Abstract:

The dominant debate over race relations and the law focuses either on colorblindness, in which the law fails to recognize racial distinctions, or on multiculturalism, in which each race is given special and different treatment for the purpose of recognizing the equal worth of all cultures. Joel Olson critiques both of these positions by arguing that each of them, while an improvement on the segregationist Herrenvolk ideal, reinforces, in different ways, the political superiority of a white racial identity. Olson examines the work of Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom to show that colorblindness in the law is hopelessly unrealistic in its appraisal of the social status of racial minorities. Similarly, the works of Charles Taylor and Henry Giroux fail to construct a positive white identity within a multicultural framework. In opposition to colorblindness and multiculturalism, Mr. Olson proposes an abolitionist identity, which is premised on actively rejecting a white racial identity and recognizing race as a form of political power.

THE LIMITS OF COLORBLIND AND MULTICULTURAL PERSONHOOD

Joel Olson *

On July 27-31, 1997, police officers in Chandler, Arizona, a rapidly-growing suburb south of Phoenix, conducted a massive sweep of downtown Chandler searching for illegal aliens. Working with local Immigration and Nationalization Services officers, they stopped people with brown skin at random and greeted them in Spanish. If the person replied in Spanish, they demanded to see papers proving legal residency. In the process of arresting and deporting 432 people, they stopped thousands of people who were playing soccer, hanging out at their apartment complexes, or walking down the street. Sometimes entire families were searched. No white people were stopped and asked to prove their residency. A brown-skinned driver pumping gas at a convenience store had to produce papers proving her legal status, while the white-skinned driver at the next pump was ignored. Latino community leaders quickly filed a $35 million lawsuit against the city, charging that the sweeps were part of a $600,000 downtown revitalization plan by the Chandler city government to attract middle class white consumers to downtown Chandler and way from thriving downtowns in nearby Tempe.

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and Scottsdale.¹

A year and a half later, the Arizona Republic cheerfully reported Chandler was set to celebrate its fourth annual Multi-Cultural Festival, complete with Middle Eastern belly dancing, Irish step dancers, and Mexican mariachis, all designed as “a celebration of all our various backgrounds,”² according to festival director Karen Drake. Chandler Councilwoman Patti Bruno said the diversity of Chandler (whose population is nearly eighty percent white) is “awesome” and something for the city to be proud of.³

The Chandler government’s two minds about race — police raids and cultural festivals, white dollars and ethnic flavor, green cards and guacamole dip — is an increasingly common phenomenon in American cities. Racial profiling and diversity celebrations go hand in hand in a country that is glad to be done with segregation yet uncomfortable with all the consequences its dissolution might imply. Americans celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. as they lock up more Black men than ever before; they praise diversity but agonize over affirmative action; they dance to mariachis after sweeping the streets for brown skin.

Americans love to think they can create anything from scratch, including their identities. Rock star, entrepreneur, president — it is all within our grasp if we work hard, play by the rules, and get a little lucky. Running against this myth of self-invention are certain inherited social characteristics such as race and gender. Up until recently, these characteristics were regarded as permanent and inflexible. One could be an astronaut or an acrobat, a cop or a robber, but one was forever male or female, Black or white, or one of the other approved Census racial categories. This attitude still holds sway for many people, especially regarding gender, but its grip is loosening somewhat in regards to race. Boundaries that once provided security now seem like obstacles. Old identities no longer seem adequate to capture our sense of self. Tiger Woods is not Black, he is “cablinasian,” which is short for Caucasian-Black-Indian-Asian. White people squeal with delight to find they are part Indian. Love sees no color. Racial identity, which once seemed like an immutable part of us, has turned out to be another choice we make. We can emphasize our racial identity, ignore it, or change it (witness the “biracial” movement).

However much we try to make it a matter of choice, our racial identities are not as easily adopted or rejected as we like to think. Our identities, especially our racial identities, are bound up in social structures that are beyond our direct control. These systems of power construct certain social and political ideals around which we consciously and unconsciously shape our identities. Any exploration of identity must therefore explore the ideals that shape it. In this essay I examine the three ideals that have constructed racial conceptions of personhood in the United States. In the era of


² Monica Davis, Chandler Diversity Worth Celebrating, Festival Officials Say, ARIZONA REPUBLIC, Jan. 21, 1999, East Valley §, at 1.

³ See id.
slavery and segregation, the dominant racial ideal was white supremacy, or what I call the herrenvolk ideal. In this era, race was central to Americans’ sense of self, largely because it determined one’s social and political status. According to the herrenvolk ideal, to be a full human being with all the rights and opportunities that accompany it, one simply had to be white. Becoming white, I argue, was not an automatic function of pale skin or European ancestry. It had to be fought for, like any other social status, and once achieved, it had to be defended, largely by excluding others.

The civil rights movement was a watershed in American history, not only because it ended legal segregation, but also because it dismantled the herrenvolk ideal that shaped our racial identities for centuries. No longer would race carry any publicly sanctioned status or stigma. The question that emerged from this was whether race should play a role in defining one’s sense of self. The colorblind ideal has no place for race, while the multicultural ideal argues that race is an important part of the glorious mosaic that makes us who we are and thus should continue to play a role. In this essay I examine the colorblind and multicultural ideals by arguing that while both are certainly better than the herrenvolk ideal, neither constructs a truly democratic alternative to racist conceptions of personhood because neither addresses the problem of white identity. It is the white racial identity, I charge, that is behind the racial conflicts of our past and our present, and possibly our future. Examining Justice John Harlan’s dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and political scientists Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom’s *America in Black and White*, I argue that the colorblind ideal perpetuates white identity even as it attempts to make race publicly insignificant, since it allows white privilege to continue unabated in the private realm. Examining philosopher Charles Taylor’s work on “the politics of recognition” and the new “whiteness studies,” I argue that white identity endures in multiculturalism through a redefinition of race as culture that counts whiteness as simply one culture among others, ignoring the ways in which it continues to profit whites.

Advocates of each ideal typically differ over the extent and nature of racial discrimination today as well as the proper means to achieve a society in which race no longer holds any political advantage or stigma. Both ideals, however, share a fundamental weakness: both dissociate race from politics, and in so doing neither effectively confronts the white world. The white world persists in colorblindness through a formal definition of race that redefines white as simply one physical characteristic among others. It also endures in multiculturalism through a definition of race as culture that counts the white world as simply one culture among others. Both redefinitions blanch the notion of power and alliance from their conception of race, defining away the cross-class alliance rather than confronting its operation. In this way, the colorblind and multicultural ideals both provide the surreptitious means by which the white world perseveres. Neither ideal, therefore, is a force for greater democracy.4

Any future democratic society requires a new political ideal that has no room for white personhood. The political challenge, I contend, is not to abolish all racial categories nor to make them all equal but to eliminate the single explicitly antidemocratic

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4 I refer to the colorblind state or the colorblind democracy as the polity following the herrenvolk democracy whose core principle is to not discriminate on the basis of race. The colorblind ideal is one set of prescriptions and guidelines on how to achieve a colorblind democracy, while the multicultural ideal is a different set toward the same end. Multiculturalism is not a challenge to the colorblind state but an alternative notion as to how to achieve it.
racial identity, whiteness. I conclude by briefly sketching out a vision of what a non-white identity, which I call an abolitionist personality, might look like.

I. THE DEATH OF THE HERRENVOLK IDEAL

The colorblind and multicultural conceptions of personhood are in large part a reaction to the forms of identity that existed under slavery and segregation. Following the sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe, I will call this era of white supremacy a herrenvolk democracy, a regime that is “democratic for the master race but tyrannical for subordinate groups.” The herrenvolk was a curious combination of democracy and tyranny, equality and supremacy, all of which coexisted with state repression, mob violence, and widespread belief (justified by God and science) of the eternal inequality of humanity. The mix is epitomized in Vice President of the Confederacy Alexander H. Stephens’s famous “Cornerstone Speech”:

Many governments have been founded on the principles of subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were, and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature’s law. With us, all the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eyes of the law. Not so with the Negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.

The herrenvolk era, which we can date from roughly the 1670s (when explicitly racial slavery was codified into the colonial statutes) to 1964-65 and the passing of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, produced a peculiar form of identity I call white citizenship. On the one hand, white citizenship was an identity of equality: all those who were citizens were politically equal to all other citizens. It was, however, simultaneously an identity of supremacy: one was also superior to all those who were not citizens, particularly slaves. As evidenced by the Fugitive Slave Law, which made any free Black person subject to kidnapping and enforced bondage by any white man who claimed him or her, blackness was inherently linked to slavery. Likewise, citizenship and whiteness were bound together. Thus, both whiteness and citizenship were fundamentally forms of status: citizens enjoyed status over slaves, whites over those who were not white. White citizenship was not something automatically granted to all “whites,” however. Those who staked a claim for white citizenship had to prove themselves white (largely by proving they were not Black).

Remnants of the struggle to achieve white citizenship litter American law. The

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5 Pierre L. van den Berghe, Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective 18 (1967).
1857 *Dred Scott* decision declared that all whites are of a higher social status than any Black person, free or slave, thus providing an incentive to become white. In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* sanctioned a dual system of public accommodations, one for the white citizens and one for Black people, providing yet another incentive. Both cases signified that no matter how low, poor, or despicable a person might be, if he is white he enjoys a higher status than that of the wealthiest, most esteemed Black person. Thus, as David Roediger notes, Black people in the *herrenvolk* democracy were not so much non-citizens as they were *anticitizens* whose exclusion and oppression set the boundaries and privileges of white citizenship.

The courts, then, did more than merely regulate relations between citizens and anticitizens, they helped determine who was white as well. In *Plessy*, the Supreme Court deferred to the laws of Louisiana in determining whether Homer Plessy was Black. (Plessy, who had seven white great-grandparents and one Black one, was Black by Louisiana law.) Indeed, much of the task of determining who was Black fell to state courts and legislatures. Yet the federal courts played an active role as well. As Ian Haney-López shows, in cases such as *In re Ah Yup*, *In re Rodriguez*, *In re Najour* and numerous others, the courts inconsistently ruled on the racial status of Asian Indians, Mexicans, Armenians, and others who strived to be classified as white. Racial designation was a political-legal matter in the *herrenvolk* era. There was a pressing need to be defined as white if one was to enjoy the privileges and prerogatives of a citizen. One could say that an individual was not a citizen because he was white but that he was white because he was a citizen.

When the civil rights movement swept away the *herrenvolk* democracy, it changed the character of white identity as well. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation of public accommodations, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed Black people’s right to vote, abolished the legal superior status of the white citizen and made Black people citizens as well. African Americans were now at least formally the political equals of whites. Of course, reality never matched ideal. Nevertheless, the Civil Rights acts were a watershed that altered the role of race in shaping one’s identity, for no longer was it necessary to be white in order to be a citizen. The question, then, is what role, if any, should racial identity play in defining one’s sense of self today? This question is particularly acute for white racial identity, since it was the dominant racial category of the *herrenvolk* democracy and therefore the lynchpin of the

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9 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

10 ROEDIGER, supra note 7, at 57.


12 In re Ah Yup, 1 F. Cas. 223 (1878) (granting citizenship to a Chinese immigrant, reasoning that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments only extended citizenship to people of African descent).

13 In re Rodriguez, 81 F. 337 (1897) (granting citizenship to a man of Mexican descent).

14 In re Najour, 174 F. 735 (1909) (stating that petitioner, of Syrian descent, appeared to be white and was therefore entitled to naturalization).

system of racial oppression.

New times call for new ideas, and new ideals of personhood. The death of the *herrenvolk* demanded a new way to make sense of racial identity, but given whites’ loss of racial standing and their strong resistance to substantive Black equality, any new vision would have to balance a commitment to equal rights and opportunities with the need to mollify white anxieties if it were to avoid a white backlash. It would have to safeguard the material and social advantages whites had accumulated and come to expect as a matter of right under the *herrenvolk*, such as preferential access to the top schools, the best neighborhoods, the means to accrue wealth, and decent treatment by public officials. Colorblindness and multiculturalism emerged as competing ideals of personhood in this context.

II. THE COLORBLIND IDEAL

The fundamental premise of the colorblind ideal is that one’s race should carry no status in the public sphere. People should be judged according to their character and the merits of their labors, not their membership in an ascribed group. Given this, the ideal state would grant no recognition to any particular race or ethnic group via public policy, legislation, jurisprudence, or law enforcement, whether for purposes of discrimination (as in the *herrenvolk*) or for combating it (such as affirmative action). “Racial solutions, such as busing, affirmative action, black power, and multiculturalism, are bound to fail,” Yehudi Webster reasons, “because they heighten the very racial awareness that is said to have led to ‘racial problems’ in the first place.” The state’s only role regarding race is to prevent discrimination so that all individuals may have an equal opportunity to succeed in the economic and social spheres. Thus the state must deliberately ignore or be “blind” to one’s membership in any race.

The colorblind ideal rests on a distinction between public and private realms. The defining characteristic of social relationships in the realm of politics and civil society is equality. All citizens are equal in the eyes of the law; one’s race is not recognized except possibly as a neutral description for classification purposes. In the private sphere, race may be recognized as the individual sees fit. Given this public/private split, the essence of the colorblind ideal is not so much that races do not exist — some colorblind advocates note that there are no biological races, others assume there are — but that their existence is politically irrelevant, since the state may not take them into account either way.

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17 A number of colorblind advocates argue against racial classification of any kind, claiming that even this practice ultimately subverts a colorblind society. For Webster, for example, race is a myth that is perpetuated by any public acknowledgement of it, including racial classification. Race is a logical fallacy, he argues, so the system of racial classification is racist in itself and must be eliminated immediately, for even with the best of intentions it ends up perpetrating the power of race rather than undermining it. See generally id.

18 In an extreme instance of this logic, Dinesh D’Souza actually calls for the repeal of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, claiming that its antidiscrimination provisions should apply only to the public sector, and
The colorblind ideal is not exclusively a right-wing phenomenon. Its advocates include liberals, conservatives, and even leftists, who claim to be preserving the true meaning of liberalism, progressivism, and/or the American spirit by defending a set of universal values premised on the freedom of the individual against a set of particularistic values premised on membership in a cultural group. As colorblind advocate Richard Payne argues, Americans must reject the “racial framework” for understanding the world and begin “reframing problems within the broader context of universal human virtues, and particularly American values.”\(^{19}\) We get beyond race, he believes, by refusing to recognize it. If the essential principle upon which multiculturalism is based is the politics of recognition (as I explain below), the backbone of colorblindness is the principle of public non-recognition of human differences and an assertion of a common identity.

The intellectual origins of colorblindness lie in Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan’s famous dissent in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Ruling on a suit brought by Homer Plessy, the seven-to-one majority declared that Louisiana’s laws segregating Black passengers on its trains were constitutional on the grounds that providing separate but equal facilities did not deny African Americans their political rights guaranteed by the 13th and 14th amendments.\(^{20}\) In his dissent, Harlan replies that the segregation of public facilities does in fact violate the civil rights of African Americans. The Civil War amendments pertain not only to the rights of citizenship (such as voting and serving on juries), as the majority stated, but also to personal liberty and therefore explicitly prohibit differential treatment according to race.

Harlan’s eloquent rebuttal of the majority decision as well as his famous “our constitution is color-blind”\(^{21}\) phrase has made him the founding father of the colorblind ideal. Even though many Black writers and orators have made the same point, the acclaim accorded to Harlan is entirely appropriate, for his dissent foreshadows the limitations of the colorblind ideal in a way African American thinkers’ arguments generally do not. For example, the full “color-blind” quotation reads:

> The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage, and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guarantied by the supreme law of the land

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\(^{20}\) See Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U.S. 537, 546 (1896) (Harlan, J., dissenting). The phrase “separate but equal” is actually from Harlan’s dissent, not the majority opinion.

\(^{21}\) Id. at 559.
are involved.  

Thus, in the same paragraph that Harlan defends a colorblind Constitution, he also sanctions the social superiority of the white race. A colorblind Constitution would protect the political and civil rights of Black people, but it would do nothing about whites’ control over educational, financial, and political resources — nor should it, he concedes — since these lie outside of the political and civil realms. White domination in these areas is understood as the “normal” condition of society, reflecting the white race’s naturally “great heritage.” Harlan’s dissent draws a line between public activities such as voting and the enjoyment of public accommodations, in which the state must be colorblind, and private activities such as the accumulation of education or wealth, in which inequalities are natural and therefore immune from public deliberation and decision-making processes. Thus, Harlan’s “color-blind” defense of civil rights for African Americans also sanctions and perpetuates the advantages that whites have built up due to their privileged status. It perpetuates white privilege even as it would bring about formal political equality.  

This irony is reproduced in one of the most prominent academic voices for colorblindness today, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom’s America in Black and White. The Thernstroms gather voluminous amounts of data to show that African Americans have made great strides in income, housing, education, politics, and every other social indicator since the herrenvolk era, and that the gaps between Black and white are getting smaller. Further, they claim, these gains have been accompanied by dramatic changes in whites’ attitudes toward Black people. Contrary to popular wisdom, they argue, neither the civil rights movement nor affirmative action are responsible for racial progress. The boom in Black economic empowerment and the shift in white attitudes began in the 1940s and 1950s, before the civil rights protests, and without any sort of affirmative action. Black progress was the cumulative result of the migrations of African Americans from the South to the North, where jobs and higher wages were more plentiful; the ideological imperatives of World War II, which made racism disgraceful, and the waning prejudices of white Americans, who began to acknowledge and reject the gap between American ideals of equality and its practices. These factors, among others, led to higher incomes, lower poverty rates, greater political influence, and increased home ownership among Black Americans, all of which resulted in social progress heretofore unknown in the Black community. “The unprecedented progress of the 1940s and 1950s was not, for the most part, the product of deliberate decisions by government officials or by the leaders of organizations seeking to change public policy,” they assert. “Immense progress was made by black Americans before the idea of racial preferences was

22 Id.


24 STEPHAN THERNSTROM & ABIGAIL THERNSTROM, AMERICA IN BLACK AND WHITE: ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE (1997). The book has received a great deal of attention in the press, particularly after Abigail Thernstrom challenged President Bill Clinton at one of his President’s Initiative on Race forums in December 1997 for his support for affirmative action.
seriously entertained by anyone.”

The Thernstroms conclude from this that since Black Americans made their greatest strides in overcoming discrimination and whites made their greatest strides in shedding their prejudices without government programs or social movements, colorblind public policies are the best way to unite Americans across the racial divide. Racial preferences, they hold, are not just divisive, they have done little historically for Black progress. Thus, the government has no need nor any business maintaining programs of racial preference. Instead, it should pay heed to Justice Harlan’s words and create a color-blind social policy that treat people as individuals rather than members of an ascribed group. This, they hold, is a responsible middle ground between the racist policies of the past and the sky-is-falling racial doom saying of today’s affirmative action liberals. “It is on the grounds of individuality that blacks and whites can come together,” they argue, not by clinging to the divisive discourses of race.

The Thernstroms’ plea is a noble one. Nevertheless, as with Justice Harlan’s dissent, their colorblind ideology naturalizes white advantage, shifting the blame for persistent racial gaps onto Black people and excusing whites almost entirely. Black poverty is almost exclusively the result of out-of-wedlock births and the decline in Black marriage rates. Their “spatial mismatch” theory explains away high Black unemployment by claiming that Black people simply do not live where the jobs are. Any remaining segregation is largely due to African Americans’ preference to live together. Affirmative action, not whites’ resistance to it, is responsible for widening the breach between the races. Their chapter on Black poverty concludes by arguing that Black people just have to buckle down, refuse to sell drugs, accept minimum wage jobs and work their way up like immigrants do. They even suggest we stop using the terms “racism” and “racist” because they just antagonize Black-white relations. At this point they have come full circle, from acknowledging the continuing existence of racism to contemplating eliminating the very language that allows one to name it.

Ultimately, they excuse whites for racism, America in Black and White declares that any residual forms of white advantage are merely incidental — or are Black people’s fault. But denying that white privilege exists does not mean it really has disappeared. To not recognize race publicly one has to deny the historical connection of whiteness with racial subordination or, as the Thernstroms do, tuck it away safely in the past. This formalistic conception of race permits continuing subordination by denying the presence of all but

\[25\text{ Id. at 95.} \]
\[26\text{ Id. at 529.} \]
\[27\text{ For a similar critique, see generally Stephen Steinberg, Up From Slavery: The Myth of Black Progress, 7 NEW POLITICS 69 (1998) }\]
\[28\text{ See supra note 24, at chaps. 9, 15, 17.} \]
\[29\text{ Id. at 534.} \]
the most blatant forms of racial privilege and discrimination. By defining race simply as skin color or by refusing to classify racially at all, race as a form of status, property and terror is not abolished so much as it is simply defined away. If anything, colorblindness perpetuates white advantage since it declares such advantage “normal” or “private” and therefore beyond the realm of public deliberation. Thus, the colorblind ideal actually reproduces a white identity that continues to see itself as both equal and privileged, although now its advantages are “natural” rather than enforced by a racist system. It preserves a material interest in being white. In so doing, it offers little toward the development of a democratic conception of personhood. Unfortunately, neither does its principal alternative, multiculturalism.

III. THE MULTICULTURAL IDEAL

Multiculturalism is a term of many uses. In one sense it simply describes a fact of the world. If culture is “the context within which people give meanings to their actions and experiences, and make sense of their lives,” then most nations are by definition multicultural, for they contain numerous cultures within their borders. In a more normative sense, multiculturalism represents an acknowledgment of the cultures of other peoples and a moral ideal of tolerance toward them. In a third sense, multiculturalism is not just a normative ideal but also a political imperative. In this conception, which I term the multicultural ideal, cultural diversity is not only a moral good, it is necessary for democracy, since the full inclusion of all individuals or citizens implies public recognition of their cultural identities. Rather than suggesting a colorblind universalism that would subordinate the sources of an individual’s identity (such as her culture, race, religion, or gender) to that of the citizen, the multicultural ideal asserts that a healthy public sphere should be committed to providing cultures (particularly minority cultures) the protection they need to survive and flourish. So long as they follow the rules of a common democratic civic culture, multiculturalism is perfectly compatible with a universalism “that counts the culture and cultural context valued by individuals as among

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30 See Crenshaw supra note 23 at 282–85. Crenshaw argues that the strategy the Supreme Court used to uphold segregation in Plessy v. Ferguson is the same one the Court now uses to uphold colorblindness. The Court’s strategy in Plessy was to define equality formally, while ignoring the actual material context of segregation, as well as its effects. Thus, the Court saw the presence of two railroad cars, one for whites and one for Black people and declared it equal accommodations, all the while ignoring the actual context: one car was clean and comfortable and, most importantly, a sign of standing while the other car was hot and filthy and, most importantly, a sign of degradation. She claims that, when examining cases claiming racial discrimination, the Court still looks at race in narrow, formal terms, i.e. as skin color. In so doing, the Court ignores the historical, political, and economic context of race and racial discrimination. Thus, since everyone has a skin color, “equal treatment” means that the state should take no one’s skin color into account. Given such a definition, racism can just as easily be perpetuated against whites as Blacks, and proving it requires explicit, deliberate discriminatory intent. But since the state only recognizes intentional discriminatory behavior by a particular person or agency, Black people are essentially forced to depict themselves as “perfect victims as against a perfect discriminator.” This puts them in a Catch-22: they are chastised for using “victimology” when making claims of discrimination, yet they have no other way to claim discrimination.

As a fact of the world or as a commitment to tolerance, multiculturalism is largely unobjectionable today. There is great disagreement, however, over the multicultural ideal — its desirability, its implementation, and the kind of democratic politics it prefigures. Much of this debate in the areas of philosophy and political theory revolves around Charles Taylor’s seminal essay, “The Politics of Recognition.”

“The Politics of Recognition” emerges from questions that originate in Taylor’s earlier study of Hegel. Hegel’s challenge to participatory democracy, Taylor argues, is to ask how much diversity a society can endure without dissolving. Modern society is fundamentally self-interested; it is thus fractured and alienated. Yet absolute freedom (or participatory democracy) requires homogeneity for it to function because the participation of all citizens in political deliberation requires a common foundation of purpose. Such a common foundation is impossible in a fragmented, self-interested society. Further, attempts to create such a foundation inevitably lead to an inability for the political order to cope with the complexity and fragmentation of modern society at best or a terror (such as the French Revolution) at worst. The question for Taylor is “What kind of differentiation can modern society admit of?” What is needed, he argues, is a “meaningful differentiation” that both knits communities together and distinguishes them from others. “The Politics of Recognition” is his attempt at such a differentiation.

Human life, Taylor asserts, is fundamentally dialogical. That is, individuals construct their own identity, but not by themselves. We only become fully human through interaction with others, particularly those who in some way matter to us. “Thus my discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others.” Taylor argues that in the pre-modern era, one’s identity was defined according to one’s “honor” or status in a system of social stratification. By contrast, in the modern era individuals must construct their own identity through the concept of dignity. While the underlying premise of honor is that only some share in it, the premise of dignity is that everyone possesses it. The demand for dignity thus results in “a politics of equal recognition,” in which all individuals demand the right to be recognized as an equal to all others. Recognition, then, is the acknowledgement of one individual’s self-consciousness and identity by another self-conscious being.

But the modern politics of recognition has an element of uncertainty built into it. Whether one was prince, priest, or pauper, the social hierarchy guaranteed a premodern person’s identity. Yet in the modern era persons can lose their identity, they can fail to be recognized or they can be “misrecognized” by others. Historically, misrecognition has

34 CHARLES TAYLOR, HEGEL AND MODERN SOCIETY 111 (1979).
35 TAYLOR, supra note 33, at 34.
36 See id. at 26–27.
not only been the experience of individuals, but of entire groups. Misrecognition, then, is a lack of due respect shown for an individual or group by another individual or group. However, it is not just a snub to the person or group seeking recognition. Because our identities are created dialogically, misrecognition can be internalized, resulting in a damaged sense of identity that can “inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred.” The problem of misrecognition, Taylor argues, is the fundamental dilemma of the modern era.

The politics of recognition has assumed two forms in response to this dilemma. The politics of universalism insists that the way to achieve dignity and equal worth is to emphasize that which brings us together as members of a common community, in particular the possession of equal rights and entitlements. This is the colorblind position. The politics of difference, on the other hand, demands recognition not on the basis of what humans share but on that which makes them unique. All persons are of equal worth, but each person possesses a distinct identity, often derived (in part) from membership in a cultural group. It is this distinctness that defines us as humans and that demands equal recognition. Advocates of the politics of universalism contend that an emphasis on human particularity, particularly cultural differences, separates individuals rather than brings them together. A common political identity, usually consecrated by citizenship, is necessary to create the common bonds necessary for a democratic public. Advocates of the politics of difference charge that the “universalism” of the politics of universalism historically has been quite particular (i.e. white, male, and propertied). Further, universalism often demands the suppression of differences in order to construct a common political identity, denying the individual an opportunity to fashion her own publicly significant identity. The politics of universalism, its critics charge, is actually ethnocentric and elitist.

Taylor agrees that the politics of universalism tends to homogenize social life and can easily slide into the politics of ethnocentrism — and often has. Still, he is uncomfortable with the politics of difference since, he argues, it abandons all attempts to judge the moral worth of particular cultures in claiming that all standards of judgment are inherently tainted by power. Taylor thus sees his task as being to find a third path, not between the politics of difference and the politics of universalism so much as between poststructuralism and a homogenizing liberalism that can easily turn ethnocentric. His goal is a universalism that can respect (and protect) the demands for recognition by individuals and cultures alike.

Taylor’s solution is a “substantive liberalism” that he distinguishes from the “procedural liberalism” of universalism and the “difference” politics of poststructuralism. According to procedural liberalism, a liberal society can adopt no substantive view about what constitutes the good life. The state is restricted to a procedural commitment to protect the rights of individuals so that they are able to pursue their private definition of the good. But, Taylor argues, a society can have collective goals without violating liberal principles. Quebec, for example, expresses a collective desire to preserve its French language and culture but does not trample on the rights of those Quebecois who disagree with this goal, such as indigenous peoples and Anglophones. Cultural survival is a

\[37\] \textit{Id.} at 26.
substantive good: it makes a collective claim as to what the good life should, in part, consist of — such as that Quebec should be a French-speaking territory. This substantive good is worth preserving as a matter of state policy, Taylor argues. A substantive liberalism can be perfectly in keeping with principles of universalism while avoiding the dangers of homogenization so long as it respects the rights of those who do not share in the collective definition of the good.

Taylor is a Canadian; his theory of recognition is intended to explain the conflict between English and French-language cultures in that nation, particularly in Quebec. Misrecognition may indeed be Canada’s fundamental dilemma, but it is not the United States’. A theory of the equal recognition of cultures cannot make sense of the American experience, for the fundamental dilemma here has been race, not the uneasy coexistence of two language-based cultures like in Canada. A multiculturalism borrowed from Taylor assumes that social identities are defined culturally. Accordingly, each race must possess a corresponding culture. But this is an assumption that must be proven rather than asserted. An analysis of cultural groups implies equality: I grant your culture recognition and seek to learn about it because I feel it is potentially as worthy as mine. Racial injustice, however, is premised on relations of inequality between dominant and subordinate groups. Multiculturalism is premised on the valuing of difference, but racial oppression, for all the differences it concocts as a means to divide white from not-white, depends on the suppression of difference in order to forge disparate cultures and ethnicities into homogenous races for the purposes of privilege and subordination. Thus, lack of recognition and racial subordination are not the same thing. When they are conflated, the unfortunate tendency is to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter. Applying Taylor’s theory of recognition to the United States requires making race equivalent to culture; the “American dilemma” is defined as whites’ “misrecognition” of Black people. But race and culture are simply not synonymous; one is a form of status and subordination, the other is not necessarily so.

The conflation of racial and cultural identity points to a second problem with Taylor’s theory of recognition: it lacks an analysis of power. Taylor acknowledges that power may prevent an individual from being recognized as she desires and that the state may need to protect against such misrecognition, but there is little sense in “The Politics of Recognition” that identities themselves are constructed (and not merely repressed) through power relations. As Linda Nicholson puts it, Taylor focuses too much “on the other to be recognized and too little on the practice of recognition itself.” Taylor interprets the problem of the modern age as the problem of misrecognition and the psychological damage it inflicts on its victims. The modern era, he argues, brought about the collapse of honor, and thus the instability of identity. Honor, though, is an eminently modern concept, fully compatible with liberal ideals and democratic governance. Status or “honor” as a white person historically has been a guaranteed form of social standing

38 Taylor himself acknowledges this. He implies that his model of recognition applies to the situation of Black people in the United States in several places in “The Politics of Recognition”. Id. at 26, 36, 38, 65. In his review of Will Kymlicka’s Multicultural Citizenship, 90 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 408 (1996), however, he acknowledges that African Americans do not fit into his cultural model. For a similar criticism, see generally LINDA NICHOLSON, THE PLAY OF REASON: FROM THE MODERN TO THE POSTMODERN (1999).

39 NICHOLSON, supra note 38, at 135.
largely insulated from the possibility of misrecognition. Racial oppression, then, is not a problem of misrecognition but a problem of power — the attempt by one group to maintain its standing and privileges over another group.\(^40\) Taylor is loath to raise the question of power because he believes it will throw him in the bog of poststructuralism and its “half-baked neo-Nietzschean theories.”\(^41\) Yet this reluctance, when borrowed for an American political and social theory, leads inquiry away from politics and into an unfruitful exploration of “cultural differences” and how to build bridges between them. At best such work misunderstands the nature of race; at its worst it actually perpetuates racial inequality rather than eradicates it.

The dangers of conflating culture with race are most apparent, ironically, in the emerging field of “whiteness studies,” which aims to study race not through a study of the oppressed but through an inquiry of the privileged.\(^42\) An underlying assumption of much of the work on whiteness in the disciplines of education, cultural studies, and clinical psychology is that race is not biology but culture. Thus, whiteness must be a culture as well, and since all cultures should be equal, the logic goes, white identity deserves a place at the multicultural table. The problem, of course, is that whiteness historically has not been an expression of culture so much as a social status reflecting relations of inequality, discrimination, privilege, and terror. The political and pedagogical challenge as whiteness studies defines it, then, is to find a usable white history that, once disassociated from the strange fruit of white supremacy, can provide the basis for a non-racist white identity that can constructively join the multicultural tapestry.

Furthermore, if no such history can be found, it will have to be invented. Since whiteness historically has not been an expression of culture so much as a status reflecting social relations of inequality, discrimination, privilege, and terror, its strongest advocates have found it very difficult to locate a white culture independent of its function as a form of standing. In his work on whiteness and youth, for example, education professor Henry A. Giroux blames identity politics for the inability of white youth to develop solidarity with youth of color.\(^43\) Identity politics has alienated poor white youth and led to a “crisis

\(^40\) It is possible to interpret misrecognition itself as a form of power, and Taylor indeed does say that misrecognition can be a form of oppression. But the focus of misrecognition is on the demeaning images the misrecognized have had forced on them (and in some ways have internalized) by the powers that be, not the social relations that enable one group to (mis)recognize another. Misrecognition is largely an effect of material relations of subordination, not the source of subordination.

\(^41\) TAYLOR, supra note 33, at 70.

\(^42\) I exclude from the following critique works on whiteness by scholars such as Neil Foley, Ian Haney-López, bell hooks, Noel Ignatiev, Matthew Frye Jacobsen, David R. Roediger, and Alexander Saxton, as well as other important works such as TONI MORRISON, PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION (1992). These scholars are more interested in critiquing whiteness than in discovering a usable past in its name, and thus have much to teach political theorists interested in questions of race. David Roediger locates the origins of this sort of inquiry in African American scholarship and terms it “critical studies of whiteness” to distinguish it from the field of “whiteness studies” I criticize here. David R. Roediger, Introduction to BLACK ON WHITE: BLACK WRITERS ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE WHITE (David R. Roediger ed., 1998).

\(^43\) See Henry A. Grioux, White Noise: Toward a Pedagogy of Whiteness, in RACE-ING REPRESENTATION: VOICE, HISTORY, AND SEXUALITY 53 (Kostas Myrsiades & Linda Myrsiades eds.,
of self-esteem” by denying them an ethnicity of their own. White people, especially white youth, need an identity and a culture to which they can belong. Given American history, he argues, such an identity will inevitably be tied to race. Giroux complains that conservatives have appropriated whiteness for their own politics, duping some poor white youth into right wing politics along the way. The only thing that can save white youth from the right wing reaction, Giroux holds, is a reconstructed, progressive, anti-racist white identity. Thus, the political and pedagogical task is to locate serviceable elements of the white experience and use them to form the basis of a new, anti-racist white culture and identity.  

He strongly resists claims that whiteness is nothing but a racist identity. Even if true, he warns, telling this to white youth would be psychologically damaging, for these youth need to find a place for themselves in the multiracial mosaic. “Defining ‘whiteness’ largely as a form of domination . . . while rightly unmasking whiteness as a mark of ideology and racial privilege, fails to provide a nuanced, dialectical, and layered account of whiteness that would allow white youth and others to appropriate selective elements of white identity and culture as oppositional.”

Whiteness is more than a form of oppressive power, he asserts, it is also a possibility.

Giroux’s effort to create a progressive white culture sounds promising at first glance, but the reconstruction of white identity is a dangerous undertaking. Some of the dangers are evident in Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg’s introduction to the anthology White Reign. Kincheloe and Steinberg anxiously warn about “the white identity crisis” and how it “cannot be dismissed simply as the angst of the privileged.” In fact, their primary criticism of multiculturalism is that it has yet to produce a “compelling vision of a reconstructed white identity.” The task of educators, they assert, is to create “a positive, proud, attractive, antiracist white identity that is empowered to travel in and out of various racial/ethnic circles with confidence and empathy.” They even call for a redirecting of funds and pedagogical energy toward the development of a progressive white identity: “Such pedagogical work is anything but easy; progressive Whites will require sophisticated help and support to pull them through

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1998).

44 See id., at 43.
45 Id. at 43.

47 Joe L. Kincheloe & Shirley R. Steinberg, Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness, in WHITE REIGN: DEPLOYING WHITENESS IN AMERICA 12 (Joe L. Kincheloe et al. eds., 1998). One should note that they offer no such version in their book either.

48 Id. One should note that they offer no such vision in their book either.
49 Id.
the social, political, and psychological dilemmas they all will face.” This “sophisticated help” includes funding as well as support groups of people of color to help “progressive whites” cope with unsympathetic white colleagues! With Kincheloe and Steinberg, whiteness studies reaches its logical endpoint — instead of challenging discrimination it demands people of color support groups; instead of channeling funds to deprived students of color, they now go to aggrieved whites; instead of challenging white supremacy, effort is devoted to reconstructing and sustaining white identity. The desire to create a positive white identity quickly turns a well-meaning anti-racism into white narcissism, which perpetuates white privilege rather than undermines it.

Despite their vigorous defense of an antiracist white identity, white culture advocates have yet to define what “white culture” is apart from white supremacy. The problem, however, is not bad scholarship; it is the fact that a white culture does not exist. After all, it is not white culture that unites a Brooklyn cop, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, a rural West Virginian, a Portland hippie, or a Phoenix metal head, it is white power: the enjoyment or expectation of preferential treatment by public and private officials. Further, as Albert Murray points out, given the pervasive influence of African, Indian, and other cultures, American culture can in no way be defined as white but is “incontestably mulatto.” This is not to say that whiteness is culturally insignificant, or that politics and culture can be neatly distinguished. In one sense, as David Cochran writes, white culture could be described as “the elevation of norms and practices that embody the experiences of white Americans to the position of neutral and universal standards used to judge everyone.” However, the attempt to raise one group’s way of seeing the world to a hegemonic position is a problem of power, not culture. If all that whites share as whites is an expectation of favored treatment, then whiteness is best understood as an identity of power, not of culture.

Whiteness studies’ failure to understand whiteness as a form of power follows from the politics of recognition’s tendency to understand the modern dilemma in terms of the misrecognition of cultures rather than the persistence of relations of privilege and subordination. If the problem is defined as misrecognition, the challenge becomes to make all races equal, which compels not only a multicultural politics but also, as Giroux and Kincheloe and Steinberg argue, a reconstructed white identity that can helpfully join a multicultural polity. Whiteness, though, cannot be understood apart from the history of

50 Id. at 23.

51 Neither Giroux nor Kincheloe and Steinberg are able to define white culture. Kincheloe and Steinberg falsely claim that “no one at this point really knows exactly what whiteness is,” as if African American scholars and others have not been exploring it for years. Id. at 4. Giroux claims it is possible to construct a white identity without essentializing whiteness (as if the main problem with whiteness is its essentialism), but it is his own logic that is essentializing. Because blackness contains a content independent of relations of subordination, Giroux assumes that whiteness must have one, too. He cannot conceive that it might be possible for a Black culture to survive without a white one, or that whites might someday identify themselves other than racially.


white supremacy. Multiculturalism undermines *herrenvolk* conceptions of personhood by positing the equality of all persons and the equal worth of various cultures. By redefining whiteness as culture, however, multiculturalism sets as its task to fit the white world into the multicultural mosaic rather than to question whether the world needs whiteness. Yet, what can a program of whiteness as merely a form of unjust power offer the multicultural tapestry besides a rip? If, as Marx says, “the formulation of a question is its solution,” then the misformulation of a question is its problem. The dilemma of how to construct a progressive white identity evaporates when whiteness is critiqued as a political category rather than as a cultural identity.

IV. TWO LOGICS OF GLOBAL CAPITAL

Multiculturalism and colorblindness are often presented as competing ideals due to the former’s emphasis on culture and the latter’s emphasis on the individual. Multiculturalism would highlight human differences, while colorblindness would overlook them in order to emphasize what human beings share. Ultimately, however, what the two ideals share is more significant than their differences. The purpose of both is to secure political stability in an increasingly global and rapidly changing economy. As the Soviet Empire fell, political challenges to capitalism and liberal democracy wilted from all quarters. Even many leftists resigned themselves to a world in which the market must be taken for granted. The only holdouts to this new world order so far are virulent forms of nationalism, fundamentalism, and the occasional protest against globalization. Multiculturalism and colorblindness are useful ideologies for controlling these conflicts. As Slavoj Žižek points out, multiculturalism is the perfect cultural logic for a world in which capital is loyal to no country, empire, or race, yet people still are. Tolerance, diversity, equality, and liberal democracy, he argues, all form the basis of a new “hegemonic ideal” through which global capital functions. “Diversity” is not a radical ideal, it is a corporate imperative. Similarly, Justice Harlan warns that the grave cost of *Plessy* will not only be the humiliations inflicted on Black people but the sowing of instability and discord in the nation. Only a colorblind polity, he holds, can secure social peace.

The destinies of the two races, in this country, are indissolubly linked

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54 *See* Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 3 *Collected Works* 146, 147 (1975).

55 Slavoj Žižek, *Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism*, 225 New Left Rev. 28 (1997).

56 A 1995 poll found that 73 percent of CEOs (most from companies with 10,000+ workers) would continue their company’s affirmative action programs even if federal contracts no longer required them. The reason most CEOs gave for this is that race-conscious hiring helps their marketing. Ternstrom, *supra* note 24, at 452. In the twenty-first century business world, diversity is as necessary to profit making as a web site. Yet while diversity may be good business, confronting white privilege is decidedly not. As a vice president for human resources in one company told journalist David Shipler, “Diversity is good business [but as for] sitting people down and trying to unearth their racial inclinations, I don’t think it’s healthy.” David K. Shipler, *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America* 539 (1997).
together, and the interests of both require that the common government of all shall not permit the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law. . . . The sure guaranty of the peace and security of each race is the clear, distinct, unconditional recognition by our governments, National and State, of every right that inheres in civil freedom, and of the equality before the law of all citizens of the United States without regard to race.⁵⁷

However, the imperative of political stability in the global era does not eliminate the problem of white identity. Globalism has undoubtedly worked to undermine white identity of the herrenvolk era, if only because capital is increasingly unwilling to continue paying white workers more for the same work. Yet, globalism is not a resolute enemy of whiteness. White privileges are generally unopposed by globalists so long as they are not prohibitively costly and so long as they are not the product of conscious forms of discrimination but result from the apparently unintended effects of the routine functioning of the political and economic order. Just as economic elites accommodated themselves to Jim Crow, they can easily accept normalized white advantages in a formally race-neutral democracy, as long as they preserve the political stability required for future growth rather than threaten it.

Whether one tries to ignore or deny away the power of white personhood, as colorblindness does, or to harness it for good rather than evil, as multiculturalism does, neither confronts the fact that white personhood is inherently an identity of privilege, inequality, and supremacy, and is therefore incompatible with a democratic society. The task of a democratic politics, then, is neither to ignore nor redefine white personhood but to abolish it. If a racial order is inherently hierarchical and anti-democratic, by definition so is the race at the top of the hierarchy. Abolishing the hierarchy therefore eliminates its dominant category, much as the abolition of slavery eliminated the slaveholder and the abolition of feudalism eliminated the aristocracy as significant social identities. This abolition does not imply mass murder, of course, it implies rendering the white identity as socially useless as the Danish royalty are to the average Dane. Rather than a colorblind or even a multicultural personhood, then, we need an anti-white personhood. In the tradition of the American abolitionists of the nineteenth century, I propose to call this an abolitionist personality.

V. WHAT WOULD AN ABOLITIONIST PERSONALITY LOOK LIKE?

If conceptions of personhood are constructed through social structures, it is also true that new forms of identity are necessary to create new structures. Creating a truly democratic society in the United States will require an abolitionist identity, particularly for those citizens who formerly assumed they were white. While spelling out the details of an identity that does not exist can easily turn into fanciful dream work, I conclude by suggesting some of the basic elements of an abolitionist identity.

First, an abolitionist personality would be resolutely opposed to white privileges

of any kind. As a result, it would support any and all policies, including affirmative action, busing, reparations and other forms of wealth distribution, that undermine the racial gap in housing, education, employment, wealth, health, criminal justice, and politics.

Second, this identity would adopt a new set of core values to ground it. An obvious source for such values is Black culture, for as the lone culture that emerged within and against white supremacy, it has the most experience both struggling against white identity and imagining a world beyond it. Historian V. P. Franklin argues that the core cultural values of the African American experience are self-determination, freedom, resistance, and education. An abolitionist personality would seek to articulate what these values mean in the twenty-first century. A reconsideration of these core values could change the way people understand democracy. Freedom could come to mean the ability for all interested persons to participate in those affairs that affect their daily life rather than merely freedom from government interference. Equality could come to mean substantive social equality rather than formal political equality and equality of opportunity. After all, defining freedom and equality as narrowly as we do today are legacies of the herrenvolk era, when citizenship was a status to possess rather than a power to employ and when social equality not only meant the equal distribution of wealth but equality with Black folk. In any case, an abolitionist personality founded on the Afro-Atlantic heritage rather than the heritage of white supremacy would be willing to explore new ways of thinking about such matters. Such a founding would not steal from Black culture, which has happened too many times in American history, but place it at the center of the American experience.

Above all, an abolitionist personality would be a political identity. One of the biggest problems with colorblindness and multiculturalism alike is that both leave little room for politics. Colorblindness wants us to ignore people’s racial identity and to look at each other as citizens, but it says very little about how limited the power of citizenship is today. Multiculturalism tends to divide the world into culture and socioeconomics, leaving expressly political questions of citizenship, participation, and governance to fall through the middle. Both approaches reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of whiteness. Whiteness certainly has cultural and economic effects, but it is first and foremost a political identity of status and privilege. It organizes people into groups, distributes them according to a hierarchy, allocates advantages to some and disadvantages to others, and shapes the way in which people make sense of the world. These are all political operations. An abolitionist identity would bring politics back into the picture both by understanding race as a form of power and by understanding that the solution to the problem of race is not to ignore differences nor celebrate them, but to secure greater participation and more democracy by undermining the privileges of whiteness.

In developing an abolitionist personality, I propose we look to the utopian moments of Black political thought. “Utopian” is not a word to fear. While utopian can represent the hopelessly unrealistic, it can also represent a political vision that is willing to go outside the boundaries of conventional political thinking to imagine new ways of living and organizing our lives. Such willingness is found in Black political thought

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more than any other American political tradition, socialism included. The interests of white identity ultimately lie in its own self-interest, and it therefore resists any political vision in which its privilege is not central. Black people, on the other hand, have led the resistance against the white democracy. As a result, Black political thought is typically free of any white blinders that might restrict its democratic vision.

This utopian strain is easily located in the works of people such as W. E. B. Du Bois. For example, Du Bois hints at the latent possibilities of a world without whiteness in an article “Criteria of Negro Art,” published in 1926 in the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine. The article asks its Black readers, living under Jim Crow, “What is the thing we are after?” Du Bois replies, “We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens.”59 This seems like an honorable demand for full civil rights, and indeed it is. But he continues:

But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? . . . [P]ushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us . . . a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world . . . a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.60

This expanded political imagination, borne of Black struggle, is one of the potential fruits of unshackling democratic politics from the bonds of whiteness. For Du Bois, the political problem is not how to find a way for democracy to integrate Black people. Rather, *democracy should aspire to blackness*. The struggle for Black equality opens up political possibilities unimaginable to those tethered to the white world.

In 1965, the editors of *Ebony* magazine announced that there is no “Negro problem” in America; rather, the problem of race is a *white* problem. The source of the solution to that problem lies “not in the Negro but in the white American and in the structure of the white community.”61 Today there is no “multicultural” or “diversity” problem, there is still only the white problem — its attitudes, its power, its solidarity. The willingness of both ideals to acquiesce to whiteness is not so much a sign of their hypocrisy as it is proof of the determination of white personhood to hold together in the post-*herrenvolk* era. Whether through resistance to analyzing race in terms of power or through a rearticulation of whiteness into a culture that, properly purged of its racist features, deserves recognition with any other, white identity yet lives and has a will to live. The task for those who want a different world from the one we live in, then, is not the refusal of recognition of race in general nor the equal recognition of races but the


60 Id. at 509–10.

refusal of recognition of whiteness. Such a refusal creates the opportunity to invent new conceptions of personhood, such as the abolitionist personality, that are not tied to superior status but to a commitment to freedom for all.