


PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

# Schooling as a White Good

Benjamin Justice\* 

Rutgers University, New Jersey

\*Corresponding author. Email: [ben.justice@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:ben.justice@gse.rutgers.edu)

## Abstract

Schooling in the United States has never been a public good, nor has “the public good” been its primary goal. Since its origins in the early nineteenth century, schooling has been a *white* good, designed to promote white advantage. Three mechanisms, among many, have been key to this process: the relationship of schooling to place, the knowledge that schools impart, and the hobbling of brown and Black children. Insofar as schooling has approached being a public good, that tendency has emerged as the result of counter-majoritarian, explicitly racial activism led by non-white people. The struggle for racial justice has been the struggle of moving schooling from a white good to a public good.

**Keywords:** education and public good; white advantage; hobbling in education; racial justice and education

For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

They came from “all over the state and other states.” It was the first day of school, fall of 1957, and a white mob assembled outside Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas to protest the arrival of nine Black teenagers to the formerly all-white school. Attracting national attention, the state’s governor sent the National Guard to “maintain or restore peace and good order” by assisting the mob, not the children.<sup>2</sup>

We are familiar with what happened next (see [Figure 1](#)). President Eisenhower asked the governor to let the children in; instead, the governor withdrew state troops.

<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1963), 18.

<sup>2</sup>“*Fighting Back* (1957–1962),” episode 2, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1986). In this essay I do not capitalize the words “white,” or “brown,” as racial categories, but I do capitalize Black, as is the current convention among many Black scholars, news outlets, and major newspapers, including the *New York Times*.



**Figure 1.** Black Student Elizabeth Eckford is jeered by white student Hazel Bryan as she attempts to enter Little Rock Central High School, Sept. 4, 1957. Distributed by the Associated Press. Photographer Will Counts, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, \*[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth\\_Eckford.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Eckford.jpg).

Little Rock police could not adequately control the mob, and Eisenhower sent in federal troops, who spent the school year guarding the kids. The following year the Arkansas governor closed all Little Rock high schools. More broadly, state governments across the South engaged in a violent and cynical game of legal hide-and-seek to keep Black children from attending white schools.<sup>3</sup> We still live in its aftermath.

How do we explain what is happening in this moment?

A progressive view, still popular among educational historians, suggests that images like this are exceptional. The public good has been the core goal of public schooling and, reciprocally, public schooling has been a foundational good for the United States. Schooling was imperfect, of course, and excluded particular groups, but things are getting better. In that sense, the mob is historically exceptional or regionally idiosyncratic. The kids are marching Arkansas into a better future, to the tune of the Fourteenth Amendment.

A second, less common but influential account of schooling frames it in economic terms: schools allocate public and private goods, generate society-wide human capital, and individual social mobility. The economic framing of schooling also sidelines racism, however. The classical economic way of seeing schooling might partially explain

<sup>3</sup>James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Clive Webb, *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

why those nine children (and their parents) were putting themselves in harm's way (although they had other motivations too), but I don't see how the economic framing accounts for the mob, who are not there for their individual private interests or to support the economic development of Arkansas.

A third accounting, rooted in Black American, Latinx, Native, and other subaltern histories, as well as critical race theories, decenters white people as the protagonists of educational experience. This family of scholarship frames schools as institutions promoting white racial interests against which non-whites resist strategically and contingently. Little Rock is unexceptional in this accounting, even if its details might play out uniquely. This view is incompatible with the first two, and to my mind, much more persuasive.

But it still leaves me wondering about the good. Schools can be places of joy, learning, and human flourishing. There's a long-running and broad consensus among political theorists that schools are essential to healthy democracies. How can so many people believe that schooling is a good, when it seems to do so much harm? If Little Rock is unexceptional, how can we explain the goals and functions of schooling in the United States that account for the mob, the kids, the various legal authorities, and the violence all around?

In this talk I offer a new way of framing the goals and functions of schooling in the United States. Schooling in the United States has never been a public good, nor has "the public good" been its primary goal. Instead, I will argue that since its origins in the early nineteenth century, schooling has been a *white* good, designed to promote white advantage. Insofar as schooling has approached being a public good, that tendency has emerged as the result of counter-majoritarian, explicitly racial activism led by non-white people. The struggle for racial justice has been the struggle of moving schooling from a white good to a public good.

Calling schooling a white good is a small—and I hope, logical—step from the remarkable work that many historians, legal scholars, social scientists, and others have done in the last thirty years excavating and explaining the way in which schooling in the United States is a fundamentally racial project. It also accounts for and corrects racially naive political and economic framings that have been such powerful drivers of school policy. Finally, calling schooling a white good helps explain how it can be something that seems to be good for everyone while also doing the harm of recreating racial inequality.

The paper has five parts. Part 1 describes the historical problems with calling schooling a public good, either in a political or economic sense. Part 2 offers an alternative framework focused on white goods. Part 3 looks at some of the primary mechanisms by which schooling has secured white advantage over time, and how people without access to whiteness have resisted these mechanisms and insisted on schooling being a public good. Part 4 examines the role of violence in protecting schooling as a white good. I will then conclude with some remarks on what the white goods framework might mean for telling the history of education in the United States.

## I. The Mythical Origins of the Public Goods Talk

Scholars talk about schooling and the public good in two ways. The first is to engage the idea of "*the* public good." It is a conversation as old as philosophy. The second is

the idea of a public good, in an economic sense, and is of recent vintage. Both are problematic for describing the history of schooling in the United States.

The anachronism of “the public good” is straightforward enough. The word *public* comes directly from the Latin *publicus*, meaning “in relation to the people at large and/or the government.” That connotation endured through the early colonial period. Importantly, however, both then and now the word is available to both anti-democratic and liberal democratic visions of society. Whether in the slave republic of Rome or the slave colony of Virginia, “the public” meant both the existing social arrangement and all the people in it. Throughout the British Atlantic, colonial governments explicitly and implicitly framed Native and Black people as civic outsiders—objects of the law but not participants in its processes or protections.<sup>4</sup> The enslavement and/or subordination of some groups of people were *the goals* of government for the promotion of the public good.

After the revolution, when white Americans began systematically organizing state services like safety, education, health, and legal due process, one of the biggest questions in American politics was whether and how to use government to create a society that accorded people *different* levels of status: Who enjoyed the protection of the law? Who could vote, own property or be someone else’s property? Who could participate in schooling? A look at state constitutions reveals that when most authorities in the antebellum period said “the public good” they referred to social stability and progress, but not the radical notion that all people should enjoy legal privileges, including formal education. Leon Litwack estimates that in 1840, 93 percent of all free Black people in the North lived in states that excluded them from voting, and in many states, Black people had to post security bonds in order to settle in their communities.<sup>5</sup> The so-called goal of an educated citizenry did not apply to “the public,” in the sense we use the word today, but to whites.<sup>6</sup> American freedom and unfreedom were mutually reinforcing. Race was the mechanism.<sup>7</sup> It can be misleading when historians today identify points in the past when writers intoned words like “the common good” or “the public good” as a way to suggest that schooling was for everyone’s equal benefit. It wasn’t.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin Justice, “The Art of Coining Christians: Indians and Authority in the Iconography of British Atlantic Colonial Seals, 1606–1767,” *Journal of British Studies* 61, no. 1 (Jan. 2022), 105–37; Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 75.

<sup>6</sup>Hilary Moss, “Race and Schooling in Early Republican Philadelphia,” in *The Founding Fathers, Education, and “The Great Contest”: The American Philosophical Society Prize of 1797*, ed. Benjamin Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103–17; Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Zoë Burkholder, *An African American Dilemma: A History of School Integration and Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

<sup>8</sup>Leveraging such language today in the legal sphere may be a good rhetorical strategy, but without a clear-eyed account of the deep commitment of local, state, and federal government to promote white goods and non-white harms, colorblind accounts of past ideas of “the public” may lead to colorblind solutions that do not address underlying mechanisms of white advantage.

In economics, it was Paul Samuelson's 1954 article "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure" that launched the modern career of policy talk about education as "a public good."<sup>9</sup> A public good, he argued, is something useful that anyone can consume (that is to say, a public good is *non-exclusive*). Moreover, a good is public if one person's consumption or benefit does not limit other people's consumption or benefit (that is to say, a public good is *non-rivalrous*).<sup>10</sup> Private goods are the polar opposite of public goods, according to the original definition: their consumption is exclusive and individualistic.

The argument was scandalously naive in its bipolar account of private individuals and public society. "I assume no mystical collective mind that enjoys collective consumption goods," Samuelson wrote. "Instead I assume each individual has a set of *ordinal preferences* with respect to his consumption of all goods (collective as well as private)."<sup>11</sup> Of course, whiteness was, and is, just such a "collective mind," influenced by the collective utility of white goods to any white person. Whiteness ran through local, state, and federal law, social custom, residential and employment patterns, so-called public and so-called private activity alike at the very time that Samuelson wrote those words.<sup>12</sup> Resistance to whiteness and the collective identities formed by minoritized people were also neither public nor private. The mysticism was in Samuelson's theory.

Contemporary scholars had offered more realistic appraisals. W. E. B. Du Bois, of course, had identified the "wages of whiteness" in *Black Reconstruction* (1935).<sup>13</sup> And respected economist Gunnar Myrdal criticized his field in his blockbuster study, *An American Dilemma* (1944), arguing that "the good" is a moral problem and not one of mere "valuation" along hedonistic or utilitarian lines.<sup>14</sup> He agreed with Du Bois that racism was foundational to American society, and that white Americans as a group accrued many economic advantages through their racist laws and actions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Paul A. Samuelson, "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 36, no. 4 (Nov. 1954), 387–89. The first use of the actual phrase "public goods" can be attributed to later papers: Robert H. Strotz, "Two Propositions Related to Public Goods," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1958), 329–31; Mark Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Julian Reiss, "Public Goods," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 21, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/public-goods/>.

<sup>10</sup>Samuelson, "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure."

<sup>11</sup>Samuelson, "The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure," 387 (emphasis in original).

<sup>12</sup>See generally George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

<sup>14</sup>Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1944). See also Gunnar Myrdal, *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954).

<sup>15</sup>Myrdal had his own mythology, however, in his account of the relationship between white supremacy and the American Creed. He saw them as paradoxical—a dilemma. Later scholars have demonstrated the opposite—that they were mutually reinforcing. See, for example, Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*.

Undaunted, however, Samuelson and his intellectual heirs (and foes) continued to ignore or sideline race in their pursuit of ideal (normalized white) theories of human activity, as did many scholars across the social sciences.<sup>16</sup> For example, Nobel Laureate Gary Becker argued in *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957) that racial discrimination was a matter of costly, individual taste. It was the work of record on the subject for nearly forty years. Economists developed racially naïve theories of educational mobility (Turner, 1960), of residential choice (Tiebout, 1956), and of government investment in human capital (Shultz, 1961; Becker, 1964) that ignored the structured white advantage in schools; the legal, officially tolerated, and highly violent systems of residential segregation that shaped where people live and situate schools; and the deliberate, centuries-old, and highly profitable white investment in *deskilling* Black, brown, and Native children for maximal profitability and political domination.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1970s, racially naive economic frameworks that were developed in the 1950s and 1960s entered the mainstream of public policy. As they entered the mainstream of educational policy specifically, left- as well as right-leaning educational researchers began speaking of the politics and function of schooling through classical economic theories of production and consumption, including efficiency, markets, and public goods/private goods.<sup>18</sup> According to this “goods” model, public schooling in the United States served two competing kinds of goals: allocating public goods such as political socialization and human capital development, both of which benefited society as a whole, and the allocation of the private good of mobility—individual competitive advantage in a capitalist economy achieved primarily through credentialing.<sup>19</sup> The role of whiteness in these accounts was secondary and exceptional.

<sup>16</sup>Graham Richards, *Race, Racism, and Psychology: Towards a Reflexive History* (London: Routledge, 1997); John F. Dovidio, Anna-Kaisa Newheiser, and Jacques-Philippe Leyens, “A History of Intergroup Relations Research,” in *Handbook of the History of Social Psychology*, ed. Arie W. Kruglanski and Wolfgang Stroebe (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 407; Tom R. Tyler, “A History of Justice and Morality Research,” in *Handbook of the History of Social Psychology*, 453; Benjamin Justice and Tracey Meares, “The Wolf We Feed: Democracy, Caste, and Legitimacy,” *Michigan Law Review Online* 119, no. 1 (Jan. 2021), 95–120; Leah N. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup>Gary S. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964); Charles M. Tiebout, “A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures,” *Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (Oct. 1956), 416–24; Theodore W. Schultz, “Investment in Human Capital,” *American Economic Review* 51, no. 1 (March 1961), 1–17; Ralph H. Turner, “Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System,” *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 6 (Dec. 1960), 855–67. For a more recent example, see Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup>Elizabeth Popp Berman, *Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Raymond G. Batina and Toshihiro Ihori, *Public Goods Theories and Evidence* (Berlin: Springer, 2005). A notable early example of the marginalization of race and racism is David Tyack’s classic essay “Ways of Seeing: An Essay on the History of Compulsory Schooling,” *Harvard Education Review* 46, no. 3 (1976), 355–89, which deploys economic, organizational, and political framings of compulsory school laws that do not “see” non-white people or whiteness at all.

<sup>19</sup>David F. Labaree, “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Jan. 1997), 39–81; David Hogan, “. . . The Silent

Moreover, this same public goods/private goods framing soon captured the heart of federal and state school policy and jurisprudence as well, driving efforts toward privatization and toward “school choice” policy solutions such as vouchers for private schools or quasi-private “charter schools,” tuition tax credits, and other approaches.<sup>20</sup>

Those scholars who took up the “public goods” analysis of American education on the left were part of a broad movement in legal studies, policy, and history that, at the time, sought to correct the then-pervasive laissez-faire account of nineteenth-century America that relied on a series of myths—individualism, exceptionalism, statelessness, and individual rights.<sup>21</sup> Educational historians seeking to counter this exaggerated laissez-faire account of nineteenth-century America have, since then, understandably sought to use the public goods/private goods framework in a kind of rhetorical jujitsu against the right-wing romance with a mythical American past.<sup>22</sup> The goal is laudable. The problem, however, is that the terms of the debate are, themselves, part of the problem—a classic case of trying to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.<sup>23</sup> The public good, and public goods, were not what they appeared to be.

Despite its success in the policy realm, cracks began to appear in the grand edifice of racially naive economic thinking in the 1990s as well, thanks to the work of critical race scholars. Several in particular have made significant contributions to our understandings of how race functions in schooling, and are important antecedents to a theory of schooling as a white good. Cheryl Harris has argued that whiteness is a form of

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Compulsions of Economic Relations’: Markets and the Demand for Education,” *Educational Policy* 6, no. 2 (June 1992), 180–205; John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, “Politics, Markets, and the Organization of Schools,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 4 (Dec. 1988), 1065; Arthur G. Powell, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); Harry Brighouse et al., “Educational Goods and Values: A Framework for Decision-Makers,” *Theory and Research in Education* 14, no. 1 (March 2016), 3–25; Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Sarah M. Stitzlein, “Public Schools, Public Goods, and Public Work,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 100, no. 3 (Nov. 2018), 33–37; Batina and Ichori, *Public Goods Theories and Evidence*.

<sup>20</sup>Chubb and Moe, “Politics, Markets, and the Organization of Schools”; John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, “America’s Public Schools: Choice Is a Panacea,” *Brookings Review* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1990), 4–12; Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

<sup>21</sup>William J. Novak, *The People’s Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Diane Ravitch made the astonishing claim that the civil rights movement upended the sacred American tradition of individual rights by insisting on “group rights” in *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>22</sup>Labaree, “Public Goods, Private Goods”; David F. Labaree, *Education, Markets, and the Public Good: The Selected Works of David F. Labaree* (New York: Routledge, 2007); David B. Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1; Robert N. Gross, *Public vs. Private: The Early History of School Choice in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Charles Dorn, *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Johann N. Neem, *Democracy’s Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Hogan, “. . . The Silent Compulsions of Economic Relations”; Larry Cuban and Dorothy Shipps, eds., *Reconstructing the Common Good in Education: Coping with Intractable American Dilemmas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>23</sup>Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

property, a status identity of legal privileges that coevolved with property law to the point of convergence.<sup>24</sup> George Lipsitz and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, among others, have shown that racism is structural, not idiosyncratic and individual.<sup>25</sup> Charles Tilly developed a theory of “opportunity hoarding” to understand how white people leverage their networks to acquire exclusive access to seemingly open resources, work that was expanded in educational history by John Rury, and in educational sociology by John Diamond and Amanda Lewis.<sup>26</sup> And Victor Ray has built on structural race theories to develop a theory of racialized organizations, arguing that race is central to the history, structure, and functioning of organizations, including schools.<sup>27</sup>

The most influential work toward a theory of white goods comes from scholars in law and economics, including Robert Cooter and Daria Roithmayr.<sup>28</sup> Robert Cooter’s 1994 law review essay, “Market Affirmative Action,” marked the first non-racially naive account of racism in economic terms: whiteness functions like a cartel, he argued. Cartel economics and anti-trust law offered models for meliorating the harms of white supremacy. Picking up that clew, in 2014 Roithmayr argued that the history of public policy across the twentieth century, including the history of schooling in particular, was shaped by white cartel behavior to such a degree that white advantage may now be “locked in” by self-perpetuating structures and institutions even if, on paper, white cartel behavior is now illegal.<sup>29</sup> Although Roithmayr does not engage the goods framework specifically, her pathbreaking integration of economic thinking into a critical race analysis has paved the way.

## II. Schooling as a *White Good*

A theory of schooling as a white good requires brief definitions of “white” and “good.” Whiteness was, until quite recently, a formal legal category in American law and a foundational one in custom, from the local level to the state and federal.<sup>30</sup> It described a group of people who enjoyed special group rights and privileges in

<sup>24</sup>Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993), 1707–91.

<sup>25</sup>Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>26</sup>Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); John L. Rury, *Creating the Suburban School Advantage: Race, Localism, and Inequality in an American Metropolis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); John L. Rury and Aaron Tyler Rife, “Race, Schools and Opportunity Hoarding: Evidence from a Post-War American Metropolis,” *History of Education* 47, no. 1 (Jan. 2018), 87–107; John B. Diamond and Amanda E. Lewis, “Opportunity Hoarding and the Maintenance of ‘White’ Educational Space,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 11 (Oct. 2022), 1470–89.

<sup>27</sup>Victor Ray, “A Theory of Racialized Organizations,” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (Feb. 2019), 26–53.

<sup>28</sup>Robert Cooter, “Market Affirmative Action,” *San Diego Law Review* 31 (1994), 133; Daria Roithmayr, *Reproducing Racism: How Everyday Choices Lock in White Advantage* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup>In this aspect of her work, Roithmayr draws on Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>30</sup>Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017); Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton,



relation to other “non-white” groups—in employment, residence, marriage and family, political participation, legal protection, and access to organizations and institutions, whether public or private. Even today, surface changes in the law have not changed the salience of whiteness in implicit and explicit behavior, belief, and cultural practices;<sup>31</sup> nor has the law corrected the many social structures erected or tolerated by previous laws that continue to harm non-white people and provide privilege to white people.<sup>32</sup> Historically, white goods have shifted from explicit white domination and privilege by law and custom to embedded white categorical advantages by virtue of the cultural and structural “lock in” that Roithmayr describes.

As a social construct whiteness has been an unstable category. White people do not exist in any physical sense, and historians have shown that precise legal applications of whiteness and related racial hierarchies have shifted depending on time and place, although these definitions have been anchored in anti-Nativeness and anti-Blackness.<sup>33</sup> In law, racial classification was an imprecise tool for denying access to state-organized goods such as political participation, due process, and schooling.<sup>34</sup> Historically, whiteness has been a lucrative category for those who could access it—members of marginalized groups in various time periods and places such as Irish, Italians, and Jews, as well as those of African and Latin American descent who could “pass.”<sup>35</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people raced as Asian saw a major transformation in white Americans’ treatment of them in law and society, from framing them as the “Yellow Peril” and making them objects of lynching to the emergence of the “model minority” myth that resulted in a fundamentally different experience from Black Americans and

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*American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup>Jennifer A. Richeson and Samuel R. Sommers, “Toward a Social Psychology of Race and Race Relations for the Twenty-First Century,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 67, no. 1 (Jan. 2016), 439–63; Jennifer L. Eberhardt, *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019); Michael W. Kraus et al., “The Misperception of Racial Economic Inequality,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14, no. 6 (Nov. 2019), 899–921; Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup>Roithmayr, *Reproducing Racism*; Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

<sup>33</sup>I use the term *brown* to refer to Latinx, Native, and other raced peoples of the Global South whom whites frame as racially inferior. (Sometimes I refer to Native people separately and specifically.) I do not use *brown* to refer to people raced as Asian for the purpose of this essay, although there are many people from the continent of Asia who fit that description. For an overview of how anti-Blackness functioned as the anchor of whiteness, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>34</sup>Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Desegregation, 1865–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Mary Frances Berry, *Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup>David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Stephen Lassonde, *Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven’s Working Class, 1870–1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

others.<sup>36</sup> Yet Asian Americans were still targets of racist and conceptual violence, and those who did not fit the racist stereotype in ethnicity and behavior have been raced differently.<sup>37</sup> In recent years, political leaders and media have weaponized racist stereotypes of Asian success (ignoring their fundamentally different experience with American racism) to buttress racist stereotypes of Black failure.<sup>38</sup>

Outside of formal laws of exclusion and segregation, however, whiteness has been advanced through other means, from private organizations and agreements, popular culture, school curricula, and economic behavior, to outright defiance by legal authorities against those of other jurisdictions. Gaining access to white goods in one particular sphere of law and custom—say, when Mexican or Chinese children were classified as white to gain access to white schools by a court ruling—has never been a guarantee of access to white goods in other legal jurisdictions, in daily practice, or in the face of white vigilantism.<sup>39</sup>

Importantly, while whiteness has accorded opportunities and privileges relative to other groups, it also cost its members politically and psychologically. In the former case, whiteness has divided working-class Americans, providing white workers a psychological “wage,” as Du Bois put it, but at the cost of achieving real social reform through political solidarity with non-whites and tolerating deep economic inequalities for the palliative effect of superior racial status.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, as Derrick Bell and others have observed, the kind of “black and white” thinking that sustains whiteness gives white children a damaged view of their understanding of themselves and of others.<sup>41</sup>

Because whiteness is a category of social dominance (and not just a form of difference), a white “good” would be something that is useful to white people as the dominant racialized group in relation to other subordinated racialized groups. White goods are, by definition, non-white harms. That white goods are designed

<sup>36</sup>Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Simeon Man, “Anti-Asian Violence and US Imperialism,” *Race & Class* 62, no. 2 (Oct. 2020), 24–33.

<sup>37</sup>Robert T. Teranishi, “Yellow and Brown: Emerging Asian American Immigrant Populations and Residential Segregation,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 37, no. 3 (Sept. 2004), 255–63; Kevin D. Lam, *Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling: Vietnamese American Youth in a Postcolonial Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>38</sup>Kat Chow, “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used as a Racial Wedge between Asians and Blacks,” NPR, April 19, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/19/524571669/model-minority-myth-again-used-as-a-racial-wedge-between-asians-and-blacks>.

<sup>39</sup>Gonzalo Guzmán, “‘Things Change You Know’: Schools as the Architects of the Mexican Race in Depression-Era Wyoming,” *History of Education Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (Nov. 2021), 392–422; David G. García, *Strategies of Segregation: Race, Residence, and the Struggle for Educational Equality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Rubén Donato and Jarrod Hanson, “Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican’: The Politics of De Jure and De Facto School Segregation in the American Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 202–25; Rubén Donato and Jarrod Hanson, “‘In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes’: The Politics of Unofficial Segregation in the Kansas Public Schools, 1915–1935,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (April 2017), 53S–74S.

<sup>40</sup>Amy L. Chua, “Paradox of Free Market Democracy: Rethinking Development Policy,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (2000), 287–380; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>41</sup>Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

to benefit white people does not mean, of course, that they cannot be useful to non-whites. Obviously they can. But because a white good must advantage white people more than other people by definition, a white good will be *less useful* to non-whites than to whites. White goods are relative as well as absolute. In fact, when non-white people participate in a white good, their very participation reinforces an underlying system that favors white people.

Likewise, identifying the existence of white goods does not mean denying the poverty and oppression of people who are white, or that white goods benefit every single white person in every instance. White goods are categorical. They exist in the aggregate. They offer unfair advantages in an already unfair system that allocates many harms to many people—women, differently abled, gender nonconforming, and the like. Finally, as I will explore later, white goods depend on violence.

It is important at this point to distinguish between a white good and the tempting idea of a “racial good.” The problem with naming something a “racial good” is that race is not a general category of social difference; it is a specific category of social dominance and subordination. There can be racial *things*, but a racial *good* is by definition also a racial harm, since race is a system of domination. The difference depends on which “race” we are talking about. The racial paradigm, globally, is known and needs no abstraction—indeed, abstracting becomes its own sort of racial project by denying the very real power of whiteness as a global and local variable in human relations.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, limited attempts at a theory of “relational goods” obscures or ignores real-world racism and the allocation of relational harms.<sup>43</sup> This aspect of white things—that they have no equivalent for other groups—means that non-white people often have to navigate them, as sociologist Elijah Anderson explains, “as a condition of their existence.”<sup>44</sup>

Schooling in the United States is a nearly ideal example of a white good. Historically, the maintenance of white advantage has been a primary political goal of schooling, and until the 1970s, an overt one.<sup>45</sup> This was not accidental. Common schools developed in the nineteenth century were not for a public that happened to be white. White Americans designed common schools during a time when the United States was a diverse society that allocated different civic statuses to different people depending on the myth of race. When white-controlled governments regulated the education of other groups, they did so with the understanding that these regulations would reinforce the system that white people built for themselves.

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<sup>42</sup>David Theo Goldberg, “Racial Comparisons, Relational Racisms: Some Thoughts on Method,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 7 (Sept. 2009), 1271–82; Bianca Gonzalez-Sobrinio and Devon R. Goss, “Exploring the Mechanisms of Racialization beyond the Black-White Binary,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 4 (March 2019), 505–10.

<sup>43</sup>For instance, see Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Pierpaolo Donati, *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010). For a critique, see Benjamin Justice, “American Public Education: Race, Religion, and Illusion,” *Theory and Research in Education* 18, no. 2 (July 2020), 246–50.

<sup>44</sup>Mike Cummings, “Elijah Anderson on the Burden of Being Black in White Spaces,” *Yale News*, March 24, 2022, <https://news.yale.edu/2022/03/24/elijah-anderson-burden-being-black-white-spaces>.

<sup>45</sup>Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants*; Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

Today, schooling is a social practice that launders white social advantage (inherited and updated) in the name of merit. Yes, schooling *can be* beneficial for everyone, and yes, many non-whites can succeed brilliantly while many whites can fail. And also, non-white people have generated their own goods as acts of self-determination and resistance within the schools designed for the good of people who are white. But resistance adds cost and risk, and not having to resist is an advantage conferred on children who identify, and were allowed to identify, as white.<sup>46</sup>

When African American parents tell their children they will have to work twice as hard for half as much, they are espousing an economic theory of schooling as a white good—that schooling is critically important for their children’s lives *and also* that it something designed for their relative disadvantage.

### III. Mechanisms

Beginning with the regulation of Black learning in the slaveholding South and the formation of common schooling in the North, white Americans have used formal education as the key mechanism for racial reproduction. White Americans have used nearly every aspect of schooling to reproduce the existence of their group and its advantages—to give meaning and value to white-occupied spaces, support group identity formation, create and valorize white history, language, and literature, allocate cultural and social capital, create jobs, promote religion, develop individual and collective human capital, provide corporate welfare, childcare, social certification, and more. Non-whites have succeeded in using many of these aspects of schooling too, but at greater cost, with greater precarity, and at greater risk.

In this section I briefly sketch three of the prime mechanisms of schooling as a white good: land use and school placement; the design and enactment of school curricula; and the control of opportunity.

#### *This Land Is My Land*

From the early seventeenth century to the early twentieth, Europeans conquered, commodified, and “developed” a vast swath of territory—some three million square miles of the earth’s surface in what became the lower forty-eight states. Land was the cause of war, the basis of wealth, and the driver of politics and law.<sup>47</sup> Control of places became a key mechanism that white Americans have used to maintain their advantage over people they raced as others.

After the revolution of 1776, state and federal governments began selling former Native homelands, which they called “the public domain” to encourage the

<sup>46</sup>On current white educational advantages and nonwhite harms, see, for example, Megan Kuhfeld, James Soland, and Karyn Lewis, “Test Score Patterns across Three COVID-19-Impacted School Years,” *Educational Researcher* 51, no. 7 (Oct. 2022), 500–506; Wesley Jeffrey, “Crossing the Finish Line? A Review of College Completion Inequality in the United States by Race and Class,” *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 5 (2020), e12787; Alexandra Freidus and Eve L. Ewing, “Good Schools, Bad Schools: Race, School Quality, and Neoliberal Educational Policy,” *Educational Policy* 36, no. 4 (June 2022), 763–68.

<sup>47</sup>Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1968), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001326536>.

development of schooling.<sup>48</sup> In higher education, for example, some eleven million acres of Native homelands were commodified by the Morrill Act of 1862 to support state colleges and universities.<sup>49</sup> The commodification of Native homelands to support common schooling overshadowed the higher-ed land grants by an order of magnitude. Between 1795 and 1912, state and federal governments granted 129 million acres of land for common schools—an area nearly the size of France.<sup>50</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, most states west of the Mississippi received more than 10 percent of their school budgets from federal (or in Texas, state) land grants.<sup>51</sup> Historians once focused on the efficiency of this process, but the important point is not whether white settlers did it *well*, but that they did it at all—creating incalculable harm to Indigenous people for the benefit of schooling as a white good.<sup>52</sup>

Once “settled,” white people organized society spatially in ways that contained and constrained non-whites. Schooling has been central to that process, as many scholars in our field have shown.<sup>53</sup> The political economy of places varied by region, but the centrality of white advantage was a core principle of educational regulation and development across all regions. In the pre-Civil War South, formal education was highly exclusive to white people, regulated, closely monitored, and enforced through extreme physical and psychological violence. Nevertheless, when the white interest was served

<sup>48</sup>David B Tyack, Thomas James, and Aaron Benavot, *Law and the Shaping of Public Education, 1785–1954* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Carl F. Kaestle, “Public Education in the Old Northwest: ‘Necessary to Good Government and the Happiness of Mankind,’” *Indiana Magazine of History* 84, no. 1 (March 1988), 60–74; Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Christiana Stoddard, “Why Did Education Become Publicly Funded? Evidence from the Nineteenth-Century Growth of Public Primary Schooling in the United States,” *Journal of Economic History* 69, no. 1 (March 2009), 172–201.

<sup>49</sup>Margaret A. Nash, “Entangled Pasts: Land-Grant Colleges and American Indian Dispossession,” *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (Nov. 2019), 437–67; Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013); K. Tsianina Lomawaima et al., “Editors’ Introduction: Reflections on the Land-Grab Universities Project,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2021), 89–91; Genevieve Croft, *The U.S. Land Grant University System: Overview and Role in Agricultural Research* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

<sup>50</sup>The total area of converted land is probably much higher, as I do not include the land that contributed the massive “federal deposit” to the states in 1837. Forthcoming work by Matthew Gardner Kelly is likely to yield a much larger estimate. See Jon A. Souder and Sally K. Fairfax, *State Trust Land: History, Management, and Sustainable Use* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 85; Sally K. Fairfax, Jon A. Souder, and Gretta Goldenman, “The School Trust Lands: A Fresh Look at Conventional Wisdom,” *Environmental Law* 22, no. 3 (1992), 797–910; Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 824; Fletcher Harper Swift, *A History of Public Permanent Common School Funds in the United States, 1795–1905* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1911), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001284012>.

<sup>51</sup>Tyack, James, and Benavot, *Law and the Shaping of Public Education, 1785–1954*, 22. Even today, land grants generate income in western U.S. states: in 2020 land grants for schools and other public purposes accounted for some five hundred million acres of land, with a value of \$90 billion, generating approximately \$4 billion in revenue for K-12 schools. “FY20 Member State Data,” National Association of State Trust Lands: Helping States Fund Education, [statetrustland.org](http://statetrustland.org).

<sup>52</sup>For example, see Kaestle, “Public Education in the Old Northwest.”

<sup>53</sup>Moss, *Schooling Citizens*; Michael Clapper, “School Design, Site Selection, and the Political Geography of Race in Postwar Philadelphia,” *Journal of Planning History* 5, no. 3 (Aug. 2006), 241–63; John L. Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Rury, *Creating the Suburban School Advantage*.

by non-white schooling, for example, when enslaved and free Black laborers' literacy and numeracy could be profitable, it was allowed, as Frederick Douglass experienced in the port city of Baltimore.<sup>54</sup> In New England, white people increased restrictions on Black participation in a wide range of social goods simultaneously with the common school reform movement, and famously used mob violence and legal procedure in tandem to block Black students from attending schools, arguing that such institutions would encourage Black in-migration and affect real estate values.<sup>55</sup> In the Midwest and, increasingly, the West, white governments restricted Black settlement, and often excluded those Black people who did settle from using common schools through explicit laws or mob violence.<sup>56</sup> White delegates of the future state of Illinois avoided putting the provision of schooling in the state constitution, for fear that it would attract Black people to the state.<sup>57</sup>

When white homesteaders from the Midwest hit the Oregon Trail in 1843, they carried their twin commitments to common schools and white supremacy with them. The common schools in Oregon were legally white-only schools since, starting in 1844, the territorial government enacted a series of laws attempting to expel all Black people. Oregonians later wrote Black exclusion into their original state constitution, which the US Congress approved in the very same year, 1857, that the Supreme Court ruled that no Black person could be a United States citizen.<sup>58</sup>

In what Kate Masur calls the "First Civil Rights Movement," Native and Black people, together with some whites, fought back.<sup>59</sup> Before emancipation, some enslaved people secretly managed to steal a formal education despite the law and the lash; in other cases, enslaved people resisted white bans on education by informally educating their children during the quotidian interactions of daily life.<sup>60</sup> Free Black people in the North strategically resisted overt exclusion from schooling by asserting rights claims at the local level, by giving speeches, writing, holding conventions, lobbying, and litigation. The results of their long struggle were the Reconstruction Amendments, pushing existing systems in the North to accept non-white children, and building new, state-supported school systems in the South.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Moss, *Schooling Citizens*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-slavery Office, 1847).

<sup>55</sup>Moss, "Race and Schooling in Early Republican Philadelphia"; Litwack, *North of Slavery*; Richard Archer, *Jim Crow North: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>56</sup>Dana Elizabeth Weiner, *Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery and Prejudice in the Old Northwest, 1830–1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). See generally Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*; Litwack, *North of Slavery*.

<sup>57</sup>Robert L. McCaul, *The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century Illinois* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>58</sup>Kenneth R. Coleman, *Dangerous Subjects: James D. Saules and the Rise of Black Exclusion in Oregon* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2017).

<sup>59</sup>Kate Masur, *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).

<sup>60</sup>Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>61</sup>Christopher M. Span and James D. Anderson, "The Quest for 'Book Learning': African American Education in Slavery and Freedom," in Alton Hornsby Jr., ed., *A Companion to African American History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 295–311; Williams, *Self-Taught*; Anderson, *The*

During and after Reconstruction, however, white people adapted to these changes, applying exclusion to new groups (notably Mexican and Chinese in the West), expanding boarding schools for Native children, and developing the interrelated practices of spatial and bureaucratic segregation in ways that ensured white advantage.<sup>62</sup> In its *Plessy* decision of 1896, the Supreme Court gave federal legal cover to segregation as a strategy of white supremacy, arguing, illogically, that providing services separately according to categories of domination (races) was legally permissible as long as the allocation of services was equal.<sup>63</sup>

From the 1880s to the 1970s (and, some argue, even to the present day), white people used terrorism, local police agencies, real estate law, private associations, and private agreements to remove and exclude Black people from small towns and desirable spaces in and around cities across the North, with the express purpose of hoarding supposedly “public” goods like safety, transportation, health care, and schooling.<sup>64</sup> In the South, whites united across social classes to erect Jim Crow through law and extralegal violence, and, when able, adopted northern methods of spatial organization.<sup>65</sup> In the West, whites deployed numerous “strategies of

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*Education of Blacks in the South*; Camille Walsh, *Racial Taxation: Schools, Segregation, and Taxpayer Citizenship, 1869–1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 18; Archer, *Jim Crow North*; McCaul, *The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century Illinois*.

<sup>62</sup>David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); García, *Strategies of Segregation*; Mark Kanazawa, “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California,” *Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (Sept. 2005), 779–805; Paul A. Kramer, “Imperial Openings: Civilization, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868–1910,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 3 (July 2015), 317–47.

<sup>63</sup>*Plessy vs. Ferguson*, Judgement, Decided May 18, 1896; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163, #15248, National Archives.

<sup>64</sup>García, *Strategies of Segregation*; Hernández, *City of Inmates*; James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Colin Gordon, *Citizen Brown: Race, Democracy, and Inequality in the St. Louis Suburbs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Rury and Rife, “Race, Schools and Opportunity Hoarding”; Tilly, *Durable Inequality*; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; Martha A. Myers and James L. Massey, “Race, Labor, and Punishment in Postbellum Georgia,” *Social Problems* 38, no. 2 (May 1991), 267–86; Ansley T. Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>; Walter C. Stern, *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City, 1764–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018); James E. Ryan, *Five Miles Away, a World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Damien M. Sojoyner, *First Strike: Educational Enclosures in Black Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Jack Dougherty, *More than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); John L. Rury, “Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago’s Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 117–42.

<sup>65</sup>James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: Knopf, 2000); Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*.

segregation” against Native and Mexican people, as well as Black migrants.<sup>66</sup> Americans ordered and reordered their spaces around the allocation of white advantage—making sure that goods like schools were in fact white goods.

The racial ordering of space allowed white people to create deeply unequal systems of school funding based on local real estate value and other indicators of whiteness.<sup>67</sup> This forced non-whites to pay more for less schooling while enabling whites, especially as they gained wealth, to pay less for more.<sup>68</sup> Place-based inequalities have always been a real phenomenon among white people, too;<sup>69</sup> but the “color line,” as Du Bois put it, created a whole new order of white goods in most of the country.<sup>70</sup> Race-based inequalities in taxation were compounded by white political control of school boards. And even as they did this, white Americans developed a political ideology of taxpayer citizenship that framed minoritized people as dependents, dullards, delinquents, and thieves who were undeserving of well-funded schools.<sup>71</sup>

Middle-class Black Americans, on the other hand, often felt they were more deserving of schooling than whites, since they paid a double tax for Black and white children’s education.<sup>72</sup> Non-white people across the country resisted the exclusion, segregation, and related forms of white control throughout the twentieth century—in courts, by organizing, giving public speeches, writing for popular audiences, and also in their everyday behavior: crossing and challenging segregated boundaries, resisting boarding schools and segregated schools, challenging white-controlled teachers’ unions, building early-childhood programs, flexing political muscle in municipal politics, and asserting community control despite white advantage.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup>García, *Strategies of Segregation*; Hernández, *City of Inmates*; Sojoyner, *First Strike*; Rubén Donato, *Mexicans and Hispanos in Colorado Schools and Communities, 1920–1960* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Donato and Hanson, “In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes”; Donato and Hanson, “Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican.’”

<sup>67</sup>See, for example, Matthew Gardner Kelly, “‘Theoretically All Children Are Equal. Practically This Can Never Be So’: The History of the District Property Tax in California and the Choice of Inequality,” *Teachers College Record* 122, no. 2 (Feb. 2020), 1–32.

<sup>68</sup>Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

<sup>69</sup>Dietrich Vollrath, “Inequality and School Funding in the Rural United States, 1890,” *Explorations in Economic History* 50, no. 2 (April 2013), 267–84; Rodney Ramcharan, “Inequality and Redistribution: Evidence from U.S. Counties and States,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92, no. 4 (Nov. 2010), 729–44.

<sup>70</sup>Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

<sup>71</sup>Walsh, *Racial Taxation*; Robert A. Margo, “Race Differences in Public School Expenditures: Disfranchisement and School Finance in Louisiana, 1890–1910,” *Social Science History* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1982), 9–33; Leon F. Litwack, “The White Man’s Fear of the Educated Negro: How the Negro Was Fitted for His Natural and Logical Calling,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 20 (Summer 1998), 100–108; Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

<sup>72</sup>Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 150.

<sup>73</sup>Walsh, *Racial Taxation*; Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*; Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*; Weiner, *Race and Rights*; McCaul, *The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century Illinois*; Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Tondra L. Loder-Jackson, *Schoolhouse Activists: African American Educators and the Long Birmingham Civil Rights Movement* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015);



African Americans in particular widely shared the goal of dismantling formal segregation, but committed to integration unevenly and strategically depending on their local circumstance.<sup>74</sup> Their greatest victories were in law.<sup>75</sup>

But, as the first wave of critical race theorists observed, the neutering of overt racial discrimination was clearly insufficient. And once again the Supreme Court ruled in favor of white goods, determining in several key cases in the 1970s that legal categories historically designed to protect white dominance—segregated school districts and property tax laws—did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection.<sup>76</sup> These structures of white advantage continue to operate within “school choice” models today.<sup>77</sup>

### *The Bright White Gaslight*

“It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6 or 7,” said James Baldwin, “to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians and, although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.”<sup>78</sup>

For two hundred years schooling in the United States has provided a formal education rooted in colonial knowledge—defining civic insiders and outsiders, framing right and wrong perspectives, promoting “facts” from geography and science—all with white settler identity at the core.<sup>79</sup>

The school curriculum for the masses has not reflected a practice of teaching and learning a body of knowledge for the public good, nor has acquiring that knowledge been a good equally for everyone. On the contrary, schooling has, and continues to be, a practice of teaching and learning a body of knowledge that promotes white advantage through conceptual violence to non-white people, as Baldwin described. Historical studies of school textbooks have found white superiority, non-white inferiority, and the erasure of critical voices and histories to be themes from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> This pattern was not uniform

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Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Crystal Sanders, *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi’s Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>74</sup>Burkholder, *An African American Dilemma*.

<sup>75</sup>Justin Driver, *The Schoolhouse Gate: Public Education, the Supreme Court, and the Battle for the American Mind* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018); Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*.

<sup>76</sup>*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*: 411 U.S. 1 (1973); *Milliken v. Bradley*: 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

<sup>77</sup>Jon Hale, *The Choice We Face: How Segregation, Race, and Power Have Shaped America’s Most Controversial Education Reform Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021); Todd-Breland, *A Political Education*.

<sup>78</sup>Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 381.

<sup>79</sup>John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>80</sup>Donald Yacovone, *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (New York: Pantheon, 2022); Zoë Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American*

or progressive; during certain historical moments where white interest and strong political pressure for racial justice converged, white-authored curriculum softened and non-white perspectives appeared, most notably with the introduction of Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month.<sup>81</sup> The very existence of Black History Month is evidence of the centering of whiteness as everyday, normalized experience, as well as the ongoing struggle to resist it.

Even as they have been compelled to participate in the white good of colonial knowledge, non-white children, parents, teachers, and community members have resisted, co-opted, and ignored it through more than just the observance of Black History Month—although doing so has required cost and risk. In recent years historians of education have expanded our understanding of non-white teachers, students, and communities—Black, Native, Puerto Rican, Native Hawaiian, and others—who worked as activists to undermine and resist white schooling from within the system.<sup>82</sup> Black teachers have engaged in their work in a variety of ways, through ethics of care and community uplift, active and passive resistance to white supremacy in the schoolhouse, and political activism outside of it.<sup>83</sup> Jarvis Givens has characterized the history of Black teaching and learning in the United States as forms of

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*Schools Taught Race, 1900–1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

<sup>81</sup>Ashley D. Dennis, “The Intellectual Emancipation of the Negro’: Madeline Morgan and the Mandatory Black History Curriculum in Chicago during World War II,” *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (May 2022), 136–60; Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Lori J. Kenschaft, *Lydia Maria Child: The Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David Gold, *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873–1947* (Carbondale Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>82</sup>García, *Strategies of Segregation*; Derrick P. Alridge, “Teachers in the Movement: Pedagogy, Activism, and Freedom,” *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Feb. 2020), 1–23; V. P. Franklin, *The Young Crusaders: The Untold Story of the Children and Teenagers Who Galvanized the Civil Rights Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021); V. P. Franklin, “They Rose and Fell Together’: African American Educators and Community Leadership, 1795–1954,” *Journal of Education* 172, no. 3 (Jan. 1990), 39–64; Derek Taira, “Embracing Education and Contesting Americanization: A Reexamination of Native Hawaiian Student Engagement in Territorial Hawai’i’s Public Schools, 1920–1940,” *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Aug. 2018), 361–91; Derek Taira, “‘We Are Our History’: Reviewing the History of Education in Hawai’i and Oceania,” *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (Nov. 2020), 632–43; Adrea Lawrence, “Epic Learning in an Indian Pueblo: A Framework for Studying Multigenerational Learning in the History of Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Aug. 2014), 286–302; Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America’s Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Mirelsie Velázquez, *Puerto Rican Chicago: Schooling the City, 1940–1977* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 2022).

<sup>83</sup>Alridge, “Teachers in the Movement”; Loder-Jackson, *Schoolhouse Activists*; Brittany Lee Lewis and ArCasia D. James-Gallaway, “White Philanthropy Won’t Save Black Education: Tracing an ‘Ordinary’ Segregated School’s Life in Delaware,” *Journal of Black Studies* 53, no. 3 (April 2022), 269–89; Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Todd-Breland, *A Political Education*; Adrienne D. Dixon, “Let’s Do This!’: Black Women Teachers’ Politics and Pedagogy,” *Urban Education* 38, no. 2 (March 2003), 217–35; Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Womanist Lessons for Reinventing Teaching,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 56, no. 5 (2005), 436–45.

“fugitivity”—that is, operating outside the laws and expectations of schooling for the white good.<sup>84</sup>

Higher education gave whiteness its pedigree.<sup>85</sup> Litwack famously chastised American historians for “the miseducation of American youth” with regard to race.<sup>86</sup> “The scholarly monographs and textbooks they authored,” he said, “perpetuated and reinforced an array of racial stereotypes and myths and easily justified the need to repress and quarantine black people.”<sup>87</sup> Charles Mills offered a similarly withering critique of the field of philosophy; critical race theorists have exploded the field of law and legal studies.<sup>88</sup> John Dewey famously defined democracy as a mode of associated living, and imagined classrooms as spaces where knowledge flows like liquid among community members of equal standing, or between and among smaller “publics.” Yet in his forty books and over seven hundred articles, Dewey never directly confronted the problem of white supremacy for classroom teaching and learning, or for knowledge production.<sup>89</sup> His philosophy was the ideal vehicle for schooling as a white good, gaslighting the obvious—indeed central—project of white supremacy.

Colleges and universities have historically existed to promote the white good to their foundations, as Craig Steven Wilder has demonstrated.<sup>90</sup> Even institutions designed for the benefit of non-white students at the end of the nineteenth century have historically struggled to contend with culture, knowledge, oversight, philanthropy, regulation, law, and a K-12 education system that do non-white harm.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, mid-twentieth-century colorblind access programs like the GI Bill and federal student loans paradoxically provided more financial access for racialized people but also reinforced white advantage by failing to consider the broader harms of white supremacy: lower family wealth, less access to college preparation in high school, and discrimination in admissions, not to mention the questions of whether faculty, staff, and curricular content were oriented toward the success of non-white

<sup>84</sup>Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.

<sup>85</sup>For an account of the origins of US higher education in the slave and settler political economy through the mid-nineteenth century, see Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*.

<sup>86</sup>Leon F. Litwack, “Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (Sept. 1987), 326.

<sup>87</sup>Litwack, “Trouble in Mind,” 326.

<sup>88</sup>Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, “The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or A Foot in the Closing Door,” *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002), 1343.

<sup>89</sup>When I say “directly,” I am referring to the specific problems that whiteness posed for his core educational philosophical tenets. Dewey did, on very rare occasion, talk about race, but even his defenders today concede that he did not really understand it. See Thomas D. Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History, 1895–1922* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011); Sam F. Stack, “John Dewey and the Question of Race: The Fight for Odell Waller,” *Education and Culture* 25, no. 1 (2009), 17–35.

<sup>90</sup>Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*; Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>91</sup>Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement*; Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*; William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

people once they arrived on campus.<sup>92</sup> Much of what is recognizably non-white about knowledge production, teaching, and learning in American higher education is the result of activism by students, families, faculty, and communities of color.<sup>93</sup> Higher education institutions, historically, have not led on the question of the public good because that has not been their mission. Most often, they have been forced by students who took great personal risk, paid steep costs, and even died, to move higher ed toward something resembling a public good. We are not there yet—not by a long shot.

### Hobbling

A third, critically important mechanism of schooling as a white good is the ability to control mobility, a process I have called *hobbling*.<sup>94</sup>

Economists, sociologists, and historians of education hold up schooling as the single most important factor in social mobility—indeed, one economist recently penned a guest essay for the *New York Times* declaring that “schooling is for mobility,” touting more schooling as the obvious solution for Black poverty.<sup>95</sup> This racially naive view of what schooling has done to Black and brown people over the last two centuries is standard fare for the field of economics. When we recognize the history of schooling as white good, and the tightly integrated, deliberately constructed relationship between school formation, location, regulation, quality, curricular tracking, and white advantage, however, schooling in the United States appears to be less about mobility for everyone, and more about hobbling Black and brown children.<sup>96</sup>

I use the word *hobbling* advisedly. For millennia, people have used hobbling as a form of mobility reduction to the point of domination. In the context of the racial enslavement system of the nineteenth-century United States, enslavers used physical and psychological disfigurement, as well as mechanical devices, to prevent the mobility of enslaved people out of their enslavement. As white Americans developed and

<sup>92</sup>Ira Katznelson and Suzanne Mettler, “On Race and Policy History: A Dialogue about the G.I. Bill,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 3 (Sept. 2008), 519–37; Juan F. Perea, “Doctrines of Delusion: How the History of the G.I. Bill and Other Inconvenient Truths Undermine the Supreme Court’s Affirmative Action Jurisprudence,” *University of Pittsburgh Law Review* 75, no. 4 (June 2014), 583–651; Fenaba R. Addo, Jason N. Houle, and Daniel Simon, “Young, Black, and (Still) in the Red: Parental Wealth, Race, and Student Loan Debt,” *Race and Social Problems* 8, no. 1 (March 2016), 64–76; Brandon A. Jackson and John R. Reynolds, “The Price of Opportunity: Race, Student Loan Debt, and College Achievement,” *Sociological Inquiry* 83, no. 3 (May 2013), 335–68.

<sup>93</sup>Sharon S. Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Joy Ann Williamson-Lott, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965–75* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 2003); Richard Patrick McCormick, *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement*.

<sup>94</sup>Benjamin Justice, “Hobbling: The Effects of Proactive Policing and Mass Imprisonment on Children’s Education,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 17, no. 1 (Oct. 2021), 31–51.

<sup>95</sup>John N. Friedman, “Opinion | School Is for Social Mobility,” guest essay, *New York Times*, Sept. 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/01/opinion/us-school-social-mobility.html>.

<sup>96</sup>For a granular look at this process in high school formation in the twentieth century, see Kyle P. Steele, *Making a Mass Institution: Indianapolis and the American High School* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

then expanded their schooling practices, they used schooling as a means to hobble Black and brown children as members of society—both in terms of limiting their access to academic development and credentials acquisition, and in terms of their access to skills development. Schooling as a white good has been a key contributor to Black and brown poverty, and one of the primary engines of white advantage.

Educational hobbling is an aggregative and relative process, not an individual and isolated one. The expansion of school attainment for non-white children over the long twentieth century, by some measures, is not the point. The point is that *relative* school attainment, on the aggregate, has remained quite unequal for the targets of whiteness: brown and especially Black children. As a white good, schooling on the whole has historically made it harder and riskier for many children of color to compete with white children in the “zero sum game” of schooling.<sup>97</sup> You might even say *twice as hard, for half as much*.

Economic theories of human capital development are equally naive. For example, historians of education have recently made the case that the twentieth century was, for the United States, the human capital century.<sup>98</sup> This claim, following a long tradition of classical economic theory dating to the 1950s, argues that states have incentives to train their workforce. The main evidence its proponents cite with regard to race is the slow closing of enrollment rates by race over the course of the century. What they do not consider is the long history of wide and deliberately constructed differences in the quality of education available to children of color within schools—not just the curriculum that does conceptual violence, but career tracking and the disparate opportunities for postsecondary education rooted in household wealth, the availability of extracurricular opportunities, and the white American investment in deskilling brown and Black children in terms of their political capital and opportunity in the workplace.<sup>99</sup>

Of course, schooling as a white good has been only partially successful in hobbling Black and brown children. Racialized children and families and racialized schools face relative aggregate disadvantages; but there are many examples of excellent schools and teachers and successful, thriving children. Historians of education are increasingly recovering these stories of resistance, efficacy, and excellence. Moreover, when schools fail them, people of color have historically created their own groups and organizations, their own bodies of knowledge, their own joys and markers of a civic belonging and a good life. Religious bodies, civic organizations, fraternity and sorority family networks, and community groups all help provide capital when their schools do not. People of color have also leveraged the mainstream political system to achieve educational change.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>97</sup>David F. Labaree, *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>98</sup>Goldin and Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology*.

<sup>99</sup>Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education*; Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>100</sup>Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North*.

#### IV. Violence

So far my argument begs the question: How did white Americans maintain their advantages in schooling, when people of color have put up so much resistance?

The very short answer is that schooling as a white good was built with violence, has been maintained by violence, and does violence. While the patterns and mechanisms of violence have changed, there is a traceable through-line from colonial-era settlement and enslavement to twenty-first-century school-to-prison pipelines and backflows. It is extremely difficult to take a theory of schooling as a public good seriously when we see just how far white Americans have been willing to go to keep from sharing it.

From the collapse of Reconstruction to the mid-twentieth century, white people across all regions of the country continued to use extreme forms of violence and terrorism to defend white goods—especially schooling—with impunity and even with the assistance of legal authorities. Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative estimates that between 1865 and 1950, Americans committed some 6,500 lynchings. Some of these were committed against deviant whites, but most were against non-whites—Chinese, Mexican, Native, and especially Black Americans—as forms of overt racial terrorism.<sup>101</sup> In coordination with this violence, police and property law agencies reinforced spatial and political boundaries.<sup>102</sup> White mobs committed massacres against entire non-white communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Wounded Knee, South Dakota (1890); Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Springfield (1908) and East St. Louis (1917), Illinois; Slocum (1910) and Porvenir (1918), Texas; Washington, DC (1919), which the community repulsed; Ocoee, Florida (1920); and Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921), to name but a few.<sup>103</sup> Between 1917 and 1921, Black homes in Chicago were bombed, on average, once every twenty days.<sup>104</sup> Black people in the South who asserted their claim to schooling as a public good in even the smallest ways were subject to sanctions ranging from job loss to incarceration, terrorism, torture, enslavement on chain gangs, and, of course, murder. Legal instruments such as restrictive covenants and redlined federal loan maps were part of the process too; but they came later in the game, adding new tools by which white people could dominate public goods through violently racializing space and converting that violence into legally legitimated property ownership.<sup>105</sup>

The violence has changed since state and federal governments stepped up enforcement against overt racial terrorism in the late 1960s and ’70s. Instead, the last half-century has added a whole new arsenal against our non-white children: zero-tolerance

<sup>101</sup>Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>. See also NAACP, “History of Lynching in America,” <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

<sup>102</sup>Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

<sup>103</sup>For the targeting of individuals, see EJI, *Lynching in America*. For a general overview of whole-community attacks, see Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 87–115. See also Zinn Education Project, “Massacres in U.S. History,” <https://www.zinnproject.org/collection/massacres-us/page/2/>.

<sup>104</sup>Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 35. For a description of this process in Los Angeles, see Hernández, *City of Inmates*.

<sup>105</sup>Rothstein, *The Color of Law*.

punishment regimes in schools and, outside of them, the coordinated massification of criminal justice.<sup>106</sup>

The scale and racial disproportionality of criminal legal processing for the last forty years are historically unprecedented and difficult to exaggerate. Before the mid-1970s the US locked up between 100 and 150 people per 100,000 in jails and state and federal prisons, a rate larger than but commensurate with other wealthy nations. Between 1970 and 2010, that rate exploded to over 750 per 100,000. Well over two million people. The disparate impact on Black and brown men has been severe. According to The Sentencing Project, of all American men born in 2001, one in seventeen white men, one in six Latinx men, and *one in three* Black men, will spend some time imprisoned.<sup>107</sup>

So-called proactive policing has had similar disproportionate racial effects. In a single year, for example, NYPD police stopped and patted down 80 percent of African American adolescents ages 16-17, compared with rates of 38 percent and 10 percent for Hispanics and whites, respectively.<sup>108</sup> School attendance of Black boys dropped during periods when the NYPD was saturating their neighborhoods, a drop not seen for other children.<sup>109</sup> Michelle Alexander has provocatively referred to the rise of this criminal justice regime as the “New Jim Crow,” alerting us to the long tradition of state violence against non-white people in the United States.<sup>110</sup>

Schools mirrored and collaborated with criminal justice. Zero-tolerance punishment regimes upped the consequences and reduced teacher discretion for alleged bad behavior in school.<sup>111</sup> School “safety” reforms expanded the presence of sworn police officers in schools, especially schools serving primarily non-white children.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Hinton and DeAnza Cook, “The Mass Criminalization of Black Americans: A Historical Overview,” *Annual Review of Criminology* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 2021), 261–86; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); James Forman Jr., “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow,” *New York University Law Review* 87, no. 1 (2012), 101–46; John F. Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration—and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Jeffrey Fagan, “Report of Jeffrey Fagan, PhD. United States District Court, Southern District of New York” (David Floyd et al. v. City of New York et al., 08 Civ. 01034 [SAS], 2010); Jeffrey Fagan, “Recent Evidence and Controversies in the ‘New Policing,’” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 690–700; Jeffrey Fagan et al., “Stops and Stares: Street Stops, Surveillance, and Race in the New Policing,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 43, no. 3 (2016), 539–614; Joshua Page, Victoria Piehowski, and Joe Soss, “A Debt of Care: Commercial Bail and the Gendered Logic of Criminal Justice Predation,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (Feb. 2019), 150–72; Gordon, *Citizen Brown*.

<sup>107</sup>The Sentencing Project, “Prison Population over Time,” <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>.

<sup>108</sup>Fagan, “Report of Jeffrey Fagan, PhD. United States District Court, Southern District of New York.”

<sup>109</sup>Joscha Legewie and Jeffrey Fagan, “Aggressive Policing and the Educational Performance of Minority Youth,” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 2 (April 2019), 220–47.

<sup>110</sup>Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. For a friendly critique of the use of “Jim Crow,” see Forman, “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow.”

<sup>111</sup>Judith Kafka, *The History of “Zero Tolerance” in American Public Schooling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>112</sup>Kathleen Nolan and Paul Willis, *Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban High School* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Aaron Kupchik, *The Real School Safety Problem*:

Not surprisingly, Black and brown children have been punished more often, and more severely, than white children for similar offenses. The interlocking pushout factors of lower quality, more punitive, and more highly segregated schooling, in combination with the massification of policing and incarceration, led scholars in 2003 to start referring to a “school-to-prison pipeline.”<sup>113</sup> Flipping the pipeline metaphor on its head, social science research shows equally devastating effects of proactive policing and mass imprisonment outside of schools on children’s performance in them.<sup>114</sup> Personal, familial, or even vicarious contact with police has negative effects on school performance, political socialization, and health.<sup>115</sup> In some minoritized school districts in the United States, that means a majority of children are affected.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

So what does seeing schooling as a white good get us?

First, I ended the body of my argument on the theme of violence because it’s critically important to recognize that the little white schoolhouse, that so-called laboratory of democracy on the endless Western frontier, rested on non-white harms. The worst harms. It’s problematic in our work as historians to view schooling as a white good with romantic nostalgia, unless we are recovering stories of resistance, empowerment, and justice. Whose history are we writing?

Second, turning schooling from a white good into something resembling a public good calls all of us to the work of writing racism back into the many subfields of the

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*The Long-Term Consequences of Harsh School Punishment* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Paul Bleakley and Cindy Bleakley, “School Resource Officers, ‘Zero Tolerance’ and the Enforcement of Compliance in the American Education System,” *Interchange* 49, no. 2 (May 2018), 247–61; Philip Matthew Stinson and Adam M. Watkins, “The Nature of Crime by School Resource Officers: Implications for SRO Programs,” *SAGE Open* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014521821>; Elora Mukherjee, *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools* (New York: New York Civil Liberties Union and the American Civil Liberties Union, 2007).

<sup>113</sup>Johanna Wald and Daniel Losen, “Defining and Re-directing the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *New Directions for School Development* 2003, no. 99 (Fall 2003), 9–15; Paul J. Hirschfield, “Preparing for Prison? The Criminalization of School Discipline in the USA,” *Theoretical Criminology* 12, no. 1 (Feb. 2008), 79–101; Kayla Crawley and Paul Hirschfield, “Examining the School-to-Prison Pipeline Metaphor,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, June 25, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.346>.

<sup>114</sup>Justice, “Hobbling”; Leila Morsy and Richard Rothstein, *Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes: Criminal Justice Policy Is Education Policy*, Economic Policy Institute, Dec. 15, 2016, <https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/>; Christopher Wildeman and Sara Wakefield, “The Long Arm of the Law: The Concentration of Incarceration in Families in the Era of Mass Incarceration,” *Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2014), 367–89; Peter K. Enns et al., “What Percentage of Americans Have Ever Had a Family Member Incarcerated? Evidence from the Family History of Incarceration Survey (FamHIS),” *Socius* 5 (Jan.-Dec. 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119829332>; Jessica T. Simes, *Punishing Places: The Geography of Mass Imprisonment* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

<sup>115</sup>Justice, “Hobbling”; Morsy and Rothstein, *Mass Incarceration and Children’s Outcomes*; Wildeman and Wakefield, “The Long Arm of the Law”; Enns et al., “What Percentage of Americans Have Ever Had a Family Member Incarcerated?”; Simes, *Punishing Places*.

<sup>116</sup>Simes, *Punishing Places*; Todd R. Clear, *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).



history of education. I think it's fair to say that there is enough access to primary evidence and secondary scholarship now that there is no area of educational history in the United States where we can shrug off the role of race as unknowable. Whiteness has colored all the parts of schooling—teaching and learning, curriculum, placement, sex and gender, policy, religion, punishment, pop culture, early-childhood and higher education, international and global expansion, even the methods we use and archives we inhabit.

Third, historians can play a critically important role in moving schooling from a white good to a public one. Understanding the specific mechanisms of schooling as a white good points us toward pathways for making it a public good.

This work requires “both/and” thinking. By that I mean formal education is critical to human flourishing and the health of a just and democratic society. Schooling as a method of education has historically delivered a great many goods. That same schooling has delivered a great many harms, too—not only absolute harms, but relative ones. Our work as historians of education entails explaining how schooling as a social practice has, historically, done both.

**Benjamin Justice** is Professor in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Administration at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University. He wishes to thank the following people for their generous responses and feedback on various drafts of this paper, although he acknowledges that he is solely responsible for all opinions and errors herein: Jack Schneider, A. J. Angulo, Kim Tolley, Dana Green, Tracey Meares, Leah Mirakhor, Jorge Camacho, Ivana Bozic, Howard Zonana, students in the 2022 Yale African American Studies Department course “Justice and Society,” and the participants of the 2022 Global Meeting on Law and Society session “Race and White Supremacy as Categories of Legal and Political Analysis in Courts and Schools.”