainstream researchers like Park, Myrdal, and Gordon, though periodically elaborated and revised, have continued to significantly influence the way that a majority of social scientists and other researchers have viewed and researched important racial issues.[4]

Certainly, the mainstream "race relations" theories and concepts have provided handy interpretive tools for understanding numerous aspects of racial oppression, but they also have significant limitations and carry hidden assumptions that frequently trap analysts into a limited understanding of racial inequalities and patterns. Included among these are traditional concepts such as bigotry, bias, prejudice, stereotype, race, ethnicity, assimilation, and bigotry-generated discrimination. These concepts have been widely used, and are frequently valuable, but do not provide the essential array of conceptual tools necessary to make sense out of a highly racialized society like the United States.

These conventional analytical concepts tend to be used in decontextualized and non-systemic ways. Even a quick look at today's social science journals or textbooks reveals the frequency and limitations of these commonplace concepts. Many analysts who use them tend to view racial inequality as just one of numerous "social problems." Social problems textbooks dealing with racial issues often have a section on something like the

U.S. "race problem," as do other textbooks such as those used in law school courses on Constitution and racial issues. This "problem" view is similar to the cancer view of racism, in that the problem is considered to be an abnormality in an otherwise healthy system.[5] Such an approach typically views the race problem as not foundational to society, but as temporary and gradually disappearing as a result perhaps of increasing modernity. Thus, one common approach in conventional analyses is to view historical or contemporary acts of discrimination as determined by individual bias or concern for views of bigoted others. This bigot-causes-discrimination view is, like other mainstream views, generally oriented to individual or small-group processes and does not substantially examine the deep structural foundation in which such acts of discrimination are imbedded.[6]

Classical Social Scientists: Trapped in the Eurocentric Context

The habit of not thinking realistically and deeply about a country's undergirding racial structure extends well beyond U.S. social scientists, past or present, to numerous prominent figures in the long tradition of Western social science. Consider the still influential intellectual giants of the Western tradition such as Max Weber, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. They loom large in much contemporary Western social science. Three were of Jewish background and were personally familiar with European anti-Semitism. Several gave some attention to that anti-Semitism, yet they provided brief or no analytical attention to the systems of racial oppression that operated conspicuously within Western countries' growing imperial and colonial spheres during their lifetimes. Not one assessed in significant depth the extreme racialized oppression that played out in front of them as a central aspect of European imperialism and colonialism. Even Karl Marx, a critic of class oppression who knew Western history, never offered a sustained analysis of the highly racialized character of the colonizing adventures overseas by Western governments and capitalistic enterprises. The widespread omission of a serious and sustained analysis of Western racial expansion and oppression, and the consequent racialized social structures, is striking given how fundamental these processes and structures have been to the prosperity and global dominance of major Western countries, now for centuries.

Historically, these influential social science analysts have been European or European American. These analysts have generally prized European civilization over that of other continents, and characteristically viewed Western racial matters from an educated version of the dominant white frame, which I explain fully in the next section. For the most part, these theorists and analysts have been handicapped by the fact that they typically have thought out of the dominant racial framing that most European

Americans and Europeans at all class levels have used now for several centuries.

Take the example of Max Weber, who died in the early twentieth century but has had a great impact on Western social science ever since. Like other social scientists of his era, he held to the tenets of blatant biological racism, a view that infected his historical and geopolitical arguments, yet one that almost never gets critically discussed in textbooks and empirical analyses that to this day use his analytical concepts. Weber wrote unreflectively of the "hereditary hysteria" of Asian Indians, of Africans as genetically incapable of factory work, and of Chinese as slow in intelligence and docile, with these traits viewed as shaped by biology. As with most European scientists, central to Weber's work was the idea of Western "rationality," which he viewed as having hereditary grounding. Western capitalism had evolved through the process of "modernization," which Weber and his peers contrasted to the "traditionalism" of "Oriental" civilizations. Weber held to the Eurocentric view that European capitalism was an "intellectual progression, an ascent of human 'rationality,' meaning intellect and ethics" from ancient society to modern society.[7] Beyond Europe, other countries were viewed as to some degree backward. Edward Said has described this as an ideology of Orientalism, a Western-centered framing unable to see beyond Eurocentrism.[8] Since the time of Weber, many Western social scientists assessing European industrialization and capitalism have continued to accent European superiority in modernity.

To take a more recent example, consider the leading U.S. social theorist, Talcott Parsons. Parsons viewed U.S. racism as an anachronism representative of a premodernist mode of thinking and likely to be dissolved with more industrialization and modernization. Even a scholar who probed deeply into Western civilization was unable to see the racialized "water" in which he metaphorically swam, the water of a sophisticated white framing of Western societies.[9] That frame and the racial oppression it aggressively rationalizes have always been much more than a "premodern survival" attached to an otherwise advanced society. The system of white-imposed racism and its rationalizing frame have long been part of U.S. foundational realities, yet not one major white theorist in the U.S. social science canon has substantially analyzed and understood well that major foundation.

Consider too that the idea of Western civilization's modernity, which includes a superior rationality, has long been important in Western analysis, from Max Weber's time to the present. The term "modernity" has functioned as social science shorthand for industrial and technological civilization, for societies shaped by the views that humans should actively transform physical environments, that market economies are best, and that

bureaucratized nation-states are necessary for societal well-being.[10] Yet this idea of modernity emerged about the same time as the white framing that, since at least the 1600s, has rationalized racial oppression in North America and elsewhere. The concept of "advanced Western civilization" grew out of the European and European American history of imperialistic subordination of peoples of color and often within the social crucibles of slavery and genocide.

According to many contemporary analysts, modern Western societies supposedly have proceeded well beyond the premodern impulses of group irrationality, superstition, and primitive violence. Yet European enslavement of Africans in North America and European-generated genocides targeting indigenous peoples across the globe, which operated openly until a century or so ago, did *not* result from premodern violent impulses somehow breaking through modernity. Instead, these actions did, and do, constitute the economic and cultural foundations of Western modernity—with its advanced technologies, accent on Western-controlled markets, developed nation-states, and overseas military operations aimed at maintaining Western dominance. Racial oppression and its rationalizing frame have long been central to *modern* Western societies, to the present day.

The White-Centered Perspectives of Contemporary Social Scientists

Today, one observes the continuing reality of a white-centered framing in many scholarly and popular analyses of U.S. society. As with canonical scholars like Max Weber, the language chosen to describe a society demographically or sociologically often reveals a white perspective. For many scholarly and popular analysts in the U.S. and across the globe even the English word "Americans" is routinely used to mean "white Americans." Terms like "American dream" and "American culture" are often used to refer primarily to the customs, values, or preferences of white Americans.

Language evasion or deflection strategies are often used by researchers and other authors to downplay certain racial matters. Many social science and popular analysts phrase analytical sentences about racial issues in the passive tense (e.g., "prejudice has been a problem for African Americans"), or they put vague or general nouns in the subject position of sentences about racial issues ("society discriminates against Latinos"). By such artifices, the whites who do the specific acts of racial oppression are not explicitly positioned as active agents and decisionmakers, and are not named as such in the relevant sentences of an article or book. Of course, authors need a diversity of sentences to maintain readers' interest, and using such passive or general phrasing might be in order to maintain that interest. However, in too many cases such sentences are there to avoid directly asserting that

whites, in general or particular, are important decisionmakers and actors in the drama of racial oppression. This nonagentive way of speaking about racial matters is all the more dramatic because some research has shown that U.S. English speakers are generally *more* likely than speakers of languages such Spanish and Japanese to accent the agents of particular events—that is, to speak of specific people *doing* things.[11]

In addition, in many social scientists' and other analysts' writings a good documented discussion of the negative white role in racial matters, such as during the centuries of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, is frequently balanced with positive statements about whites because these analysts apparently feel a need to say something good about whites. An example is paralleling a written section on "bad slaveholders" with another on supposedly "good slaveholders," the latter a contradictory phrase in itself. Take the case of George Washington, perhaps the most famous U.S. founder. Numerous white historians have portrayed him as a superior moral leader and "good" slavemaster in spite of his bloody involvement in extending the brutal slavery system. Washington periodically asserted harshly negative stereotyping of black Americans, had enslaved runaways chased down, had enslaved workers whipped, and had teeth taken from the mouths of those enslaved for his own mouth. Strikingly, one generally savvy historian insists Washington was "not a racist" and that "his unique eminence arises from his sterling personal qualities . . . and from the eerie sense that, in him, some fragment of divine Providence did indeed touch this ground."[12] Similarly, otherwise critical social scientists seem unable to name accurately some of the gendered brutality often directed at black women during the slavery and legal segregation eras as "rape" or "coerced sex." Historian Winthrop Jordan noted that "white men of every social rank slept with Negro women" and that "miscegenation was extensive" in English colonies, but he did not use the words "rape" or "sexual coercion" in his analyses of this violent white male behavior.[13]

Moreover, today many white scholars and other analysts seem puzzled about the constant recurrence of blatantly racist incidents, events, and commentaries in this society. They have often accepted a contemporary racial framing that views U.S. society as "colorblind" or "post-racial" and considers racism to be dead or in significant decline (see Chapter 5). Even white scholars of a liberal inclination regularly underestimate the depth and extensiveness of current racial hostility and discrimination.[14] However, as I will show throughout this book, just because there seem to be fewer overtly racist actions and performances by whites today in public—at least performances viewed as racist by most whites—does not mean that whites' racist thought and action has decreased to a very low level.

The White Racial Frame: Dimensions and Impact

Today, we are in the early stages of developing a major new conceptual paradigm on U.S. racial matters, with an array of conceptual and interpretive tools and a growing number of critical social scientists, critical legal scholars, and others starting to analyze the old "racial relations" paradigm's serious limits.[15] Those working in this contemporary paradigm are attempting to develop a better theory of racial oppression, one that accents this oppression's deep structures, assesses its dimensions and reproductive processes, and demonstrates how both persistence forces and change forces have shaped it over time. For this we need better and agreed-upon analytical and interpretive concepts.

Those working toward a full-fledged structural and systemic racism paradigm have developed new, or extended old, analytical and interpretive concepts, including enhancing concepts from the counter-mainstream historical tradition of scholars and activists of color such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Oliver Cox in the past (for details, see Chapter 8). Over more recent decades, those working in this structural and systemic racism tradition have been very disproportionately scholars and activists of color, such as Kwame Ture, Rodolfo Acuña, Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, Angela Davis, and Adrian Piper, to list just a few.

Inspired by this countersystem tradition, I make much use in this book of strong concepts like the white racial frame, the black counter-frame, and institutional and systemic racism. These concepts link well to critical insights that help us build a better social science paradigm that fosters research into the racial foundation of this society. The empirical world of racial experiences is diverse, complex, and saturated with meaning, and these always structured experiences often have no adequate analytical categories in traditional social science.

The central concept of the white racial frame that I develop in this book is one that helps greatly in digging deeply into the operation of racial oppression in this society. What do I mean by "frame"? Several contemporary sciences, especially the cognitive, neurological, and social sciences, have made use of the idea of a perspectival frame that gets imbedded in individual minds (brains), as well as in collective memories and histories, and helps people make sense out of everyday situations. People are "multiframers." They have numerous frames for understanding and interpretation in their minds, and their frames vary in complexity from specific micro-level framing of situations to a broad framing of society.

Cognitive and neurological scientists have used the frame concept to examine minds at work, with significant attention to how mostly unconscious frames shape individuals' socio-political inclinations and actions.

Some social scientists, in contrast, have in recent years used the concept of frame to examine the relatively conscious frames of people in particular social movements. Their concern is with how framed messages aid in getting a particular social movement's members to protest. Other social scientists, especially media researchers, have accented how mass media framing of stories is typically quite conscious. Specific media frames select out limited aspects of an issue in order to make it salient for mass communication, a selectivity usually promoting a narrow reading of that issue. In all these disciplines a frame is form-giving and makes meaningful what otherwise might seem meaningless to the people involved. A particular frame structures the thinking process and shapes what people see, or do not see, in important societal settings.[16]

In examining U.S. racial oppression, I extend these conceptions of societal framing and emphasize the central importance of a broad, long-dominant white racial frame. As I show later, much historical research demonstrates there is in North America and elsewhere a dominant, white-created racial frame that provides an overarching and generally destructive worldview, one extending across white divisions of class, gender, and age. Since its early development in the seventeenth century, this powerful frame has provided the vantage point from which white Americans have constantly viewed North American society. Its centrality in white minds is what makes it a dominant frame throughout the country and, indeed, in much of the Western world and in numerous other areas. Over time, this powerful frame has been elaborated by or imposed on the minds of most Americans, becoming thereby the country's dominant "frame of mind" and "frame of reference" in regard to racial matters.

This white racial frame is broad and complex, as we have seen. Over time white Americans have combined in it a beliefs aspect (racial stereotypes and ideologies), integrating cognitive elements (racial interpretations and narratives), visual and auditory elements (racialized images and language accents), a "feelings" aspect (racialized emotions), and an inclination to action (to discriminate). Moreover, over centuries of operation this dominant white framing has encompassed both a strong positive orientation to whites and whiteness (a pro-white subframe) and a strong negative orientation to racial "others" who are exploited and oppressed (anti-others subframes). Much research shows that this dominant white frame is often negative toward the racial others, that it is full of anti-others subframes. Yet it is much more than that. In the next chapter I show that early in this country's history this overarching racist framing includes a central subframe that assertively accents a positive view of white superiority, virtue, moral goodness, and action. For centuries the white racial framing of ingroup superiority and outgroup inferiority has been, to use Antonio Gramsci's

term, *hegemonic*—that is, it has been part of a distinctive way of life that dominates major aspects of society. For most whites, thus, the white racial frame is more than just one significant frame among many; it is one that has routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society.

Let us consider a racial event that illustrates several of these important dimensions of the white racial frame. In a journal kept for a college course, Trevor, a white student at a midwestern college, reported on an evening party with other white male students:

> When any two of us are together, no racial comments or jokes are ever made. However, with the full group membership present, anti-Semitic jokes abound, as do racial slurs and vastly derogatory statements. . . . Various jokes concerning stereotypes . . . were also swapped around the gaming table, everything from "How many Hebes fit in a VW beetle?" to "Why did the Jews wander the desert for forty years?" In each case, the punch lines were offensive, even though I'm not Jewish. The answers were "One million (in the ashtray) and four (in the seats)" and "because someone dropped a quarter," respectively. These jokes degraded into a rendition of the song "Yellow," which was re-done to represent the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. It contained lines about the shadows of the people being flash burned into the walls ("and it was all yellow" as the chorus goes in the song).

There is nothing subtle or ambiguous about these performances that frame and target specific groups. Trevor recorded yet more racist performances in this long evening event:

> A member of the group also decided that he has the perfect idea for a Hallmark card. On the cover it would have a few kittens in a basket with ribbons and lace. On the inside it would simply say "You're a nigger." I found that incredibly offensive. Supposedly, when questioned about it, the idea of the card was to make it as offensive as humanly possible in order to make the maximal juxtaposition between warm and ice hearted. After a brief conversation about the cards which dealt with just how wrong they were, a small kitten was drawn on a piece of paper and handed to me with a simple, three-word message on the back. . . . Of course, no group is particularly safe from the group's scathing wit, and the people of Mexico were next to bear the brunt of the jokes. A comment was made about Mexicans driving low-riding cars so they can drive and pick lettuce at the same

> time. Comments were made about the influx of illegal aliens from Mexico and how fast they produce offspring.[17]

These white men are well educated and are having great "fun" as part of an extended social gathering, one they reportedly often engage in. Even in this relatively brief journal account we observe that the white racial frame involves a relatively broad framing of society, one that encompasses multiple dimensions. We observe an array of racial stereotypes and images, both explicit and implicit, that mock and signal the inferiority of several groups of color. Even Jewish Americans are included, apparently viewed as people who are not quite authentically white. There is more here than just cognitive stereotypes. The images are vivid, as in the song playing off the "yellow" metaphor. Performances are barbed, emotion-laden, and generally set in a joking format. We observe that the white racial frame prizes whiteness, which is the obvious stance of superiority taken by those doing the racialized performances. Racially framed notions and emotions that they have probably learned from their peers and previous generations have become the basis for extensive racist performances when these white friends gather to socialize.

Note too that the white racial frame structures events and performances, which in turn feed and add to the frame. Several different roles are played by the whites in this one racialized evening. There are the protagonists centrally acting out numerous racialized notions from important subframes within the white racial frame, here in a private "backstage" area where only whites are present. Others who are present agree with the racial performances and seem to act as cheerleading assistants. The recording student apparently acted either as a passive bystander or mild dissenter showing awareness of the moral issues here. No one, however, aggressively dissents and remonstrates strongly with the active protagonists.

In situations like this we see that the socially inherited racial frame is a comprehensive orienting structure, a "tool kit" that whites and others have long used to understand, interpret, and act in social settings. The important aspects of the frame listed above become taken-for-granted "common sense" for those who hold to them, and most holders often use these tools in automatic or half-conscious ways.[18] From the beginning of this country, this white frame has been deeply held and strongly resistant to displacement, and it includes many important "bits"—that is, frame elements such as the stereotyped racial knowledge, racial images and emotions, and racial interpretations in this diary account. These elements are important pieces of cultural information passed along from one person and group to the next. They include elementary elements such as the word-concepts "white," "black," "race," and white-created racist epithets like "nigger"—key words

that in daily life regularly activate other elements of the frame. Frame elements are generally grouped into several key subframes within a broad overarching frame, and this broader frame operates as a gestalt, a unified whole that is in significant ways more than the sum of its parts.

This gestalt framing imbeds racist items that are relatively constant, but it also has connections to the ebb and flow of everyday experience that add new items or reshape old items. This dominant frame does not exist apart from everyday experience, and racist practices flowing from it are essential parts of the larger system of racial oppression. Such discriminatory practices are made meaningful to perpetrators by the dominant frame, and these practices show well the intersections of people's material, social, and mental lives.

Central to the dominant racial frame are several "big picture" narratives that connect frame elements into historically oriented stories with morals that are especially important to white Americans. These emotion-laden scenarios include stories about white conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement. They make powerful use of stereotypes, images, and other elements from the overarching frame. They include rags-to-riches narratives such as that for early English colonists. According to this mythological narrative, most English "settlers" came with little, but drawing on religious faith and hard work they "settled" and made a nearly "vacant" land prosper, against "savage" Indians. This heroic narrative was later extended as whites moved westward and concocted a "winning the West," manifest destiny myth. In that narrative white "settlers" again fought battles against "savage" Indians, with the heroes being rewarded with land and villainous Indians being killed off or isolated on reservations. (The facts, such as the reality that the indigenous peoples were the successful and established settlers of lands that were stolen from them, are often suppressed in these narratives.) Interestingly, these fictional white narratives are still very much with us. Today, in their homes and in schools and the media a great many whites tell themselves and others false and fabricated narratives of how this country was created and founded. Perhaps most importantly, many try to live by the emotion-laden values and fiction-laden interpretations that they claim as meaningful from these common mythological narratives.[19]

From such narratives, as well as from the student diary account, we see that the persisting white racial framing of society is about much more than words. In addition to its many stereotypes and other belief elements, this powerful frame includes deep emotions, visual images, and the accented sounds of spoken language. Powerful emotions, deep negative feelings, about Americans of color frequently shape how whites behave and interact, and in spite of the liberty-and-justice language they may assert. Emotions of the conventional white frame have included racial hatred, racial

arrogance, and a sense of racial superiority; greed and other emotions of gratification; and a desire for dominance over others. The emotions of white racism also include fears and anxieties, conscious and unconscious, that whites have long held in regard to Americans of color because of the latter's resistance to oppression. Moreover, for some whites guilt and shame have become central emotions, especially as the venality and immorality of racism have become more obvious to them. Significantly, too, those whites who do move to a substantial anti-racist framing of society and into significant anti-racist action often feel and accent the positive emotions of empathy, compassion, and hope for a better future.

Operating out of the White Frame

Although they live in several U.S. regions and often have different occupations and educations, most whites have revealed in numerous research studies that they often hold broadly similar positive stereotypes, images, and understandings about whites and broadly similar negative stereotypes, images, and understandings of Americans of color.[20] Nonetheless, as I see it, the concept of the white racial frame is an "ideal type," a composite whole with a large array of elements that in everyday practice are drawn on selectively by white individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in recurring interactions. People use what they need from the overarching frame's elements to deal with specific situations. Individuals mostly do not make use of the bits of this dominant frame in exactly the same way. For most people there seems to be an internal hierarchy of racial ideas, narratives, images, and emotions, such that a given person may be more comfortable with some of these elements, especially once they become conscious to the individual, than of other known frame elements. Indeed, racially liberal whites may reject certain elements of the traditional white racial frame while consciously or unconsciously accepting or highlighting yet others. Moreover, over time many people may rework, challenge, or transform the version of the white frame they inherited.

The use of critical frame elements often varies by age, gender, class, and other social variables. The strength and use of white power and privilege is variable across such white subgroups, so the utilization of the framing to rationalize and act in societal situations also varies. In addition, the dominant racial frame regularly overlaps with, and is connected to, other collective frames that are important in viewing and interpreting recurring social worlds. Once a frame is utilized by a person, it often activates related frames or subframes. Frequently, the dominant racial frame activates and relates to class-oriented and patriarchal ways of looking at society. Indeed, from the first century of European colonization, as we will see later, the

class and patriarchal frames of oppression have been linked to the white racial frame or nested within it.

By constantly using selected bits of the dominant frame to understand and interpret society, by integrating new items, and by applying its elements such as stereotypes, images, and interpretations in their exploitative and discriminatory actions, whites have for centuries incorporated this interpretive frame in their minds as well as, to varying degrees, the minds of many people of color. Contemporary neurological research shows that strongly held views, such as those of the white frame, are deeply imbedded in the neuronal structure of human brains. Repetition is critical in this process. The dominant racial frame becomes implanted in the neural linkages of a typical brain by the process of constant repetition of its elements—which are heard, observed, or acted upon repeatedly by individuals over years and decades.[21]

Once deeply imbedded in the mind and brain, this frame tends to be lasting and often resistant to change. Activation of it tends to suppress alternative or countering frames. For most whites the dominant frame has become so fundamental that few are able to see it or assess it critically. When important but inconvenient facts are presented that do not fit this dominant frame, whites tend to ignore or reject those facts. For example, for several centuries whites have held to very negative views of black Americans as not nearly as hard-working as white Americans, in spite of great historical evidence to the contrary. Frames as entrenched as the dominant white frame are hard to counter or uproot.

In fact, the white racial frame has become a major part of most whites' character structure, a character structure habitually operated out of, with important individual variations, in everyday life. A concept developed a century ago by psychologist William James, character structure refers to the internalization of historically conditioned understandings from a person's social environment and to the everyday habits developed that reflect such understandings. This habituated character structure is what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has more recently termed the "habitus," and a few social scientists, such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, have aptly referred to this white character structure as the "white habitus."[22]

Because this white character structure imbeds the white racial framing of society, it regularly generates discriminatory habits that have major structural impacts. From the beginning, the white racial frame has played a central role in regularly structuring society by providing important racialized understandings, images, narratives, emotions, and operational norms that determine a great array of individual and group actions within major societal sectors. This dominant frame is directing, and it is learned at parent's knee, in school, and from the media. Once learned, it guides and

rationalizes much discriminatory behavior. Whether it is a white child racially abusing a black child in the schoolyard, or a white adult discriminating against a Latino adult in a job situation, the dominant frame is both activating and activated, and central in creating much social texture in everyday life.

Frame interpretations and other elements do not stand outside daily life and just remain latent in the minds of individuals, but directly shape the everyday scripts whites and others actually act on, such as in acts of discrimination in important social settings. In that way the white racial frame re-creates, maintains, and reinforces the racially stratified patterns and structures of this society. For centuries, the dominant racial frame has protected and shaped society's inegalitarian structure of resources and hierarchy of power. This frame has persisted over centuries because it is constantly validating, and thus validated by, the racially inegalitarian accumulation of many economic, political, and other societal resources.[23]

Collective Memories and Collective Forgetting

Very important to the persistence of the white racial frame are friendship and kinship groups, for in such networks important elements of that frame become common cultural currency. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs suggested that our personal understandings about society are not just in some nook of our minds to which we alone have access. Instead, our social understandings, and thus important interpretive frames, are regularly reiterated for us by external groups. The groups of which we are part give us the "means to reconstruct" such frames if we "adopt . . . their way of thinking." An individual's important understandings, images, knowledge, and framing hang together substantially because they are part of the "totality of thoughts common to a group."[24]

Over time our groups, small and large, become major repositories of congealed group memories and associated social frames. We human beings gain most of our racial frame's understandings, images, and emotions from imbibing and testing those of parents and peers, the media, and written accounts handed down over generations. We do this learning mostly within significant networks of relatives, peers, and friends—as we saw in the example of white college students engaging in racist performances earlier in this chapter. Constant repetition and performance of the frame's racialized information and other bits—together with the relevant intonation and style, nonverbal gestures, and facial expressions—are essential to the successful reproduction of that frame across social networks, geography, and time.[25]

Collective memory is central to these networks. How we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge

of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of that racist past not only shapes, but also legitimates, the established racial structure of today's society. Moreover, if major groups in society hold significantly different collective memories of that racist past, they will as a rule have difficulty in sharing understandings of racial experiences in the present. Most groups have important collective memories, but those with the greatest power, principally white Americans in the U.S. case, typically have the greatest control over society-wide institutional memories, including those recorded by the mainstream media and in most history books, organizational histories, laws, textbooks, films, and public monuments.[26]

What the dominant racial framing ignores or suppresses is critical to the continuation of oppression. Collective *forgetting* is as important as collective remembering, especially in regard to the prevailing narratives of this country's developmental history. Historical events may stay in the collective records of memory, or they may be allowed to deteriorate, slowly or rapidly, through the overt choices of the powerful. The latter usually seek to suppress or weaken collective memories of societal oppression, and to construct positive and often fictional memories of that history. White Americans and their acolytes in other groups have long tried to sanitize this country's collective memories and to downplay or eliminate accurate understandings of our extraordinarily racist history. Over nearly four centuries, a critical part of the dominant framing of whites' unjust enrichment at the expense of Americans of color—for example, killing off Native American populations and enslaving and segregating African Americans—has included much collective forgetting and mythmaking in regard to these often bloody historical realities. Significant portions of North American histories about centuries of racial oppression have been allowed to disappear from public consciousness, or to be downplayed and mythologized in scattered societal portrayals.

For example, research by sociologist Kristen Lavelle has dramatized the importance of contemporary white historical memories that sanitize and reinterpret the brutal realities of the Jim Crow segregation that lasted until the 1960s. Lavelle's interviews with older white southerners, all lifetime residents of a southern city important in the 1960s civil rights movement, revealed that most remember Jim Crow segregation as a pleasant era with peace, security, and "good racial relations" between white and black residents. While most acknowledge to some degree the racial inequality of Jim Crow, they do not remember that era for what it really was—one of extensive and brutal racial discrimination and other racial oppression. One older white resident put it thus:

> There was a place for blacks, and there was a place for whites. Yes, I can remember goin' in restaurants where they had colored

> bathrooms . . . and I can remember when . . . we'd go into restaurants, and they were given food out the back because they were black, but they were not mistreated. Back then, that was a way of life. . . . Nobody ever even thought that they were really doin' anything wrong. . . . Black people or white people never felt like that was wrong.

In her white memory and framing, the all-encompassing anti-black discrimination of the Jim Crow era was not really mistreatment, and she also asserted unrealistically that the black residents did not view legal segregation as wrong either. In a joint interview a white husband and wife also remembered Jim Crow segregation as an era of good and unproblematic racial relations, until the civil rights era:

> [Husband]: 'Course we didn't go to church with 'em, didn't go to school with 'em—it was segregated there. But [we] didn't have any real problems. Rode the bus all the time, and 'course they sat in the back of the bus. I never saw the bus driver ask one to move. You really didn't see much controversy until World War II . . . .
> [Wife]: Oh yes! They didn't cause trouble. I mean, we all got along! . . .
> [Husband]: Now it wadn't all roses—every now and then there'd be somebody stir up something. Back in . . . the sixties I guess, when we had most of our race riots here.[27]

Significantly, the older white southerners who were interviewed rarely connected themselves personally to the often extreme Jim Crow oppression. They have developed various excuses to rationalize the racist views and discriminatory actions of themselves, their relatives, and their acquaintances in that era. Like this husband and wife, many viewed the "bad" racial relations as occurring only during the period of civil rights protests that ended legal segregation. They recall the period of local desegregation as a time of danger and victimization *for whites.* As Lavelle notes, "whites' perception, largely imagined, of their own racial victimization . . . is a major ideological and emotional facet of the white racial frame, whereby whites dismiss the historical and contemporary reality of white racism." This perception lets these whites draw on an old and essential element of that frame and "assert themselves, individually and collectively, as racial innocents and 'good' people." Such efforts are about the "myriad active and subtle ways that whites continue to construct themselves positively and construct people of color, especially black Americans, negatively."[28]

Evidently, one key purpose of the contemporary white racial frame in regard to our history is to provide a type of social "shrouding"—that is, to conceal much of the brutality of the racist history, especially perhaps for

younger whites and new immigrants. This shrouding involves the hiding of the brutal racist realities of an era and/or the rewriting of its history so that key events are mostly recalled from a white point of view.

Much of this white historical mythology has been absorbed even by Americans who are not white, but who have incorporated in their minds significant elements of the white framing of history. For example, Fareed Zakaria—an immigrant journalist who studied at Harvard and works for a U.S. news-magazine—has written about the historical rise and power of the West, yet with no significant references to the role of European-generated slavery and genocide in that process. He writes like many contemporary white historians: "Contact with the rest of the world stimulated Europe. . . . Everywhere Europeans went they found goods, markets, and opportunities. By the seventeenth century, Western nations were increasing their influence over every region and culture with which they came in contact." Indeed, most areas of the world became "marked for use by Europeans."[29] In a substantial discussion of these historical issues, Zakaria makes only one fleeting reference to enslavement of Africans and no explicit reference to the genocide directed at indigenous peoples such as Native Americans. For him, as for most historians of the West, modernization is about industrialization, urbanization, education, and wealth, and not centrally about genocide, land theft, slavery, and unjust enrichment of European countries.

When such a momentous and bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized by elites and historians, ordinary Americans, especially whites, understandably have difficulty in seeing or assessing accurately the present-day realities of unjust enrichment and impoverishment along racial lines. Moreover, misunderstandings and myths of our highly oppressive past are frequently passed along from one generation to the next, and from one person to the next, by means of recurring and ritualized performances. Commemorative ceremonies on holidays, such as Columbus Day, honoring our history, celebrate and in part help to sanitize a horrific past, thereby shaping contemporary communal memories by accenting the continuity of the present racial status quo with a positively portrayed racial past. Sharing elements of the white racial frame in such ceremonies generally promotes solidarity in the dominant group, and often with other racial groups that accept white dominance.[30]

The Importance of Counter-Frames

While the central concern of this book is developing the concept of the white racial frame and showing how it has developed and operated across the centuries, we need to realize and accent the point that this is not the only important collective frame directed at racial matters. Most people

carry several perspectival frames applicable to particular situations in their heads at the same time. As I suggested previously, people are indeed multiframers. In examining the significant and sometimes contested history of the dominant white racial frame, I will deal to some degree with three other important categories of frames in everyday operation: (1) a white-crafted liberty-and-justice frame; (2) the anti-oppression counter-frames of Americans of color; and (3) the traditional home-culture frames that Americans of color have drawn on for their everyday lives and in developing counter-frames.

One of the great ironies of this country's early history is that white Americans' conception of their freedom and of social justice was honed within a slavery system. By the mid- to late eighteenth century, the white colonists had developed what I call the white "liberty-and-justice frame," one that they loudly proclaimed against British officials who were suppressing their liberties. This liberty-and-justice frame is important because most white Americans have, in the past and present, regularly articulated some version of it. We see the importance of this framing in the founding documents of the United States, including the "establish justice" and "secure the blessings of liberty" language of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Since the American Revolution most whites have held in their minds some version of a liberty-and-justice frame, one that is real to them but that is usually treated as rhetorical or hypothetical when it comes to serious threats to the perpetuation of the U.S. system of racism. The liberty-and-justice frame has been routinely trumped by the white racial frame, and has too often been reserved for rhetorical speeches and sermons. Still, over the centuries of this country's existence, modest numbers of whites have taken the liberty-and-justice frame *very* seriously in regard to the racially oppressed situations of Americans of color. We see this in the white abolitionists who, with black abolitionists, protested and fought to bring down the slavery system. Later on, in the 1950s and 1960s, we again see a small group of whites actively allying themselves with black civil rights protesters, whose efforts in the South played a major role in bringing down legal segregation.

In addition to the dominant white racial frame and the white version of the liberty-and-justice frame, there are two groups of perspectival frames that are highly relevant to understanding resistance to systemic racial oppression in North America over the centuries: (1) the anti-oppression counter-frames of Americans of color; and (2) the home-culture frames that Americans of color have drawn on for their everyday lives and to develop effective anti-oppression counter-frames. In opposing the dominant racial frame, Americans of color; have frequently developed a significant counter-frame, an important frame that has helped them to

better understand and resist whites' racial oppression. Freedom-oriented resistance frames appear in the earliest period of racial oppression. The early counter-frames of Americans of color, primarily those of Native Americans and African Americans, were initially developed for survival purposes, and over time they have added critical elements that have strengthened their understandings of institutionalized racism and the strategies of everyday resistance to that racism.

The resistance frames have often drawn heavily on elements from the cultural backgrounds of those oppressed. For example, since the first century of their enslavement, African Americans have maintained a home-culture that is a hybrid, with cultural features stemming in part from the African cultural background and in part from their experiences and adaptations in North America. Confronted regularly by extreme oppression and white attempts to eradicate their African cultures, the many African groups among those enslaved became a single African American people with a home-culture that drew substantially on family, spiritual, and moral elements from their African backgrounds. With strong African roots, these African Americans shaped their religion, art, music, and other cultural elements not only for sustaining everyday life but also for understanding white oppression and generating resistance to it.

The resistance counter-frames of Americans of color have also drawn on the ideals or terminology from whites' own liberty-and-justice frame. Indeed, since the early decades of slavery and genocide whites have greatly feared that African Americans and Native Americans would operate out of a liberty-and-justice counter-frame of their own. Thus, whites feared its influence and use in African Americans' revolts against slavery, and such fears even accelerated with the end of slavery—fears that played some role in the emergence and structure of the near-slavery of Jim Crow segregation. Today, as we will see in later chapters, white Americans still fear, and attack, the stronger counter-frames as they are used by many Americans of color. One example of such white fear can be seen in the widespread, fierce, and irrational white reactions during the pathbreaking 2008 presidential election to the strong anti-racist perspective articulated by black leaders such as Dr. Jeremiah Wright, an African American minister who at the time had been President Barack Obama's pastor for several decades.

In Chapter 8, I will examine Dr. Wright's critical perspective on U.S. history as an example of a contemporary counter-frame arising out of the black tradition. I will also explore briefly other important counter-frames, including those of Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Historically and in the present, these counter-frames have provided valuable tool kits for oppressed Americans, offering individual and collective tools for countering widespread white hostility and discrimination.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have defined and detailed the useful concept of the white racial frame and suggested its utility in making sense out of racial oppression, mainly in North America. In the next chapters I examine questions about how and why this dominant racial frame and its important elements arose over several centuries. I also ask, how has this frame shaped the past and present structure of society? In these chapters I seek to answer these and related questions and to make the often-hidden white-racist realities of this country more obvious—to take them "out of the closet" so that they can be openly analyzed and, hopefully, redressed or removed.

For centuries, to the present, the dominant racial frame has sharply defined inferior and superior racial groups and authoritatively rationalized and structured the great and continuing racial inequalities of this society. In a whitewashing process, and most especially today, this dominant framing has shoved aside, ignored, or treated as incidental numerous racial issues, including the realities of persisting racial discrimination and racial inequality. By critically analyzing this dominant racial frame's elements and its numerous structuring impacts, we can see more clearly how this country is put together racially—and, perhaps, how it might be able to change in the direction of the liberty-and-justice society long proclaimed in its dominant political rhetoric.