

# LA MESA POPULAR

## The Alchemy of Race and Affect

*“White Innocence” and Public Secrets  
in the Post–Civil Rights Era*

Paula Ioanide

The despair among the loveless is that they must narcotize themselves before they can touch any human being at all. They, then, fatally, touch the wrong person, not merely because they have gone blind, or have lost the sense of touch, but because they no longer have any way of knowing that any loveless touch is a violation, whether one is touching a woman or a man.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *No Name in the Street*

affect, n. (*æfekt*)—Connotes any affective state, whether painful or pleasant, whether vague or well-defined, and whether it is manifested in the form of a massive discharge or in the form of a general mood. . . . The affect is the qualitative expression of the quantity of instinctual energy and of its fluctuations.

—J. LAPLANCHE AND J.-B. PONTALIS,  
*The Language of Psychoanalysis*

Recently I participated in a community-based discussion group about racism. At one of the sessions, the facilitators of the multiracial group asked us to discuss the moment when we first became aware of race. For white people, I knew that the answer would likely involve recalling one’s first interracial encounter, or an early memory of becoming consciously aware of racial difference. In thinking honestly about that question, however, I realized that my first encounter with race and racism in America actually took place intraracially. It was amidst suburban white people’s silences, evasions, and disavowals that the

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**Paula Ioanide** is an associate professor at Ithaca College, who teaches at the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. Her research focuses on institutional forms of gendered racism in the post–Civil Rights era, including mass incarceration and policing, immigrant exclusion, welfare reform, and militarism. Her book *Racial Fantasies and Feelings: Affective Economies in the Post–Civil Rights Era* is forthcoming from Stanford University Press.

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significance of race was first made known to me. But it was a peculiar form of knowledge, one that was affective and implicit rather than overt and conscious.

To know “affectively” means to feel something without really knowing how to name or categorize that feeling consciously. Affect guides movement and feeling without necessarily conscientizing what motivates that movement and feeling. Heavy as a millstone and potentially detonative, the implicit awareness of race rigidly organized, oriented, and confined the intuitions and interactions of white intraracial social life. There was a constant awareness that the matter was to be avoided, but no one would name what it was. Like the invisible man, everyone knew not to acknowledge it, not to talk about it. If it had to come up, strict narrative scripts were there to guide the denial of that detonative millstone, thus disavowing that it mattered as much as it actually did. Long before I understood or thought about the function of race consciously, I understood in my “structure of feeling”<sup>1</sup> that race organized US sociality.

Due to this discordance between conscious and affective knowledge, I roamed for a very long time in the labyrinth of what Charles Mills calls “the epistemology of white ignorance.”<sup>2</sup> This epistemology is plagued by affective forms of knowing that something is seriously amiss in the United States even as dominant conscious scripts keep insisting that everything is peachy, that this is the greatest nation in the world, and that if you just work hard enough . . . This “willed innocence” of whiteness,<sup>3</sup> as James Baldwin called it, was ruptured only when I finally came face-to-face with America’s history. This, then, is the story of how I lost my “willed innocence.”

I came to the United States from Romania at the age of ten. My family and I were among a number of political refugees exiled by Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship, so we were attuned to the machinations of oppressive regimes. As a result, we had invested a great deal of energy and hope in a fantasy construction of the United States as the antithesis of authoritarianism. As I began negotiating the pronounced linguistic, political, and cultural shifts, I had a persistent feeling that something was terribly wrong with this country’s social relations. I felt that Americans around me (who were predominantly white middle- and working-class suburbanites) spoke to each other in superficial and contrived tones. At first, I thought this tonal difference had to do with my limited knowledge of the English language. Even after I became fluent, however, the tonal quality continued to bother me, and I kept waiting for the moment when they would stop pretending. I had the constant suspicion that people were hiding something and were talking in exaggerated, strained inflections in order to cover up some secret. I felt as if I were in a game where everything white Americans said had a secondary, coded meaning that I could not grasp.

I found these tendencies to be particularly pronounced in the Lutheran church I attended, the congregation of which was made up almost entirely of white middle-class American suburbanites. When they spoke to me and to

each other, I sensed notes of hollowness in their overly jovial, high-pitched tones. They would exchange pleasantries and profess love and fellowship. But their words seemed to be very abstract, divorced from actual realities, and deeply concerned with appearances. I was disoriented by the churchgoers' preoccupation with the aesthetics of looking like a loving church, because I could not understand what motivated this preoccupation. Even as a teenager, the social interactions felt fake to me, and therefore spiritually inauthentic, but I could not locate what prompted this feeling.

This ever-present discomfort with white Americans' tonality and social interactions was juxtaposed with the fact that I didn't think the churchgoers themselves thought that they were lying or covering something up. In other words, I could not reconcile how they could have such emptiness in their tenor, eyes, manner, and touch with the knowledge that I could see that they thought of themselves as perfectly genuine and loving people. I chalked up my discomfort to the fact that I was foreign.

What I experienced in a pronounced way in the Lutheran church, I also felt at the mostly white suburban high school I attended. I couldn't rid myself of the nagging feeling that something was profoundly wrong with the social interactions in this country. This unease (and not for lack of trying to overcome it), along with the love American kids had for material possessions, repeatedly struck me. Their proprietary and possessive instincts seemed to be their primary guide for determining what and who was valuable, which friendships could be discarded, and which preserved in a permanent quest for "popularity." Their very touch, in the ways they physically interacted in friendship and in romance, seemed contractual and instrumentalist to me. Friendly embraces were starkly different from what I was used to. Peers always kept a certain forced distance between their bodies and mine. They would tap my back three or four times with their hand as a way to indicate that I should not get too close or hold the embrace too long. The pressures to perform scripted roles—the jock, the dancer, the cheerleader, the nerd—continued to make me feel as if I were in a theatrical play in which no one was allowed to really touch but from which no one was allowed to exit.

Until I went to college, my perception of America was based largely on watching white Americans interact with each other and with me. When as a college student I moved to Philadelphia, a city whose Black population was around 40 percent, I could feel in every interracial encounter what seemed like an insurmountable wall of distrust. People avoided looking each other in the eye when passing on the street. All interracial communications were strained, though in a different way from intraracial white interactions. Interracial tension seemed built around the fact that people of color knew something I did not. Because the college I attended was severely segregated along racial lines, possibilities for discussing such uncomfortable topics were greatly limited. I

respected these racially segregated social boundaries mostly because I could sense that I was not supposed to cross them, but I didn't understand their origin or purpose. As I volunteered at various social justice organizations in Philadelphia and New York, I got snippets of what motivated the interracial distrust, but still no overall framework for understanding the generalizable social pathologies of US society.

I sought the answer to the riddle of my discomfort through education. I desperately wanted to figure out America's "public secret," what Michael Taussig describes as a powerful form of social knowledge rooted in "knowing what not to know."<sup>24</sup> I wanted to understand what white Americans worked so hard at "not knowing," what amorphous elephant in the nation was so vehemently avoided by the hollow tones and rigid contractual touch of white Americans. In other words, I felt that the social mannerisms and maneuverings of most white Americans were crafted to avoid a particular encounter—with what I knew not. The incommunicability and profound distrust so prevalent in interracial encounters, and the fact that racial social borders were so rarely crossed, seemed to have something to do with this national "knowing what not to know." That there was some kind of danger in exposing this public secret was clear, but I didn't understand why it was dangerous.

I studied philosophy because I naïvely thought it would give me some answers. I was taken with poststructuralism because parts of it articulated the permanent social alienation I felt in the United States. But philosophy buried the public secret deeper, providing an incredible intellectual, discursive glaze over the feeling, which nonetheless persisted. I achieved an elite college education without ever getting a historical explanation of what white Americans were avoiding. I left without understanding how the interracial wall of distrust had been built. That this was possible and *likely* in American higher education is a testament to how hard hegemony works to produce the "epistemology of white ignorance" and the structured feeling of "willed innocence."

That the public secret was eventually exposed might be considered a miracle. If virtually everything in the "naturalized" order of racially segregated American life is set up to protect the public secret that fuels the reification of white ignorance and willed innocence, its exposure felt like something orchestrated by supernatural, divine forces. The interlocutors who exposed the secret and took the risk to speak frankly across the racial divides radically changed the course of my life.

What then, was the public secret that ruptured the affective and intellectual epistemology of white ignorance that had encumbered and disoriented me for so long? Simply, it was American history. Buried beneath the US discourses of hard work, individualism, freedom, merit, exceptionalism, volunteerism, color blindness, and liberal democracy were mountains of systemic favors, laws, policies, and institutional structures that carefully guarded and reproduced the

psychological, economic, civic, social, and cultural wages of whiteness.<sup>5</sup> The evidence of race- and gender-based denigration, discrimination, and exclusion enacted by white Americans and those who sought inclusion in whiteness was overwhelming. At every historical turn since the colonial settlers made violent contact, through the various shifts in the eras of indigenous genocide, slavery, Western conquest, forced removal, Asian exclusion, Jim Crow, imperialism, northern industrialism, and post-Civil Rights, white people's wealth, access, opportunity, education, and life had been manufactured and protected at the uneven expense of people of color.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the persistent resistance and rebellion of aggrieved groups, US racial regimes<sup>7</sup> have been forced to redefine whiteness numerous times in order to preserve white hegemony.<sup>8</sup> Just as southern and eastern European immigrants in the 1930s chose the New Deal's structured advantages of whiteness and masculinity over the radical possibility of abolition democracy,<sup>9</sup> so have the racial regimes of the post-Civil Rights era overwhelmingly failed to deliver on the demands and possibilities raised by post-World War II freedom movements. To manufacture this failure, whiteness has made concessions to people of color who were willing to reproduce its foundational terms and wages in exchange for modicums of mobility and delimited inclusion.<sup>10</sup> Managerial multiculturalism has supplanted the demand to proactively redress racial and gender injustices through the enforcement of fair housing and equitable education and employment laws.<sup>11</sup> To permanently disable the few Civil Rights laws established to rectify past inequalities, whiteness has introduced "reverse discrimination," "white injury," and "color blindness."<sup>12</sup> Not only do these function as powerful political ideologies, but they are also vehicles for cultivating public affective structures that produce an embodied sense of victimhood in whites. The fantasy projections of Black and Brown "cultural pathology," "criminality," and "welfare-dependence"<sup>13</sup> have neatly justified and hidden the ghastly profits and infrastructure of the prison industrial complex,<sup>14</sup> the criminalization and detention of immigrants,<sup>15</sup> and the erosion of social welfare programs and public goods.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, stagnant wages, rising costs, and the familial ruptures caused by urban renewal policies, the military industrial complex, violence, disease, and death continue to delimit disproportionately the life chances of the aggrieved.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, such policy changes in the post-Civil Rights era have also made the economic advantages of white working- and middle-class Americans more difficult to sustain.<sup>18</sup>

The exposure of the public secret cannot be understood as an instance or an event. Indeed, because the American public secret of "knowing what not to know" reaches into so many spheres—political, personal, social, cultural, psychic, libidinal—it took me several years to begin to grasp its enormity. Because racial regimes are constantly in flux and in production, "knowing what not to know" is an ever-evolving process. Hence, the decoding of the public secret is

more like a lifelong struggle than a singular “aha!” moment. But once I had encountered enough evidence that I could no longer hold on to the mythologies that had shaped my understanding of the world, I experienced an identity shattering akin to “waking up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame.”<sup>19</sup> The more I learned about American history, the more I lost the coordinates of my identity, which in the US context turned out to be overwhelmingly predicated on historical lies, unearned advantages, immoral acts, forgeries and fantasy, land appropriation, genocide, slavery, rape, privileges exhumed from others’ labor, suffering, and death.

The greatest lie whiteness had produced was also the most important coordinate in its identity formation. The “fixed star” of racial difference anchored the coordinates of whiteness as “Blackness” served as an “immovable pillar”<sup>20</sup> whose fixity was consistently and vehemently reproduced over time. Its fixity grounded the originary notion of “whiteness as property,” i.e., the right to own oneself and to possess other human beings as a white prerogative.<sup>21</sup> The fixity of racial difference assigned to indigenous peoples grounded the other aspect of proprietorship: that land ownership was a divinely appointed destiny reserved for whites.<sup>22</sup> The agents of whiteness needed such immovable pillars—noble savages, mammies, Jezebels, Uncle Toms, Black Bucks, bandits, conquistadors, El Hídalgos, Yellow Perils, Fu Manchus, Arab sheiks, harems, urban criminals, welfare queens, illegal aliens, terrorists—as surely as they needed air, for this was the most efficient way to constitute and believe in their “innocence” as they wreaked global havoc and hoarded their advantages.

Such fixed stars—held in place by apparatuses of gendered racial violence, coercion, and consent—have served as the screens upon which the agents of whiteness project and fantastically rid themselves of their transgressions. Using acrobatic inversions, disavowals, and denials, the apparatuses of whiteness turn these immovable pillars into receptacles for numerous anxieties and prohibitions (most of which were mired in manufactured fears of miscegenation, touch, and racialized sexuality). As such, white fantasy constructions of people of color have reproduced what Frantz Fanon calls “phobogenic objects”: sites and bodies where dominant culture deems it permissible to release collective aggressions.<sup>23</sup>

But these fixed stars have also become the objects that structure the desire of whiteness. They become phobogenic objects because they often represent everything that is prohibited to whiteness. As we well know, where there is prohibition there is also desire. This structure of desire and fantasy is very complicated, and it cannot be adequately addressed here. Suffice to say, however, that more often than not it is a desire rooted in sentimentality and the consumption of phobogenic racialized and sexualized objects. Numerous examples come to mind. In the post-Civil Rights era, the most prevalent example might be whites’ consumption of hip hop culture.<sup>24</sup> Such consumption is based in struc-

tures of desire that are rarely rooted in love. Because to love people of color in non-destructive ways would be the antithesis of such consumption; it would require an investment, a stake, a willingness both to give of oneself and to exchange, critique, dismantle, and forfeit whiteness in its dominant configuration.

Finally, the fixed stars, when they move out of their assigned place, also signify redemption for whiteness. This latter specter of redemption remains mostly a haunting, but I think that most white people feel it in the dark corners of their hearts nonetheless. Put simply, there are times when whites know affectively that something is missing from their spiritual lives. They feel cultural and ethical emptiness in their lives even if they do not know that heteropatriarchal racism is the generalizable cause of that emptiness. They believe that people of color have the key to that salvation, even if they do not know why. We can gauge this white desire for spiritual meaning in numerous ways: whites' appropriation of yoga, meditation, Buddhism, tarot readings, Rastafarianism, African traditional medicine, ecovillages, and so forth.

Why are whites haunted by this possibility of redemption? It may be because historically aggrieved communities of color have been the ones to insist on and fight for the possibility of a different America, one that holds the potential and promise to reconstitute itself into an abolition democracy in order to redress past iniquities.<sup>25</sup> At critical moments in US history, those who have struggled for a different America have rendered this haunting of redemption present (insofar as we can call an unfulfilled dream a presence). Aggrieved communities of color and the few whites for whom white supremacy became intolerable have been "forced to suppose the existence of an entity which, when the chips were down, could not be located—i.e., there *are* no American people yet."<sup>26</sup> In other words, even though virtually everything in people's everyday lives indicated that there was absolutely no pragmatic reason to hope for an abolitionist America and moral redemption, resisting communities have often insisted on that impossibility anyway. They have faced tremendous opposition and backlash to such impossible dreams, because to render such visions pragmatically possible, whiteness's current institutional, ontological, epistemological, and affective coordinates and apparatuses would need to be destroyed.

As I began testifying about this buried US history, I heard many retorts of "innocence" from my family. Their attunement to Eurocentrism made it difficult to hear and believe such US histories of the present. I heard refusals from my students. I heard disavowals from public media, from officials, from police officers, from teachers, from organizers.

One of the most powerful arguments the "innocents" make is that humans are generally wretched, and the four-hundred-year history of white supremacy in the United States is merely another example of that. Taking a comparative international perspective, they point to epochs and regimes that have been just

as atrocious. And anyway, aren't all "great civilizations" built on slavery, exploitation, and mass suffering?

Those who are already powerful and privileged are usually the ones who make such arguments about the "inevitability" of human wretchedness and social hierarchies. When such arguments are made by the aggrieved, it is usually to acknowledge the structural conditions that constrain freedom without naïveté and perhaps to protect oneself from the pains of chronic disappointment by taking up the shield afforded by skepticism. Baldwin succinctly characterizes this conflict between the hope for something better and the skepticism rooted in the overwhelming evidence of human wretchedness:

Yet, hope—the hope that we, human beings, can be better than we are—dies hard; perhaps one can no longer live if one allows that hope to die. But it is also hard to see what one sees. One sees that most human beings are wretched, and, in one way or another, become wicked: because they are so wretched. And one's turning away, then, from what I have called the welcome table is dictated by some mysterious vow one scarcely knows one's taken—never to allow oneself to fall so low. Lower, perhaps, much lower, to the very dregs: but never there.<sup>27</sup>

One hopes for the possibility that we "can be better than we are," despite the preponderance of evidence that we tend to be wicked, because the absence of that hope might make the threshold of lowliness limitless. Without that hope as counterbalance, Baldwin seems to say, there is nothing to prevent us from rendering increasingly despicable acts permissible.

Still, was there something valid about the argument that white supremacy in the United States should not reserve unto itself the exceptionalist position that it "does evil best"? In other words, in the process of exposing the web-like apparatuses of white supremacy, did we not unintentionally reify its power by making it seem insurmountable? Does the persistent exposure of the apparatuses that normalize investments in heteropatriarchal whiteness not strengthen the ability of these apparatuses to constitute new methods of refusal and disavowal? Is there a way to expose white supremacy without contributing to its reification? Isn't this sometimes the reason people want to "just stop talking about race and racism"?

Taussig reminds us that the exposure of the public secret can never happen directly. On the contrary, the only time we come close to exposing the public secret is when we come at it sideways, using methods not yet legible to its interpretive frameworks or predictable to its methods of preservation.<sup>28</sup> We might also remember that a society's symptoms are usually rooted in its deepest national traumas. For me, the historical traumas that the agents of whiteness

avoided addressing at all costs were not simply the intergenerational political-economic and social effects that had evolved out of colonialism, genocide, and slavery, but the ethical questions these raised. Put differently, the public secret of systemic gendered racism was closest to being exposed when the ethical price of intergenerationally investing in whiteness was broached. How low in the purported “inevitability” of human wickedness were those invested in whiteness willing to go before they realized that such malevolence implicated them? Was the epistemology of white ignorance really that effective in keeping the price of that malevolence hidden?

The public secret—so endemically marked by systemic gender-specific racism crisscrossed with the insatiable appetites of capitalism—revealed to me that we were actively engaged in reproducing national and global structures that engender profound forms of human alienation. Walter Benjamin’s prophetic prediction rang increasingly true: “[Humankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”<sup>29</sup> The allure of biopower structured through heteropatriarchal racism—i.e., the ability to determine who lives and dies using gendered racial determinants and flexible power differentials—recruits people to believe in the logics of amputation, to employ a metaphor used by Patricia J. Williams. People fantasize that cutting off or quarantining parts they deem “pathological” or “superfluous” won’t affect their own bodies, spirits, and minds. Triage the criminals, the Muslims, the welfare dependents, the Latino/a illegal aliens, the homeless, the abused, the uneducated! Keep the healthy, upstanding, tax-paying, hard-working citizens! But as Williams argues, “one cannot cut off a third of the world without some awful, life-threatening bleeding in the rest of the body politic.”<sup>30</sup> One cannot apply the logics of amputation and pretend that one is not participating in one’s own degradation.

In *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy argues that “all theories of salvation, secular or non-secular, which fail to understand this degradation of the colonizer are theories which indirectly admit the superiority of the oppressors and collaborate with them.”<sup>31</sup> That is to say, the ingenuity of the apparatuses that work to preserve the US public secret is that they mask not only the atrocities against the aggrieved, but also the ethical emptiness of the oppressors. The concealment of this ethical degradation is absolutely necessary for the reification of white hegemony because it seduces people into believing that heteropatriarchal whiteness is actually as powerful as it claims to be. After all, heteropatriarchal whiteness fervently hoards its amassed political-economic, social, and cultural capital. The seductive materialist sparkle of whiteness and the enticing dominance of heteropatriarchy persistently call upon us to fantasize and feel that a system dependent on the denigration and dehumanization of others is actually desirable and permissible. It attempts to cover over the moral incoherence and

lovelessness that are its unavoidable fruits. Until the ethical question is raised, both dominant and aggrieved are recruited to believe that the power of hetero-patriarchal whiteness is undefeatable.

Despite such delusions, those intent on safeguarding this double concealment of actual dehumanization and ethical-spiritual degradation are much like the wolf described in the prelude to Dead Prez's *Let's Get Free* album. Attracted to the blood on a double-edged blade protruding from the ground, the wolf begins to eat the blood off the blade. As he eats, he cuts his tongue. He continues to lick the blade, believing that he's consuming more and more blood. Not realizing that he is eating his own blood, he participates in enjoying and experiencing his own destruction as a pleasure of the first order.

The affective and intellectual hemorrhage produced by the exposure of the public secret necessitated the reconstitution of my identity according to other terms, other ontological and epistemological coordinates, a task I did not yet know how to actualize. But even as the ontological terms of my identity were shaken to their foundations, I also experienced a profound sense of relief. I was relieved that I had found, after a fifteen-year search, the root of my affective discomfort with US intraracial and interracial sociality, with the falsity of white tonality, and with the contractually empty interpersonal exchanges driven by proprietary and possessive instincts. It is the relief one experiences when one is not being lied to anymore. The exposed public secret confirmed for me, as James Baldwin had articulated many years prior, "the feeling that that one problem, the problem of color in this country, has always contained the key to all the other problems. It is not an isolated, particular, peculiar problem. It is a symptom of all the problems in this country."<sup>32</sup> I could not find a matter that involved politics, culture, economics, gender, class, or sexuality that wasn't already inflected by racism in some way, whether as a presence or an absence. Importantly, this problem mediated the ways whites related to each other intraracially as much as it permeated interracial interactions.

I had to do a lot of revisionist thinking after I confronted this evidence. This is when I realized that there were two operative languages in America: the language of narrative and the language of affect. The first, constituted by dominant discourses, representations, ideologies, and fantasies, was used to craft the consciousness and belief systems of liberal and conservative Americans alike. Employing the language of narrative, Americans spoke of themselves using the terms of triumph, fairness, exceptionalism, merit, rugged individualism, and the ethic of hard work. They repeated the false history they were taught in high school, professed the pleasantries of liberty, equality, justice, and God's love for all, played out the melodramas and happy endings of Hollywood, and clung to the historicism of liberal democracy. The discourses of cultural pathology, criminality, welfare dependence, big government, family non-normativity, and sexual deviance—all of which were always deeply racialized and gendered—

provided easy justifications for the aberrations, divisions, inequalities, hierarchies, and conflicts in what was otherwise understood as the greatest nation in the world.

This language of narrative through which Americans most often defined themselves masked the structures that ultimately determine people's fates and rendered invisible the relationships between past racial injustices and present social relations of power, opportunity, and life chances. In denying individual and collective responsibility for the bitter fruits of American history, the language of narrative required the "dumbing down" of society, since keeping people ignorant of historical consciousness necessitates vacuous forms of knowledge as well as alienated and instrumentalist social bonds. But it also unwittingly produced spiritual emptiness, since a society that denies the unjust outcomes of its past and present actions cannot stand on ethical grounds. I suspect this is what was behind the hollow tones and loveless touches of the people at my church and school.

The second language was structured by affect. In contrast to their triumphant discourses and reductive representations, the embodied movements, intuitive assumptions, and affective responses of most white Americans were profoundly rigid, demonstrating an awareness of how to remain within the confines of extremely racially segregated social, cultural, and institutional contexts in order to avoid that confrontation with actual American history, with collective wrongs and with collective responsibilities. The affective structures of whiteness guided one through the process of "knowing what not to know" while continuing to act as if one knew exactly how to protect the false history and the unearned privileges of whiteness.

Moreover, there was something distinct about this discordance between the language of narrative and the language of affect in the post-Civil Rights era. At the neoconservative end of the spectrum, the language of affect cultivated sheer phobia, fear, and hatred, while the language of narrative called for a return to white supremacist America in coded ways. Evoked in such racialized and gendered terms as "small town America," "traditional values," "personal responsibility," "limited government," and "free enterprise," the political power of neoconservative public feelings and fantasies consistently trumped the facts, realities, and empirical evidence of systemic gendered racism. The affective investment in the fantasy of the heteropatriarchal white family was culturally conjured and defended in policy through the construction of new "fixed stars": welfare queens, criminals and gang members, illegal aliens, and terrorists.

The liberal end of the spectrum was more complicated because the prevailing theme in the language of narrative was color blindness while the most automatic and pervasive response in the language of affect was summed up in the preemptive phrase: "I am not a racist!" Hushed tones indicated that even the slightest direct acknowledgment of racial difference—like pointing out that a

person was of African descent—conjured an affective fear among liberals that they might be judged. I suspect that the specter of the ethical price of whiteness is at the heart of the common insistence by white liberals—even when no one has accused them—that they are “not a racist!”

Such liberal affective mechanisms often prevented any discursive communicability about race and racism from even beginning. The affective disavowal that “I am not a racist!” did wonders at the national level to foreclose conversations about structural forms of redress (affirmative action, fair housing, educational equity, etc.) because color blindness denied that there was a problem in the first place. In other words, whiteness cultivated political denials and disavowals of racism in the *affective* realm as a way to foreclose engagement in the discursive realm. The significance of this is paramount, because the realm of affect is often driven by what Fanon called “paralogisms”: structures of belief and fantasy that need not be grounded in factual evidence and realities in order to be powerfully operative. Such paralogical beliefs and fantasies are experienced at an embodied level as though they are real.<sup>33</sup> If liberal paralogisms worked at all costs to preserve the liberal belief that “I am not a racist!” in the affective realm, attempts to discuss the persistence of racism on factual and evidentiary grounds often proved futile in the discursive realm.

Phobia, hatred, refusal, disavowal. These were the pervasive socially shared themes I repeatedly encountered in the affective structures of whiteness of the post–Civil Rights era. From the affective responses of phobia, hatred, and refusal came the most rabid forms of gendered racial violence, nativism, vigilantism, and xenophobia. From disavowal sprang the “genteel” forms of gender-specific racism that characterize white liberalism: benevolent paternalism, good intentions that still produced detrimental consequences, feeling good for feeling bad, guilt as an excuse for inaction, and the sentimentalist consumption of the culture and suffering of people of color. The inability or unwillingness of white Americans to deal with what these affective structures repeatedly evoked seemed to engender the sickly social relations I had sensed even as a young woman. What most of them intuitively feared, what they had been intergenerationally taught to fear, was that a genuine confrontation with America’s history would require activity toward structured redress and justice. This would necessitate the divestment of the cumulative value that whiteness had amassed—material, social, cultural, psychic, and libidinal. But it would also necessitate the loss of white identity under these coordinates. Most attempted at all costs (knowingly or unknowingly) to disallow this affective knowledge from becoming conscious, clear, and concrete. Because, as Toni Cade Bambara asks us, do we really want to get well?<sup>34</sup>

For me, the language of affect had communicated the excesses of otherwise “clean” American narratives, sending me on a long search for the exit from the labyrinth of white ignorance. But affective sensibilities need not point to such

excesses. On the contrary, they can be cultivated to support the interests of white supremacy and to further sustain the epistemology of white ignorance. Hence, what matters are not affective structures *per se*. What matters is that with which affective structures are generally aligned. With whom are our structures of feeling identified? What ideas and realities do our affective structures permit us to contend with? Do our affective structures foreclose or allow our receptivity to the mounting evidence of systemic gendered racism? Do our affective structures allow us to feel the suffering of others as our responsibility, or do they entice us to enjoy, in spectacular fashion, their subjection and degradation?

The consequences of white refusal, denial, and disavowal became my inheritance as I ambivalently adopted the United States as my geographical home. This inheritance led to the question of how one might divest from heteropatriarchal whiteness in order to live a more ethical life. That is, how might white identity be constituted under different ontological and epistemological terms, even if only as a freedom dream? And, perhaps most importantly, what was to be done?

In my search for different coordinates for my identity, I found that there is a legacy of justice that thrives in American histories of the present as much as the legacy of white supremacy. This legacy—which I call the legacy of ethical witnessing—bequeaths to us ways of knowing, thinking, and being that are not merely responsive to hegemonic epistemologies. Nor are they always legible to the ontology of propertied whiteness. These legacies of ethical witnessing are generative in themselves, even as they always have to contend with the contradictions, pains, oppressions, and ruptures produced by the willed innocence and ignorance of heteropatriarchal whiteness.

I liken the legacies of ethical witnessing to what M. Jacqui Alexander calls “pedagogies of the sacred” or “pedagogies of crossing”—epistemologies and practices that tirelessly work to cultivate structures of feeling, faith, hope, and sociality that align with justice, with survival, and with healing.<sup>35</sup> Such epistemologies and practices work to make justice feel irresistible by devising methodologies to contend with the traumas of oppression and to channel the rage and despair produced by injustice away from self-destruction. The epistemologies of ethical witnessing make white supremacy feel intolerable. They generate structures of feeling that raise questions about ethical sociality as they contest practices of isolation and alienation rooted in what Lipsitz calls the “social warrant of consumer citizenship.”<sup>36</sup>

The epistemologies and methodologies constitutive of the legacy of ethical witnessing show how elevating one group at the expense of another group’s denigration along the axes of race, heteropatriarchy, and other markers of differentiated power—while it might yield riches and pseudo-notions of superiority—cannot produce ethical integrity. The legacy of ethical witnessing

foregrounds the political and social collective responsibilities to redress past wrongs and develops mechanisms through which to implement such collective responsibilities.

Cedric Robinson and Robin D. G. Kelley have likewise traced these legacies of ethical witnessing in the cosmologies, epistemologies, and practices of people in the African Diaspora.<sup>37</sup> They have demonstrated how such epistemologies and methodologies are intergenerationally transferred through stories, music, performance, rituals, rebellions, resistances, and silences. Even if these epistemologies are not always conscientized, I would argue that they are transferred and known affectively. I suspect this is what Audre Lorde meant when she insisted on tapping into the hidden powers of feeling and the erotic.<sup>38</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa demonstrates how such epistemologies generate forms of consciousness and being that adapt to the changing structures of gendered racism in the context of the Southwest. She proposes practices of healing that build on long fetches of knowledge transmitted among the historically aggrieved and suggests that opposition is a beginning rather than an end to political consciousness. Anzaldúa devises “mestiza consciousness” as an ontology and practice focused on generative political propositions.<sup>39</sup> Edward Said marks the persistence of resistance, self-determination, and dignity rooted in the affective structures and epistemologies of ethical witnessing even in states and spaces of permanent exile.<sup>40</sup> W. E. B. DuBois outlines this genealogy in the unlikely alliances of ethnically white immigrants and Brown and Black workers, in the radical abolitionist vision of “forty acres and a mule,” and in the international alliances of Pan-Africanism. César Chávez and Dolores Huerta continued this legacy of powerful alliances in the farm workers’ movement in California, while the Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) in Oakland work to contest and surpass the disciplining tactics of capitalism and alienation today.<sup>41</sup> Yuri Kochiyama breathed life into the legacy of ethical witnessing by bridging the political struggles of Japanese Americans with those waged by members of the Black Power movement, the Puerto Rican Independence movement, and the mobilization to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. This genealogy of ethical witnessing was heard in the voices of Harriet Jacobs and Ida B. Wells, who demanded more than false tones, disavowals, denials, hypocrisy, and inaction from white Christians complicit in the atrocities of slavery and lynching. It lived in the body of John Brown, whose intolerance for white supremacy grew until it spurred him to the action that ultimately led to his death. Countless people and practices have participated in shaping epistemologies of ethical witnessing and justice. Once we begin seeing and seeking cosmologies that are beyond the grasp of global racial and gendered capitalism, the epistemologies of things seen, unseen, sacred, and tangible that constitute the legacies of ethical witnessing become inestimable.

So long as we stay within the epistemological frameworks of heteropatriar-

chal whiteness, it is difficult to see why people would want to give up the material benefits and psychological wages derived from aligning with those frameworks and practices. But if we situate ourselves in what Benjamin called “the tradition of the oppressed”<sup>42</sup> and what I’m calling the epistemologies of ethical witnessing, a collective divestment from whiteness would yield the integrity offered by ethical sociality and the sustainability derived from structural racial and gender justice. This is an impossible freedom dream and far from a practical reality, I concede. But dreaming is how new possibilities for justice come into existence.

## NOTES

1. Raymond Williams introduces the term “structure of feeling” to mean something “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.” For Williams, this structure of feeling is made up of “a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones” that recurs in artistic and literary works that are otherwise seemingly unconnected. Qtd. in Sean Matthews, “Change and Theory in Raymond Williams’s Structure of Feeling,” *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 179. A structure of feeling becomes most apparent in key socio-cultural and political transitions. As a society shifts between one historical bloc into another, its “conventions—the means of expression which find tacit consent” change as the structure of feeling changes. In addition, “new means are perceived and realized, while old means come to appear empty and artificial.” Qtd. in Matthews, “Change and Theory,” 186. While Williams looks for the “pattern of impulses, restraints, [and] tones” in literature and culture in order to ascertain larger dynamics of change, my use of “structure of feeling” here is meant to suggest not only Williams’s concept, but also the notion that structures of feeling, or what I call “affective structures,” are constitutive of forms of knowing that are distinct from conscious forms of knowledge. Of course, conscious and affective modalities of knowing constantly interact, but the operative logics that govern affective structures are not the same as the operative logics of consciousness. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, certain affective responses are “paralogical” or “prelogical.” That is, affective responses need not be governed by factual evidence and realities; the realms of fantasy, phobia, desire, belief, and faith are more likely to govern the operative logics of affect than convictions grounded in facts and evidence. This is not to say that affective structures are irrational. On the contrary, our affective states or responses are often “logical” insofar as our structures of feeling are always already constituted in relation to larger societal apparatuses of ideology, discourse, representation, material practices, and social interactions.

2. Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

3. Baldwin develops this concept in several essays, but most directly in “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” “White Man’s Guilt,” and “Many Thousands Gone,” in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998).

4. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

5. “Wages of whiteness” is a term introduced by W. E. B. DuBois to characterize not only the wealth accumulation white Americans gained from the exploitation of Black people’s labor and Black women’s reproduction, but also the “psychological wages” derived from a socio-cultural order that persistently depicted whites as superior through various mythologies, representational practices, and political ideologies. See W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

6. See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Linda

Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Thomas Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

7. Cedric Robinson defines racial regimes as “unstable truth systems. Like Ptolemaic astronomy, they may ‘collapse’ under the weight of their own artifices, practices, and apparatuses; they may fragment, desiccated by new realities, which discard some fragments wholly while appropriating others into newer regimes. . . . Racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. While necessarily articulated with accruals of power, the covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition.” *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xii.

8. See David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), and *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007).

9. See George Lipsitz, “Sent for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today,” in *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

10. See for example Ward Connerly's willingness to become the public mouthpiece of the anti-affirmative action movement in Kimberlé Crenshaw, “A Preference for Deception: Ward Connerly Steals the Language of Civil Rights to Halt Affirmative Action,” *Ms. Magazine*, Winter 2008.

11. See James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

12. On the notion of “white injury,” see Lisa Marie Cacho, “‘The People of California are Suffering’: The Ideology of White Injury in Discourses of Immigration,” *Cultural Values* 4, no. 4 (2000): 389–418. On discourses of “color blindness,” see Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Claire Jean Kim, “Racial Ordering,” in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); and Robert G. Lee, “The Model Minority as Gook” in *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999). On the notion of “reverse discrimination,” see *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978), and George Lipsitz, “Law and Order: Civil Rights Laws and White Privilege,” in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

13. For extensive discussions of the emergence of these fantasy projections, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women's Reproduction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Herman Gray, “Reaganism and the Sign of Blackness,” in *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Darnell Hunt, ed., *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Valerie Smith, ed., *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

14. On the emergence and expansion of the prison industrial complex, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police*

and Prisons in the Age of Crisis (New York: Verso, 1999); Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2006); Manning Marable, Ian Steinberg, and Keesha Middlemass, eds., *Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives: The Racism, Criminal Justice and Law Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Julia Sudbury, *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

15. See Juanita Diaz-Cotto, *Chicana Lives and Criminal Justice: Voices from El Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One is Illegal: Fighting Violence and State Repression on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2006); and Suzanne Oboler, ed., *Behind Bars: Latino/as and Prison in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

16. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), and Kenneth Neubeck and Noel Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

17. On the impact of urban renewal policies, see Mindy Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do about It* (New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 2004). On the new imperialism and its connection to “creative destruction” and militarization, see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

18. To demonstrate the ways white middle- and working-class Americans have consistently voted against their own economic interests rather than align with the demands of people of color, Lipsitz offers the following evidence: “The wealthiest 1 percent of the U.S. population owns nearly half of all the stocks, bonds, cash, and other financial assets in the nation, that the richest 15 percent controls almost all of the country’s financial assets, that the twenty-eight thousand wealthiest people in the U.S. receive more income than the ninety-six million poorest Americans . . . that the share of the national income garnered by the overwhelming majority of the population—the ‘bottom’ 90 percent—has declined precipitously from two-thirds of the national income in 1917 to about 50 percent in 2000, that working families now perform twenty additional hours per week of paid labor than families did thirty years ago. Since 1980, the wealthiest fifth of the U.S. population has seen its income increase by 21 percent, while wages, working conditions, and living standards among the poorest three fifths have fallen. Nearly 85 percent of the three trillion dollar increase in stock market valuation between 1989 and 1997 went to the richest 10 percent of U.S. families.” *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 106.

19. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1962), 7.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–1791.

22. This was a point raised by Neferti Tadiar in a public lecture titled “Contesting Imperial Belonging” (Race and Immigration Discussion Series, Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity, Ithaca College, October 12, 2009).

23. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 151.

24. See Bill Youssman, “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4 (November 2003): 366–391.

25. W. E. B. DuBois shows in *Black Reconstruction in America* that the structural possibility of an abolition democracy was imminent during Reconstruction, particularly if the “forty acres and a mule” provision had been implemented. The redistribution of land and economic power to the enslaved would have not only strengthened Black political enfranchisement, but also potentially initiated a practical modality for redressing the iniquities of slavery.

26. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage International, 1972), 10.
27. *Ibid.*, 36.
28. See Taussig's section titled "Secrecy Magnifies Reality" in *Defacement*.
29. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 242.
30. Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998), 11.
31. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1983), xv.
32. James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 69.
33. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon gives an example of culturally shared beliefs that are paralogical and rooted by affective conviction: "For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. The women among the whites, by a genuine process of induction, invariably view the Negro as the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations. . . . We have shown that reality destroys all these beliefs. But they all rest on the level of the imagined, in any case on that of a paralogism." Emphasis mine, 177. In this passage, Fanon examines how the culturally shared fantasy about Black sexuality and potency trumps the factual reality that contests such beliefs. Rather, affectively charged phobias and desires structure responses to the fantasy construction as if they were true while simultaneously foreclosing the possibility to dispel such fantasies via the presentation of factual evidence.
34. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980).
35. As M. Jacqui Alexander states, "African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine. The complexity derives in part from the fact that the Sacred energies that accompanied the millions who had been captured and sold for more than four centuries had indeed inhabited a vast geography." *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 290–291.
36. See George Lipsitz, "Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2006): 451–468.
37. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (New York: Beacon Press, 2003).
38. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53.
39. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).
40. Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
41. See Jennifer Chun, George Lipsitz, and Young Shin, "Immigrant Women Workers at the Center of Social Change: AIWA Takes Stock of Itself," *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* inaugural issue (Spring 2010): 127–132.
42. Benjamin, "Philosophy of History," 257.