



# A History of Racism in the United States

## SESSION 3

| 1954–1973: Movement Time: From Overt to Covert

### Introduction

In session 2 we explored a vast period in the formation of the United States, spanning from the Naturalization Act of 1790 to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954. In this session, we will explore how social movements, along with landmark cases like *Brown*, not only changed how people of color interacted with U.S. laws and policies, but also how these movements changed the ways racism was manifested: from overt and legally sanctioned to covert cultural and systemic racism, often invisible to the dominant society. This session raises the connected and interrelated nature of movements for justice. This period of massive social change, facilitated by movements that shared leadership and mutual inspiration, challenged and changed how racism and other forms of social evils were embedded in U.S. culture and the economy.

### Rise of the Middle Class

Extending from 1946 into the 1950s, several factors resulted in the development of a white middle class in a way that left African Americans in particular behind. The writers will focus on African American and white class mobility, as the status of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans varied according to location and is less well documented. What took place before the end of legal segregation laid the foundation for continued exclusion of African Americans after 1954, further cementing inequality that arose not out of intent, but from the continued impact of historical racism.

Congress passed the GI Bill at the end of the Second World War, providing such benefits as subsidized edu-



Home For Sale Sign in Front of Beautiful Lakefront New Home © Andy Dean—Fotolia.com

Until the 1980s, blockbusting contributed to residential segregation, as real estate agents encouraged white homeowners to sell their houses as African American families moved into a particular neighborhood, citing the likelihood that home values would fall as a result of integration.

cation and home ownership assistance to all veterans of the war. However, the ability of veterans to take advantage of the bill's provisions varied according to their race. White working- and lower-class men were able to move up to the middle class thanks to subsidized higher education. African American men were unable to do the same, since educational opportunities were curtailed by legal segregation that allowed universities to refuse admission to African American applicants. This inability to obtain an education as easily as white men was compounded by a differential ability to purchase a home, the primary way in which people in the U.S. have been able to accrue wealth that can be passed down to succeeding generations.

As soldiers came back and settled down with families and homes, white flight began with a vengeance. Whites were able to move out to the burgeoning suburbs thanks

## The Movements

During the period this session spans, social movements dominated the United States landscape. We do not have sufficient space to detail their importance and achievements. However, it is crucial that we name them: the civil rights movement, the black power movement: Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam, the American Indian movement, the Chicano movement, the farmworkers movement, women's liberation/second feminism, gay rights, yellow power, the antiwar movement, the Puerto Rican freedom movement, the peace movement, and the environmental justice movement. Our common understanding of these movements is often limited by the linear ways in which the education system of the United States approaches the teaching of history. However, these movements emerged simultaneously, often inspiring and informing each other. Intermovement involvement was not uncommon with movement leaders like Ella Baker, Grace Lee Boggs, Yuri Kochiyama, Angela Davis, Dolores Huerta, and Myles Horton standing in solidarity, informing, and shaping one another's movements.

to a number of factors. The first was lending practices that privileged white applicants over African American applicants. Redlining, the practice by which banks drew lines on maps between neighborhoods to delineate those neighborhoods in which they would lend money to buyers to purchase houses, along with restrictive covenants, in which buyers agreed not to sell a house to anyone from a particular group (such as Jews, blacks, or Asians), cemented residential segregation. Whites were able to move out to the suburbs. African Americans were led to city residences, black suburbs, or particular lower-value neighborhoods by a practice called steering. Steering takes place when real estate agents show prospective buyers only certain houses, a practice that persists to the present day. Until the 1980s, blockbusting contributed to residential segregation, as real estate agents encouraged white homeowners to sell their houses as African American families moved into a particular neighborhood, citing the likelihood that home values would fall as a result of integration.

Growth of the suburbs was encouraged by the further development of interstate highways, first built on a large scale during the war to move military equipment and people safely across distances. As the interstates developed, more suburban growth took place as a result of easier movement between suburbs and the city core. Urban renewal, a term used to describe black displacement, interstate development, and the destruction of viable communities, allowed this movement between (largely white) suburbs and (largely black) urban cores. James Baldwin "characterized urban renewal more causally as 'Negro removal.'"<sup>1</sup> The Riverfront Expressway in New Orleans effectively turned a family-friendly, economically vibrant black community, and the center of black Mardi Gras in New Orleans, into the street below the elevated Interstate 10. By the early 1960s, it became clear that the way of least resistance for interstate construction was a black community, as residents did not have sufficient access to city government and its power structure. Highway engineer Robert Moses "each year leveled the homes of tens of thousands of blacks to make way for ever more miles of expressways around and through New York."<sup>2</sup>

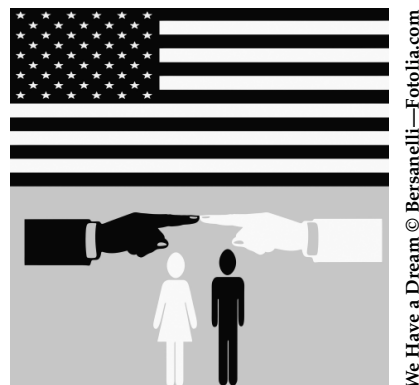
The GI Bill, white flight and the housing boom, the expansion of higher education to more working- and lower-class men, and legal segregation laid the groundwork for a booming white middle class and an African American community without access to the same benefits, further entrenching inequality between black and white. The outcomes of these laws endure into the twenty-first century, resulting in racist outcomes of institutional policies not intended to be racist. David Roediger quotes *Ebony* magazine's analysis of a Frank Sinatra movie called "The House I Live In," about white immigrants who organized around issues of home ownership and discrimination, regarding the difference between white and black: "'Never will a white man in America have to live in a ghetto hemmed in by court-approved legal documents, trapped by an invisible wall of hate much more formidable than the Siegfried line.'"<sup>3</sup>

## We Shall Overcome: Movements for Change Enter the Stage

In 1954, fifty-eight years after the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) established

apartheid (system of legal racial segregation) in the United States, the *Brown* decision disavowed “separate but equal,” ruling that *de jure* (in principle) racial segregation was a violation of the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution.<sup>4</sup> This ruling set the stage for the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Furthermore, the power of the *Brown* decision rippled through U.S. society and culture, fueling the smoldering coals of a resistance movement that would change history.

Most people identify Rosa Parks’s 1955 act of civil disobedience in a Montgomery bus as the seminal event of the civil rights movement. While the actions that led Parks to challenge the racial segregation in public transportation are not to be diminished, resistance to the United States system of apartheid began decades before. From the founding of the Howard University Law School to the establishment of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; from the Harlem Renaissance to the protest songs taught and learned at the Highlander Center in Knoxville, Tennessee; from the words of W. E. B. DuBois to those of Howard Thurman; resistance to racism has been a powerful builder of people.



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In 1910, the NAACP began publishing *The Crisis*. In its opening issue, W. E. B. DuBois wrote:

Some good friends of the cause we represent fear agitation. They say: “Do not agitate—do not make noise; work.” They add, “Agitation is destructive or at best negative—what is wanted is positive constructive work.” Such honest critics mistake the function of agitation . . . agitation is a necessary evil to tell of the ills of the Suffering. Without it many a nation has been lulled to false security and preened itself with virtues it did not possess.<sup>6</sup>

With agitation in mind, the social movements that came to dominate and change the U.S. social landscape with its power relations moved into the limelight in the decades following the *Brown* decision. The actions of these movements pushed racism to assume new, less discernable forms.

## Ensuring the Maintenance of the Status Quo: COINTELPRO

COINTELPRO stands for the Counterintelligence Program of the Federal Bureau of Investigation that operated between 1956 and 1971. Established to protect national security, prevent violence, and maintain the existing social and political order, COINTELPRO sought to “disrupt and neutralize” movement groups and individuals perceived as threats to the United States. The emergence of COINTELPRO in a social landscape where social movements were seeking to agitate and disrupt the status quo had serious consequences for the Bureau

### The Resistance: Yuri Kochiyama

Kochiyama was imprisoned at the Japanese concentration camp in Jerome, Arkansas. Over time, her religious and political views led her to join what she called “The Movement,” a series of struggles to free Puerto Rican and Black Panther political prisoners, for black civil rights and black power, and in support of civil liberties and victims of war. Kochiyama tells a story of what evangelist E. Stanley Jones said during a speech at the Santa Anita Assembly Center, one of the stops along the way to internment in 1942. He said, “It doesn’t matter so much what happens ‘to’ you as what happens ‘inside’ of you—and what you do ‘after’ it happens.” Thus, life’s blows, whether the evacuation experience that struck the Japanese Americans collectively or a breakup that jolts people individually, need not be knockout punches, but just experiences to grow on.<sup>5</sup>

and the leaders of the movements. Under COINTELPRO, techniques the Bureau had used against “hostile” foreign agents were used against American citizens. Through covert action, the Bureau’s COINTELPRO intentionally sought to influence the political choices and social values of social movements by infiltrating the movements with agents provocateurs. Five groups became the primary targets for COINTELPRO: “Communist Party, USA” (1956–71), “Socialist Workers Party” (1961–69), “White Hate Group” (1964–71), “Black Nationalist—Hate Group” (1967–71), and “New Left” (1968–71). It is important to note that the FBI defined these so vaguely that many citizens who were simply exercising their rights of speech and civil disobedience became targets of the program, as their actions were perceived to be threats to domestic tranquility. For example, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was a target of this program along with Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>7</sup>

## Is that Racism? New Codified Language Emerges to Confuse the Issue

As the end of this period approaches, the manifestations of racism become covertly embedded in our national language. Words and phrases like “welfare queen,” “domestic terrorist,” “Affirmative Action hire,” “dead-beat dads,” “generational poverty,” “urban underclass,” “permanently unemployed,” “model minority,” “wetback,” “illegal alien,” “spy,” and “urban renewal,” among others, substitute overtly racist language, leaving the hearer uncertain of the intent of the speaker. Words and phrases like the ones just named enter our national lexicon connected to images that reinforce for us the inferior, criminal, and threatening nature of people of color. Consider President George H. W. Bush’s 1988 campaign ad in which Massachusetts inmate William Horton, a black man convicted for murder and rape, was highly profiled as a “terrorizer of innocent people.”<sup>8</sup> The ad had four different incarnations, each using the Horton case as an example of what happens when politicians are “weak on crime.” The Willie Horton ad had profound implications on the 1988 presidential election. As reported in an in-depth study of the ad conducted by Brown University, “The spots aroused racial fears as well. Owing to Horton’s visage, made clear in ‘Weekend Passes’ and network news coverage, race was an obvious factor in how voters saw the crime spree. After

## Connecting Movements: Second-Wave Feminism and Women’s Liberation

Another movement with great social significance taking place during the 1960s and 1970s is the feminist movement, or women’s movement. Typically thought to have been galvanized with the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, women began to organize. The legal issues that saw change in this era were pay equity, equality in education, and extending affirmative action rights to women. Significant social change took place around attitudes regarding women and their place at work, in society, and in the home. Many believe this movement was tied to movements of people of color, including civil rights, at this time.

all, Republicans had picked the perfect racial crime, that of a black felon raping a white woman. Experimental research drawing on the Horton case demonstrated that viewers saw the story more as a case of race than crime. According to researchers, subjects who were exposed to news broadcasts about the Horton case responded in racial terms. The ad ‘mobilized whites’ racial prejudice, not their worries about crime.’ Viewers became much more likely to feel negatively about blacks in general after having heard the details of the case.”<sup>9</sup>

Most recently, Representative Harold Ford Jr. from Tennessee experienced the power of attack ads. In 2006, supporters of his opponent ran an ad depicted in this way by Taylor Marsh of the Huffington Post, “The ad Howell produced . . . reaches into the deep, dark, dirty message of the south we are all trying to leave to history, resurrecting the racial prejudice one more time to get his client elected. The ad is complete with a naked blonde winking into the camera as she asks Harold to ‘call me.’ The ad is pure race baiting, bringing to mind the image of an old stereotype of a black man dating a blonde woman.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the coded language doesn’t just criminalize, it also obscures the ways in which communities of color are impacted by racism. On January 6, 1966, six months after the unrest in Watts, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* ran an article with the title: “Success Story,

Japanese American Style.”<sup>11</sup> The *U.S. News & World Report* followed suit that same year after urban unrest during the summer of 1966. This movement-time presentation of the model minority myth coincided both with urban unrest by mostly African Americans and with post-1965 immigration reform-induced migration of highly skilled workers from Asia.<sup>12</sup> The author of the *New York Times* piece, William Peterson, wrote his statements almost in pairs, with “each commendation of Asian Americans . . . paired off against a reprimand of African Americans.”<sup>13</sup> One of the writers once heard from a Latina parishioner another version of this: “We don’t even speak English and we do better than they [African Americans] do!” This reveals an ahistorical understanding that serves to divide communities of color. Such stereotypes do little to raise awareness of the economic and social diversity within groups of people of color, and, in this case, Asian Americans who span the economic and ethnic spectrum, and the very real issues raised by race.

## Conclusion

As *de jure* segregation becomes illegal, racism continues as the middle class increases dramatically in size but disproportionately includes white Americans, reinforcing an enduring wealth gap between white and black. Language, culture, and legal precedent change, and racism moves from overt to covert. However, significant resistance that crosses class, race, gender, and sexual orientation is created by movements for justice and identity that overlap and force sweeping social change. This resistance—and covert racism—move us toward contemporary racism.

## About the Writers

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## Endnotes

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12. Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 205.
13. Wu, *Yellow*, 62.