

# SYSTEMIC RACISM IN AMERICA

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY, EDUCATION  
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# 4

## MAKE AMERICA WHITE AGAIN

### The Racial Reasoning of American Nationalism

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#### Introduction

In the spring of 2016, an independent candidate named Rick Tyler ran for the Third Congressional District from Tennessee. Tyler put up a billboard on Highway 411 in Polk County. The billboard drew inspiration from Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." But unlike many others, this billboard took an explicit racial stance. Tyler claimed:

The "Make America White Again" billboard advertisement will cut to the very core and marrow of what plagues us as a nation. As Anne Coulter so effectively elucidates in her book, *Adios America*, the overhaul of America's immigration law in the 1960's has placed us on an inevitable course of demise and destruction. Yes ... the cunning globalist/Marxist social engineers have succeeded in destroying that great bulwark against statist tyranny ... the white American super majority. Without its expedited restoration little hope remains for the nation as a whole.

*(Bever 2016)*

On his Facebook page, Tyler also stated:

Your fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers would have been entirely sympathetic and supportive of the preservation of a white super majority in America. They would have been utterly hostile to the concept of the mass nonwhite immigration that has ensued over the past half century. They would have never acquiesced to the schemes of forced racial integration

foisted upon the states by a usurpatious [sic] federal government .... The “Make America White Again” billboard is a takeoff on Donald Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again.” In a nutshell, it is stating that the “Leave It to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet, Mayberry” America of old was vastly superior to what we are experiencing today ... As set forth on the Tyler for Congress website, ... a moratorium on nonwhite immigration and the abolition of policies that subsidize nonwhite birth rates would be two constructive actions toward beginning the long journey back toward sanity and stability in our beleaguered and foundering nation.

(Bever 2016)

Framed by romanticized depictions of a White foundation to the nation as denoted by the pilgrim’s landing in Massachusetts, a portrayal of general George Washington praying beside his warhorse, the representation of White westward march of “manifest destiny,” of a young White girl praying in between wagon wheels, and a picture of the modern nuclear White family, the billboard received both praise and condemnation (Bever 2016). Regardless of the interpretations, the billboard and Tyler’s defense of it reflect mainstream assumptions that lay at the intersection of racial ideologies and American Nationalism.

In this chapter, we move step by step through the logic that undergirds a long-standing racialized discourse, which in both subtle and overt ways generally reproduces a White-supremacist ideology. This logic has at least three dimensions. First, people of color, especially African Americans in general (and in recent years, Barack Obama specifically), are reconstructed as dysfunctional, pathological, social pariahs that threaten the very foundations of Western democracy and civilization. Second, specific performances of White racial identity are deemed the manifestations of morality and are often conflated with authentic and moral forms of US citizenship and patriotism. Third, both White people and White culture are framed as the embattled victims of a politically correct and totalitarian society in which Whites are not allowed to simply speak their mind or exercise basic human rights under the leadership of Obama. These dimensions of Black dysfunction, White patriotism, White paternalism, and White victimhood together reveal the rise of a *Herrenvolk*, or White master race, democracy in the wake of the supposed “post-racial” era of Barack Obama and the beginning and end of the presidency of Donald Trump.

### The Racial Reasoning of American Nationalism

In examining how Whites make meaning of themselves, the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois asked in 1920, “... why will this Soul of White Folk—this modern Prometheus—hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past?” (p. 74). Nearly 100 years later, many argue that race has little to nothing to do

2016	58% Donald Trump	37% Hillary Clinton
2012	59% Mitt Romney	39% Barack Obama
2008	55% John McCain	43% Barack Obama
2004	48% George W. Bush	41% John Kerry
2000	55% George W. Bush	42% Al Gore
1996	46% Bob Dole	44% Bill Clinton
1992	41% George H W. Bush	39% Bill Clinton
1988	60% George H W. Bush	40% Michael Dukakis
1984	66% Ronald Reagan	34% Walter Mondale
1980	56% Ronald Reagan	36% Jimmy Carter
1976	52% Gerald Ford	48% Jimmy Carter

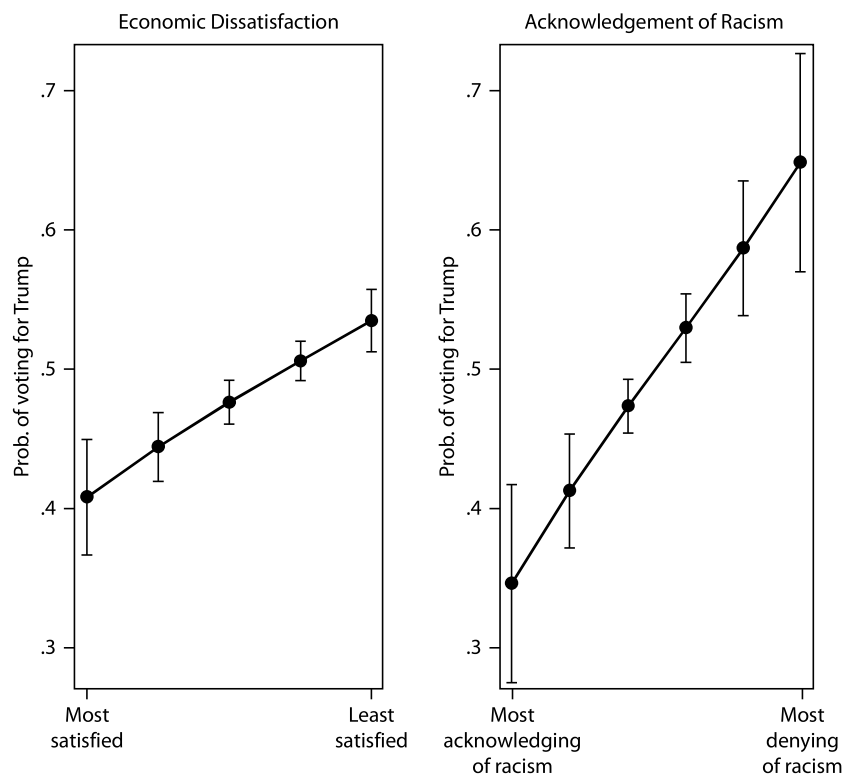
**FIGURE 4.1** Distribution of White Voters in Presidential Elections

Source: Roper Center (2016).

with the backlash to the Obama presidency as manifest in the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

First, some point to the fact that Trump's victory is not out of character with the last 40 years of Republican candidates (see [Figure 4.1](#)). Donald Trump won 58% of the White vote, a mark only about 4 percentage points higher than the average White percentage for presidential elections over the past 40 years, which is 54.18%. Examining this trend, there is little to see. Trump's victory appears lockstep with the Republican Party's grip on White votes since the political realignment of the Southern Strategy (Hughey and Parks 2014). However, simply examining the outcome without the pathway to that outcome leaves us only with the ability to describe, rather than explain, White support.

Second, some contend that Trump’s victory, especially in formally Democratic stronghold states like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, was propelled by his message of “economic populism” which appealed to the “White working class” that was supposedly left behind in the economic recovery of the past few years (cf. Hughey 2017). Hence, Trump’s populism—ostensibly marked by a focus on both economic and cultural protectionism to help bolster both the commercial opportunities and a sense of pride in blue-collar labor—resonated with this group. However, in examining White working-class Trump voters, one sees that their racial attitudes against people of color correlated *much* more closely with support for Trump than did attitudes about economic dissatisfaction. That is, while Figure 4.2 shows that economic dissatisfaction was associated with support for Trump among non-college educated Whites, it also shows



**FIGURE 4.2** Predicted Probability of Voting for Trump Based on Values of Economic Dissatisfaction (Left) and Acknowledgment of Racism (Right)

Note: Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta (2017).

that holding racist attitudes resulted in a 30-point increase in support for Trump. Moreover, it is important to note that this increase holds even when controlling all other variables in the model at their mean values, inclusive of variables that are highly predictive of vote choice, such as partisanship and political ideology as well as related concepts, such as authoritarianism and populism (Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta 2017).

Still, in both examples above, we have a need to further investigate the animating logic behind White support for political candidates that, at least in part, is driven by racist attitudes and ideologies. Especially when looking forward, research now indicates that the norms of racial political rhetoric have shifted from implicit to explicit appeals in recent years: “Whites now view themselves as an embattled racial group, and this has led to both strong ingroup identity and a greater tolerance for expressions of hostility toward outgroups” (Valentino, Neuner and Mathew Vandebroek 2016:28).

### ***White-Supremacist Beliefs in Non-White Dysfunction and Pathology***

American politics has always been fraught with the first dimension of racial reasoning: the notion that people of color, especially African Americans, are dysfunctional, pathological, social pariahs that threaten the very foundations of Western democracy and civilization. Politicians quickly learned that evoking this aspect of racial reasoning in partisan politics could make or break a political career. From the 1790 Naturalization Act that defined citizenship as belonging to only White males of “good character,” to the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which admitted Missouri as a slave state and added Maine as a free state—White racial animus, fear, and apathy has been a primary driver of American politics.

For example, prior to the 1829 presidential race between John Quincy Adams (who was running for re-election) and Andrew Jackson (then a senator from Tennessee), the August 23rd, 1828, edition of the *Cincinnati Gazette* published an editorial by Charles Hammond, a political ally of Adams, who wrote: “General Andrew Jackson’s mother was a COMMON PROSTITUTE, brought to this country by the British soldiers! She afterward married a MULATTO, with whom she had several children, of which number General JACKSON IS ONE!!!” (Remini 1999:134).

Immediately, support for Jackson in Ohio and Northern Kentucky plummeted. Even though such race-baiting did not defeat Jackson, questions of race and slavery were sinking and splitting various political parties. The party of Thomas Jefferson (the Democratic-Republicans) and other parties like the anti-Federal Whig Party and the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic “Know Nothing Party” all started to fall apart and reform themselves over the question of what to do with “the Negro” (Hughey and Parks 2014). In fact, questions circulating

around race drove a group of dissident democrats and Whigs to meet in 1854 in Wisconsin, where they formed the “Republican” Party. Members bickered over whether to support or oppose slavery. By 1861, the debate would be settled with the election of the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln and the plunge into Civil War. The Party of Lincoln garnered early Black and progressive support.

Fast forward to 1932. Three years into the Great Depression, unemployment skyrocketed from 1.6 million to 12.8 million—forcing nearly 25% of the general labor pool into unemployment, while the Black unemployment rate was over 50% (Savage 2015). In response, the Democratic candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed an ambitious social welfare program—known as the New Deal. Roosevelt was elected and Democrats became more appealing to Black voting blocs, even though many of the programs made available in the New Deal were off limits to Black Americans (Katznelson 2005).

Black Americans began to interpret the Democratic Party and the New Deal policies as more in line with their interests. Accordingly, there was a small shift of Black support from the Republican to the Democratic New Deal coalition. This shift was most recognizable in first, the high number of Black votes for Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936—71% of Black voters supported Roosevelt (Weiss 1983). Second, in the Democratic party’s decision to seat Black delegates at their 1936 convention for the first time (in an era of Jim Crow and White-supremacist violent suppression of the Black vote), and third, in Roosevelt’s formation of Black advisors to his presidency, known as the “Black cabinet.”

Harry S. Truman’s commitment to Civil Rights further entrenched Black support for the Democratic Party. Truman pushed for the Fair Employment Practices Act, reached out to Black voters, signed an executive order that desegregated the armed services, and made a worldwide radio address to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Lusane 2011). In the lead-up to the 1948 election, White southerners were becoming disgruntled with the Democrats; they doubted Democratic leaders would uphold the Jim Crow system. In response, southern Democrats stormed out of the 1948 Democratic National Convention after hearing of Truman’s civil rights plan. They formed the “States’ Rights Democratic Party,” more commonly known as the “Dixiecrats.” Led by Strom Thurmond, the Dixiecrats ran on a platform of racial segregation and White purity. While the Dixiecrats only won 39 electoral votes, the 1948 elections signaled a sea change in modern politics—all over the issue of race.

Fast forward again to 1963. John F. Kennedy is assassinated and Republican presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater emerges to challenge Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. Goldwater avoided directly speaking about race in his campaign and instead relied on code words and racialized topics to unite Whites behind a program of racial segregation and economic conservatism. Grand Old Party members began to oppose Civil Rights legislation, such as the 1964 Civil Rights

Act, and actively critiqued Johnson's handling of the 1960s protest movements (Mayer 2002). By 1964, and even with the Democratic victory of Johnson over Goldwater, the "Southern Strategy" was implemented; numerous White voters, formerly loyal Democrats, defected to the Republican Party and many Black voters, formerly loyal Republicans, became Democrats.

The use of implicit racial reasoning to cement the political realignment of the "Southern Strategy" was on full display in the campaign to elect Richard Nixon in 1968 (Hughey and Parks 2014). Since the Republican Party had turned away from Black voters and went after Whites who felt a sense of their economic and social power declining—whom they blamed on people of color—the use of racial prejudice and racism based on beliefs in non-White dysfunction was explicit (Mayer 2002).

For instance, Lee Atwater was the 1968 campaign strategist for Richard Nixon. Atwater bluntly explained his use of racial discourse in political campaigns:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] Blacks get hurt worse than Whites. ... But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."

*(Hughey and Parks 2014:95)*

White politicians have continued to use subtle and indirect appeals to White voters' racial fears over non-White dysfunction. For instance, in 1988, a group supporting George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis ran a television advertisement that baited White fears about the dysfunctional violence of young Black men. As the advertisement aired, an ominous voice stated that Dukakis "... allowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willie Horton, who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received 10 weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes—Dukakis on crime."

In response to this ad, Dukakis's campaign manager Susan Estrich stated, "[I]f you were going to run a campaign of fear and smear and add appeal to racial hatred you could not have picked a better case to use than this one" (Hughey and Parks 2014:96).



These subtle racial advertisements were, at times, matched by more overt political messages. For instance, in 1990 Jessie Helms, a White senator from North Carolina, faced Harvey Gantt, a Black challenger. To activate White working-class fears about his Black challenger, Helms ran a television advertisement that showed the hands of a White man in a plaid shirt reading and then crumpling up a job rejection letter, while a voiceover stated: “You needed that job, and you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair?” The advertisement then compared Helms to Gantt by saying that Gantt was “for racial quotas” while Helms was against them. In specific, the advertisement accused Gantt of supporting “Ted Kennedy’s racial quota law.”

In response to the ad, political scientists Nick Valentino, Michael Traugott, and Vincent Hutchings (2002:33) wrote, “Explicit appeals like these make the racial consequences of a given policy obvious even for those who know little about the issue.” The advertisement was broadcast just a few days shy of the election in which polls had Helms and Gantt deadlocked in the polls. The ad helped boost Helms to victory with 52% of the vote.

As shown, African Americans are regularly depicted as pathological, dysfunctional, dangerous, and inferior people in relation to Whites. The rhetoric of “bad values” and “pathological behavior” reigns—just as it did in the 1829 contest between Adams and Jackson—as a powerful tool for the political discussion of people of color. Such logic has not disappeared. Throughout Obama’s first term, and into his second, various political actors created and circulated images of Obama as a racial, religious, national, and political threat on posters, signs, e-mails, and publications.

One example includes the “ObamaCare” posters that feature an exotic, “witch doctor” with Obama’s face photo-shopped onto the body, as well as dozens of other photo-shopped images that depicted Obama as either an illicit drug addict or drug proponent and thousands of more images that recast the image of Obama as a White-woman feigning, urban gangster, who fetishes conspicuous consumption, replete with gold chains, gold glasses, good teeth, and guns. These images appeared with frequency on Republican, Libertarian, and Tea Party listservs, websites, and rallies over 2008 to 2016.

While it is common in American politics to ridicule, or even to harshly (and some might say, inappropriately) critique political figures, I draw attention to the use of racial stereotypes about Blackness to activate and naturalize these critiques, all the while claiming that they are somehow nonracial (Rosino and Hughey 2016).

The belief that Blackness is naturally dysfunctional is so common that Fox News regularly repeated racist claims as objective facts. For example, in 2014, journalist Bill O’Reilly commented on a dinner he had with former Democratic presidential candidate and African American Al Sharpton at the

Harlem restaurant Sylvia's. The FOX news commentator reported with shock that:

I couldn't get over the fact that there was no difference between Sylvia's restaurant and any other restaurant in New York City. I mean, it was exactly the same, even though it's run by Blacks, primarily Black patronship ... There wasn't one person in Sylvia's who was screaming, "M-Fer, I want more iced tea." You know, I mean, everybody was—it was like going into an Italian restaurant in an all-White suburb in the sense of people were sitting there, and they were ordering and having fun. And there wasn't any kind of craziness at all.

*(Hughey and Parks 2014:67)*

It was indeed an epiphany to O'Reilly and the Fox News audience that Black people possess decorum. That, evidently and literally, was "news" to them.

The rhetoric of racial dysfunction and pathology among GOP candidates and commentators on Fox News rarely let up during Obama's first term. For example, during Obama's May 2011 trip to Ireland, Fox's Eric Bolling tweeted: "Obama chugging 40's in IRE while tornadoes ravage MO" ("40's" refers to forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor—stereotypically associated with Black consumption). The tweet meant to associate Obama with being distracted, ostensibly drunk in Ireland, and uncaring about the suffering caused by a tornado in largely rural and White Missouri. And just a month later when Gabon's president met with Obama in the White House, Fox ran the headline "Hoods in the House." During the segment, a commentator stated: "Guess who's coming to dinner? A dictator. Mr. Obama shares a laugh with one of Africa's kleptocrats. It's not the first time he's had a hoodlum in the hizzouse" (Hughey and Parks 2014:69). The use of stereotypical Black vernacular, mixed with the references to "hoodlums" (which signify those engaged in criminal activity), again attempts to associate Obama with the already established dominant racial ideologies in which Blackness equals dysfunctional and criminal.

Obama chugging 40's in Ireland (IRE) while tornadoes ravage MO. Very intense show tonight. Beckel and Mike Gallagher, Rep ...  
*@ericbolling, on Twitter*

Choices, and below-average intelligence, allows political parties to frame their opponents as biologically and culturally dangerous, immoral, and unsuitable leaders, all with the authority of a supposedly "objective" and "neutral" analysis since race is not overtly mentioned. When attached to Obama, the references to "40's," "thugs," "hoods," "radicalism," and "hip-hop" together

associate Obama with a dangerous racial underclass bent on waging violence against Whites and engaging in depraved behaviors, all with the consequence of bringing down a country already in need of economic and political repair.

### ***The Conflation of Ideal Citizenship with Whiteness***

The second pillar of racial reasoning is that people of color are discursively “othered” from inclusion in the national project. And on the flipside, a kind of true authentic citizenship is said to align with a specific and ideal form of whiteness. These political narratives around ideal citizenship and belonging reveal the sustained conflation of citizenship with a nativist, xenophobic, Christian, hyper-masculine, White identity that is supposedly objective, logical, and moral.

Two historical case studies exemplify this form of racial reasoning. Takao Ozawa, born in Japan in 1915, filed for US citizenship under the Naturalization Act of 1906 which allowed only “free White persons” and “persons of African nativity or persons of African descent” to naturalize. Ozawa did not challenge the constitutionality of the racial restrictions. Instead, he claimed that Japanese people were properly classified as “free White persons” by claiming ideal traits of citizenship (Haney Lopez 2006). In 1922, he told the Court: “My honesty and industriousness are well known among my Japanese and American friends. In name Benedict Arnold was an American, but at heart he was a traitor. In name I am not an American, but at heart I am a true American” (in Kim 2001:94).

Ozawa also made a specific appeal to whiteness by claiming that he was “whiter” than most people regarded White: “In the typical Japanese city of Kyoto, those not exposed to the heat of summer are particularly white-skinned. They are whiter than the average Italian, Spaniard, or Portuguese” (in Haney Lopez 2006:57–58). Ultimately, he was unsuccessful. Drawing from Anthropological theory at the time about the so-called “Caucasian” race, Justice George Sutherland wrote the opinion on a unanimous Court ruling:

... the words ‘White person’ were meant to indicate only a person of what is known as the Caucasian race ... The determination that the words ‘white person’ are synonymous with the words ‘a person of the Caucasian race’ simplifies the problem, although it does not entirely dispose of it ... The appellant, in the case now under consideration, however, is clearly of a race which is not Caucasian and therefore belongs entirely outside the zone on the negative side.

*(US Supreme Court 1922)*

According to the “racial science” of the day, the Japanese fell under the racial category of “Mongoloid,” rather than “Caucasoid.” But Justice Sutherland’s “scientific” reasoning would come back to haunt him the following year.

In 1923, an Indian Sikh man by the name of Bhagat Thind, who identified himself as a “high caste Hindu, of full Indian blood,” sued the United States to become a naturalized citizen in the United States. He appealed to the Naturalization Act of 1906 to become a citizen by naturalization (Haney Lopez 2006). He drew upon the Ozawa decision’s reliance upon the anthropological category of “Caucasian” which included people from Europe, North Africa, and parts of South Asia such as India. Hence, Thind argued that he was a “free White person.”

However, the very same Justice Sutherland reversed the logic he and the Court used in the Ozawa case the previous year:

What we now hold is that the words ‘free White persons’ are words of common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man, synonymous with the word ‘Caucasian’ only as that word is popularly understood. As so understood and used, whatever may be the speculations of the ethnologist, it does not include the body of people to whom the appellee belongs. It is a matter of familiar observation and knowledge that the physical group characteristics of the Hindus render them readily distinguishable from the various groups of persons in this country commonly recognized as white.

*(US Supreme Court 1923)*

Abandoning the logic of anthropology, Sutherland now argued that Thind was not White because “common people” know he is “readily distinguishable” from those we “commonly recognize” as White.

Despite this circular logic, the racial reasoning that Anglo European Christian whiteness is synonymous with Americanness remained relatively stable over the next 90 years. Throughout his first term, the racial, religious, and regional othering of Obama depicted his body—and presidency—as “out of place” and illegitimate. Regardless of his positions and practices, in this context, Obama could not lay claim to an accepted and true American persona, because citizenship itself is racialized as White. Conservative media discourse also deflected charges of racism by claiming that they operate from a color-blind position. Paradoxically, commentators both denied the resiliency of White-supremacist ideals of citizenship and demanded that Obama prove his citizenship, educational attainments, or religious beliefs. Near the end of the 2008 election, conservative radio talk show host Michael Savage declared:

We’re getting ready for the communist takeover of America with a non-citizen at the helm—I love it. He won’t even produce a birth certificate. Don’t you love that? Something as basic as Obama’s birth certificate now is an issue. I mean, if he’s got nothing to hide, show it to me. Doesn’t exist.

It does not exist, they can't find it in the Hawaii government. It's never been produced. The one that was produced is a forgery. Go to my website, read the story.

(*Hughey and Parks 2014:77*)

In this discourse, Obama is depicted as not simply un-American but fundamentally anti-American. In February 2010, then Fox News host Glenn Beck argued, "He chose to use his name, Barack, for a reason. To identify not with America—you don't take the name Barack to identify with America. You take the name Barack to identify, with what? Your heritage? The heritage, maybe, of your father in Kenya, who is a radical?" (Hughey and Parks 2014:77–78). Through an oppositional binary between American identification and Kenyan heritage, Beck denies the diversity of America.

Drawing audience's attention to not just Obama's first name but to his full name as evidence of his quintessential otherness has rendered his middle name a racialized and religious insult. In 2007, conservative author Ann Coulter stated: "He has a middle name that sounds like a 'terrorist' therefore he's 'soft' on terror and national defense" (Hughey and Parks 2014:78). Politicians also employed this tactic. At John McCain's campaign rallies, the president was routinely referred to as "Barack *Hussein* Obama" with emphasis on the middle name (Nasaw 2008) to prime the audience to think of him as Muslim and, by extension, to subtly encourage the conclusion that a Muslim Obama cannot be a loyal American.

According to a 2011 CBS News poll, one in four American's believed the myth of Obama's foreign birth (Condon 2011). Hughey (2012a) conducted a content analysis of racial discourse about Obama in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* from 2008 to 2012 including stories mentioning Obama's origins, loyalties, or identity, and nearly 13,000 online comments on those stories. The following claims made it through moderation in these comment fields:

If Obama didn't act like an alien, nobody would question his birth place. But he is so unAmerican in words and actions, people look for an explanation. The Birthers are just one group of questioners.

(15 December 2010)

'Not American Enough'? Has anyone noticed the obvious? I guess it will take 10 years going by. Then some really smart guy will figure out that Obama was raised Islamic in Indonesia ... The cesspool we call the South Side of Chicago has included a politically influential gang that slaughtered everyone who wouldn't convert to Islam. Then there's the Siamese twins—Farrakhan and Rev. Wright—both of them Qaddafi pals.

(21 April 2011)

I believe these rumors about Barack Obama not being from America are true. I mean, who in this country would name their child Barack Hussane [sic] Obama. Remember Saddam Hussane. [sic] Coincidence?

(25 April 2011)

This discourse marries Obama to the already hyper-reactionary Islamophobia and White nationalist nativism renewed in the post-9/11 United States. This widespread fear of “others” in our midst, even the White House, drives public support for repressive national security policies, resistance to progressive policies on issues such as healthcare or economic inequality, and a massive military-industrial complex. It also catalyzes an organized backlash in the form of hyper-conservative Christian groups and anti-immigrant, vigilante, White-supremacist, and nationalist organizations. The day after Obama’s 2008 election, the most popular White-supremacist website, *Stormfront*, crashed from the tens of thousands of new members (Jonsson 2008).

This political rhetoric creates and relies upon White Americans’ doubts about Obama’s patriotism and national belonging. In an experiment, White Americans found it easier to associate all-American symbols (like the flag or a bald eagle) with White politicians from England (like Tony Blair) than with Obama (Devos and Ma 2013). Another series of studies found that when American citizens were shown an American flag, they then demonstrated more implicit and explicit prejudice against African Americans in general and greater reluctance to vote for Obama. Those not shown an American flag demonstrated less prejudice and more willingness to vote for Obama (Porter et al. 2010). Yet, the presence or absence of the flag didn’t impact people’s willingness to vote for White presidential candidates (Porter et al. 2010). These studies reveal the prevalent assumption that Americanness-is-White.

When most politicians were wearing lapel pins with the American flag to highlight their patriotism, Obama was not; he argued that wearing a flag pin paid lip service and was not the hallmark of true patriotism (Wright and Miller 2007; Zeleny 2007). After facing a storm of criticism, Obama began to wear the flag pin and surround himself with American flags during campaign events to offset suspicion about his alleged lack of patriotism (Newton-Small 2008). Yet, the research suggests that appeals to patriotism backfired on him. Significant numbers of Americans view Obama as *ipso-facto* anti-American, and his draping in red, white, and blue as hypocritical and indicative of a conspiracy to insert a Muslim, socialist, anti-White shadow government.

More recently, in the fall of 2017, a Republican candidate for mayor of Charlotte, NC invoked whiteness as criteria for political leadership. “Vote for me!” Kimberley Paige Barnette, a former county magistrate judge, wrote on her Facebook profile (Phillips 2017). Two lines down a description of herself read, in four capitalized words: “REPUBLICAN & SMART, WHITE,

TRADITIONAL.” In using race as a trait—alongside political ideology, intelligence, and as an advocate for customary or “old-fashioned” values—that she believes best qualifies her for the mayoral position, one witnesses the explicit conflation of whiteness with ideal citizenship and civil-legal authority. Far from a dog-whistle or subtle evocation of White-supremacist logic, Barnette’s profile went viral and instantly generated publicity for her campaign. While some decried her words, many others on social and digital media praised her “honesty” and her steadfast refusal to kowtow to “political correctness.”

### ***Whiteness as Unjust Victimhood***

The third pillar of racial reasoning is the notion that White people and White culture are the embattled victims of a politically correct and totalitarian society. Many Whites feel that they can no longer speak their mind or exercise basic human rights. This logic is embodied in the 2008 and 2012 GOP and Tea Party rally signs featuring messages about “Obama’s Plan: White Slavery” or that we need to “Save White America.” These messages resonate with more and more White Americans who feel under attack.

This narrative blames Obama and other people of color as outsiders and intruders who do not work hard but take from the social order at the expense of Whites. Even as Obama’s detractors claim that we live in a “post-racial” society, the effect has been the continued political and social marginalization of people of color who are depicted as entitled and aggressive. For example, in July of 2008, Glenn Beck claimed that Obama “has a deep-seated hatred for White people or the white culture” and that Obama “is, I believe, a racist” (Hughey and Parks 2014:70). And on his nationally syndicated radio show just one month before the 2008 election, Michael Savage stated:

I fear that Obama will stir up a race war. You want to ask me what I fear? I think Obama will empower the racists in this country and stir up a race war in order to seize absolute power. I believe that’s what he will do. It will not be as overt as you may think, but it’ll be a subtle race war on every level imaginable.

*(Hughey and Parks 2014:71)*

Right-wing commentators amplified Whites’ racial fears and anxieties by ascribing them as victims of dogmatists about political correctness, hypersensitive people of color, and, ironically, anyone playing the so-called “race card” by talking about racism and racial inequality. In our supposedly “post-racial era,” the story of White victimization is a dominant feature of right-wing racial discourse. Right-wing politicians and media interpolate (see Althusser [1971] 2001) White constituents and viewers by inviting them to see themselves as

racialized victims denied respect and empathy by racial progressives and people of color.

This racial reasoning can make the political feel personal for White voters. It reinterprets struggles over racial oppression or specific racialized events into a sense of being personally assailed. It generates a sense of fear over imagined people of color (often represented by Obama) who despise them simply for being White. In effect, these political messages employ the discourse of personal White victimization to rationalize and legitimate systemic White political domination.

The Abigail Fisher case demonstrates this political narrative well. Abigail Fisher was a High School student who didn't get into the University of Texas at Austin in 2008. She sued, claiming that she was discriminated for being White and that unqualified people of color had taken "her spot." UT denied the allegation and the case went to the Supreme Court. In 2013, the court first heard the argument. The case quickly came to represent a battle over the lawfulness of Affirmative Action. Fisher argued she wished to live in a "post-racial" society where "universities select students solely based on their merit and if they work hard for it" (Liptak 2012). The Supreme Court sent the case back to a lower court, which found that there was no discrimination against her. The decision was appealed again. Finally, the Supreme Court reached a decision in July 2016 agreeing with the lower court and siding against Fisher.

Considering the evidence of her case, the distortion of reality through the racial reasoning of White victimization comes into clear view. In 2008, 92% of the in-state spots went to students entering through the university's Top 10% policy, which granted automatic admission to Texas high schoolers who graduated in the highest 10% of their class (Hannah-Jones 2016). Yet, Fisher, despite claiming that applicants should be judged on their merits not their racial background, did not graduate in the top 10% of her class, meaning she was only in competition for the remaining 8% (Hannah-Jones 2016). Applicants for these 841 spots were judged on grades and standardized test scores as well as a "Personal Achievement Index" (Hannah-Jones 2016). This index awards points for leadership activities, the quality of their essays, service, and circumstances like low socioeconomic status or coming from single parent or non-English speaking home. It also includes whether someone belongs to an underrepresented racial group. The total of these two measures determined whether students were admitted.

The remaining 841 spots were highly competitive. With a 3.59 GPA and an 1180 SAT score, Fisher was not exceptional among those competing for these openings (Hannah-Jones 2016). Of the students accepted who had worse grades and scores, 42 were White, while only 5 were Black or Latinx (Hannah-Jones 2016). In contrast, 168 Black and Latinx students with grades and scores equal to or better than Fisher's who were also denied entry into the university (Hannah-Jones 2016). Hence, if there was a racial bias in admittance, it was a pro-White



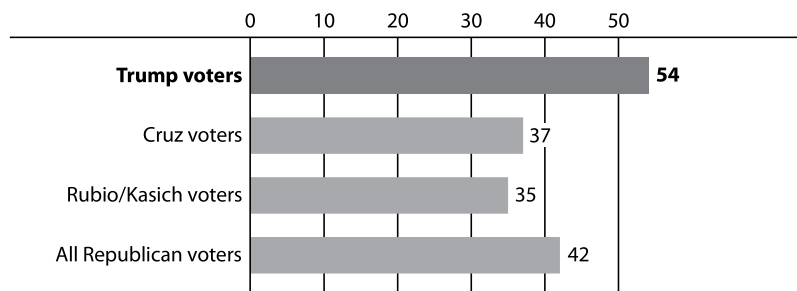
bias. Yet, Fisher claimed a sense of racialized victimhood. Her case appealed to many Whites who believe programs such as Affirmative Action constitute anti-White discrimination. Our society is not post-racial, it is post-evidence!

The myth of wide-scale White victimization has been a rallying cry of contemporary right-wing political movements. Donald Trump started his political career by claiming that Barack Obama was not a citizen of the United States and thus could not be president (Barbaro 2016). And these claims resonated with Whites who believe that they are being unfairly victimized. Underneath claims questioning Obama’s citizenship is the logic that a White man was cheated out of the highest job in the nation, the presidency, by a Black man. A March 2016 poll asked “Which of these do you think is a bigger problem in this country—Blacks and Hispanics losing out because of preferences for Whites, or Whites losing out because of preferences for Blacks and Hispanics?” As we see in Figure 4.3, more than half of Trump supporters, more than supporters of overall Republicans and other GOP presidential candidates, believed that Whites are losing out (Clement 2017).

Trump has tapped into the reservoir of White panic-fantasy. When he announced his candidacy, in 2015, he vowed to build a 2,000-mile-long wall to stop Mexico from “sending people that have lots of problems” (*Washington Post* Staff 2015). He said, “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (*Washington Post* 2016). The crime rate among first-generation immigrants is actually lower than

**More Trump supporters say whites are losing out**

% of each candidate’s supporters who say whites losing out is a bigger problem in this country due to preferences for blacks/Hispanics than say that blacks/Hispanics losing. (Results among Republican-leaning registered voters.)



Full question wording: Which of these do you think is the bigger problem in this country - (blacks and Hispanics losing out because of preferences for whites), or (whites losing out because of preferences for blacks and Hispanics)? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat?  
 Sample sizes: 131 Trump voters, 95 Cruz, 118 Rubio/Kasich.

**FIGURE 4.3** *Washington Post/ABC News* Poll, March 2016

that for native-born Americans (Martinez and Lee 2000) but Trump takes an expansive view of reality. In his 1987 book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, Trump (with co-author Schwartz) wrote: “I play to people’s fantasies ... I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion” (p. 58). He has done just that, but he is not solely to blame. These dominant forms of racial reasoning and their propagators are also at fault.

### Conclusion

These notions of whiteness as counter-posed to the assumed pathology of non-Whites and rooted in conflation with idealized citizenship and victimization constitute the racial reasoning of American nationalism. Whites continue to benefit from racialized forms of social advantage and maintain a dominant status in society. Yet, many Whites now feel that they have lost the dominant social position, which has become naturalized as their inheritance. By employing these forms of racial reasoning, Whites collectively attempt to recover a nonexistent yet idealized state of whiteness *qua* national identity as encapsulated in the phrase “Make America White Again.”

Many Whites feel victimized because they have become convinced that their racial legacy was stolen by people of color, who they see as morally undeserving, in the scramble for racial progress. These feelings culminate in the attitude now held by a majority of Whites that any gains by people of color come at the cost of White well-being and safety (Norton and Sommers 2011). The fruits of this worldview include expressions of contempt for policies aimed toward racial equality (DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy and Post 2011) and the continued vocalization of racial epithets and slurs in workplaces and other social settings (Embrick and Henricks 2013).

Through racial reasoning about what it means to be American, Whites pursue an idealized White identity or hegemonic whiteness (see Hughey 2012b). Yet, these ideals of whiteness and citizenship are so elevated that they are unattainable, not only for Whites who feel disadvantaged but also for people of color who are *de facto* excluded from this racialized sense of nationalism. Hegemonic whiteness *qua* American identity is constructed through a sense of racial and national crisis. Rightwing politicians and media pundits (including Trump) continue to exacerbate and inflame this sense of crisis manifesting in the resentment of people of color, immigrants, and reforms toward racial equality. Altogether, these forms of racial reasoning produce a collective national identity that naturalizes and facilitates White domination of the social and political systems in the United States.

## Epilogue

In February 2017, the first author (hereafter Hughey) was scheduled to give a talk at the University of Maryland, by the same name of this chapter. Weeks before the event, a reporter for the conservative website “Campus Reform”<sup>1</sup> ran a story that claimed Hughey, and another speaker would argue that “Donald Trump’s victory is a direct result of ‘spiritual depravity’ and ‘a commitment to white supremacy’ among the working class.” Shortly thereafter, both the University of Maryland and Hughey’s own University (University of Connecticut) received calls and pressure from conservative activists to disinvite him and/or stop him from delivering his remarks. Administrators debated whether the title of Hughey’s talk was too incendiary.

On top of this, weeks before Hughey was scheduled to deliver the talk, he was invited on Fox News’ “Tucker Carlson Tonight.” In the words of the show’s producer, “I wanted to see if you’d be interested in joining Tucker on the show to discuss your lecture, *Make America White Again? The Racial Reasoning of American Nationalism*. Tucker’s interested in delving into some of the ideas that your lecture will explore.” Hughey accepted and appeared on the show. However, minutes into the program, Carlson turned the topic to immigration and repeated the claim that because the United States had accepted immigrants of color, then the country could not be “White supremacist.” The conversation quickly devolved whereby Carlson questioned Hughey’s expertise, interrupted his comments, and demeaned his position until he signaled his base of watchers to attack—Carlson: “Boy, you don’t get challenged much, I guess, in college ... So, do you have tenure by the way?” Hughey: “I do.” “So, nothing you say, no matter how silly, could get you fired, is that true?”

That very minute, “#matthewhughey” briefly trended on twitter. An avalanche of social media attacks, emails, calls, and snail-mail were directed at Hughey and the University of Connecticut. The following day, phone calls were placed to the University of Connecticut at 15-minute intervals, demanding his firing. Hughey received death threats and a police presence had to patrol his home. Back at the University of Maryland, pressure increased for the upcoming talk to be canceled.

Despite these forms of intimidation, in the end, Hughey delivered his talk to a packed room where bags were checked, bordered by armed police and bomb sniffing dogs. This context behind the production and dissemination of knowledge is important to share, as the debate over Hughey’s talk “proves the point” of the talk itself. Hughey was perceived to have no right to say, first, that whiteness was anything but superior; second, that authentic American citizenship is often conflated with whiteness; and finally, that White people are not under any sustained or systemic attack. Refusal to repeat those supposed aphorisms and engage in a hagiography about whiteness often illuminates the existence of the pillars that silently buttress White supremacy.

## Note

- 1 Campus Reform was founded in 2009 by Morton Blackwell, also the founder of the right-wing Leadership Institute, for the purpose of targeting and bullying college faculty who teach science that does not align with conservative agendas. For example, Tony Listi, a regional organizer for Campus Reform, wrote in 2009 that their purpose was to “smash left-wing scum” (in Sanchez 2009).

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