The Myth of Post-Racialism: Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Stories About Race and Racism in the United States

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In the United States, hegemonic narratives reproduce post-racial ideals by developing popular myths that either minimise the prevalence of racial inequalities or blame their persistence on African Americans, who are represented as dysfunctional and resistant to mainstream American culture. Hegemonic narratives are not only racist and prejudiced but also deceptive because they move race away from the unequal policies that produce structural-level inequities for lower and working class African Americans, putting the latter at a greater disadvantage in relationships to middle and upper class white Americans and African Americans. Hegemonic stories are misleading since they claim that racial equality is possible even when the majority of white Americans have a claim to socio-economic and political privilege and have a vested interest in maintaining that advantage at the expense of others. Using both past and recent critical race theories, this article critically analyses the major differences between hegemonic stories which accept the myth of post-racialism in the United States and counterhegemonic stories which contest this myth. By analysing these stories, the essay reveals the racially disadvantageous conditions the majority of blacks in the United States continue to face despite the 2008 election of a black president. The essay identifies persistent structural racism that the myth of post-racialism seeks to efface. It also suggests that American social and economic institutions work to entrap African Americans and other non-white minorities into a racist prison industrial complex, limited education and health facilities and rampant poverty which drastically reduce their opportunities in the United States.

Introduction
Race must be foregrounded in the study of American public discourse which tends to substitute a concrete and radical civil rights agenda with notions of meritocracy and a post-racial equal playing field. The foregrounding of race shows the myth of post-racialism to be a fallacy based on hegemonic stories that minimise the effects of racism on African Americans. By contrast, counterhegemonic stories, or counterstories, seek to emphasise and make visible the consequences of racism. While hegemonic stories ignore racial inequalities in the United States by shifting the responsibility for poverty onto African Americans themselves, counterstories reveal the structural disadvantages faced by blacks and work to challenge post-racial myths. My analysis of various hegemonic and counterhegemonic stories suggests the complexities of narratives that either elide or make visible the institutional and structural factors which explain the persistence of racism in the United States.

This essay is indebted to Richard Delgado’s methodology of critical race theory, which weaves together legal discussion, statistics and narratives in order to deconstruct conventional stories about race and reveal the importance of storytelling in American law. In the mid-1990s, Delgado and other American legal scholars such as Derrick Bell and Gary Peller challenged the meaning of race in American public discourse by centring it within individual and communal stories that reflected the impact of race on the American judicial system. As Bronwyn T. Williams suggests, in “The Truth in the Tale: Race and ‘Counterstorytelling’ in the Classroom”, these scholars “used techniques such as narrative[s] to challenge dominant cultural constructions of race” and “the ideal of an ‘objective’ legal tradition, arguing instead that, by denying the influence of race on the legal system or debating whether race in the form of whiteness exists at all, the dominant culture uses the system to protect its own interests” (2004: 166).

Delgado’s use of narratives that challenge conventional perceptions of race and racism is apparent in his concept of “counterstorytelling” which provides a framework for representing the continuing effects of racism on African Americans and for challenging the biases of academic disciplines dominated by Eurocentric thinking (2000: 60-70). In his essay, “Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative”, Delgado defines counterstorytelling as the curative process by which a subjugated group tells stories that resist the narratives that a dominant group tells themselves and others in order to establish a “shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (2000: 60). Counterstorytelling is a curative process since it “can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” and, thus, “show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion” (2000: 61). Delgado’s counterstorytelling helps us to challenge the facile dismissal of race and racism in hegemonic discourse as a ‘finished business’. Applying Delgado’s counterstorytelling a decade later, Williams denounces how American universities and colleges “reproduce the dominant cultural ideology” by restricting Black History Month to a mere celebration of the achievements of individuals such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Jackie Robinson (2004: 165). Williams argues, “When we have our conversations about race in the context of
such narratives of individualism and race as ‘other’, we reinforce a worldview that does not address the systemic and cultural constructions of race” (2004: 165). Developing similar counterstories, my essay critiques the easy dismissal of race in legal, political and academic hegemonic stories from the 1940s to the present which ignore the ongoing impact of racism on African Americans.

Counterstorytelling as Resistance against Hegemonic Storytelling

Hegemonic narratives permeate books, news, tabloids, music and other media by creating a virtual reality that Delgado describes as a set of “archetypes” or “well-told stories” that “ring true in light of the hearer's stock of preexisting stories” (2000: 70). Hegemonic stories are powerful tools of indoctrination because they dictate popular views about race. Williams states: “In order to permeate and shape our perceptions and responses to race, these narratives must conform to and reproduce the dominant cultural ideology” (2004: 165). Counterstorytelling opposes hegemonic storytelling by subverting conservative assumptions that romanticise the ‘American dream’ as able to provide upward mobility, should an individual work hard enough, whilst ignoring the precarious socio-economic status of blacks in the United States. Counterstorytelling is apparent in Delgado’s critique of the inherent prejudices of American legal scholarship against African Americans (1995: 46). Delgado gives the example of civil rights laws in which the majority of white scholars “hold that any inequality between blacks and whites is due either to cultural lag or inadequate enforcement” of existing civil rights laws, overlooking “the prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom” (2000: 60).

As Delgado suggests, this kind of hegemonic storytelling was apparent when a white professor from a major law school opposed the hiring of a black lawyer named John Henry on the charge that “he was vague and diffuse about his research interests” and “wanted to write [mainly] about equality and civil rights” (2000: 62). When a student told the professor that Henry could teach law “from a black perspective”, the professor replied: “Those things are true, and we gave them considerable weight. But when it came right to it, we felt we couldn’t take that great a risk” (2000: 63). The professor’s response to the student’s plea demonstrates the lack of empathy towards other epistemologies that Delgado describes when he argues, “Ideology—the received wisdom—makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural. Those in power sleep well at night—their conduct does not seem to them like oppression” (2000: 61). Moreover, the professor’s attitude suggests that hegemonic stories endure unless they are challenged by counterstories that infuse ethics and justice into human relationships. As Williams points out, “If we listen to the narratives outside the dominant culture, not only for what they tell us about individuals but also for how they help us understand different conceptions of our culture and its institutions, they can help us develop an understanding of race that reaches beyond individual morality” (2004: 167).
Hegemonic Stories of Dysfunction and Self-Alienation

An early and influential hegemonic story on black-white race relations appeared in the 1944 book, *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, in which Gunnar Myrdal wrote: “The correlation between poor housing, one the one hand, and tuberculosis, venereal diseases, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, and crime, one the other hand, has been demonstrated so often by American experts that we do not have to add anything to the evidence. This point should be kept in mind in any evaluation of Negro family life, of Negro crime and of Negro sickness” (1944: 376). Myrdal’s book was controversial because of its attempts to establish an analogy between an urban African American ‘lifestyle’ and poverty, crime and delinquency. The book was however, influential in creating a hegemonic narrative about racial inequality that was taken up in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965).

In his report, Moynihan argues that “collectively, in the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups, where some get plenty and some get none, where some send eighty percent of their children to college and others pull them out of school at the 8th grade, Negroes are among the weakest” (1965: i). Through the use apocalyptic metaphors, Moynihan warned against the “approaching complete breakdown” of the “family” of “lower class Negroes” of the mid-1960s due to a pervasive “Tangle of Pathology” that was apparent in “broken homes” mostly lead by unwed mothers caught within welfare dependency (1965: 5-6). Moynihan and Myrdal both create hegemonic stories which evolve out of what Daryl Michael Scott calls “the image of the damaged black psyche” (1997: xii). According to Scott, “the image of the black personality as damaged” is evident in a long tradition of American social science literature that was developed “from the aftermath of Reconstruction in 1880 to the present” and holds “that blacks are and historically have been damaged” (1997: xi-ii). The ‘damage’ trope is pernicious because it views the socio-economic disadvantages of African Americans as deriving from familial and social dysfunctions that are particular to blacks. This trope inferiorises African Americans and disregards the structural conditions that prevent equality with other Americans.

By the 1980s, hegemonic stories about African Americans were so fixated on their racial dysfunction that a few white conservative intellectuals championed what they viewed as the cultural self-alienation of blacks from mainstream American culture. Thus in his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*, Allan Bloom explains that American universities and colleges of the late 1980s created a problem wherein “at the moment when everyone else has become a ‘person,’ blacks have become blacks … ‘They stick together’ … This is peculiar inasmuch as race is less spiritually substantial than religion, and also inasmuch as integration was both the goal and the practice of blacks in universities prior to the late sixties” (1987: 92-3). As a remedy to this situation, Bloom
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recommends that blacks at American universities be taught "the good old Great Books" which can provide them with "a new alternative and a respect for study itself" (1987: 344). What Bloom perceives as self-alienation are the psychological and economic factors which lead black students to form circles. These networks allow black students to develop a sense of solidarity that provides them with the emotional and cultural connections which help them overcome racial prejudices they encounter during their university or college education. In her book, 'Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race', Beverly D. Tatum says that "connecting with one’s Black peers in the process of identity development is important and should be encouraged" because it provides them with a "reference point" and a means for overcoming "the daily challenges of living in a racist society" (2003: 69-70). It is also worth pointing out that white students group together for similar reasons (excepting victimisation based on race), but because white students are not viewed as a ‘racial’ group as such, this unity is not seen as racial self-segregation in the same way that ‘black’ social groupings are nor is it viewed as disadvantageous.

White Conservative Hegemonic Stories of Colour-Blind Racism and Post-Racialism

Another dominant hegemonic story is the representation of racism as a problem that has either been resolved or is difficult to prove. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva acknowledges the prevalence of this hegemonic narrative in the United States when he argues that colour-blind racism has a “slipperiness” because it blames the victim (non-white minorities) “in a very indirect way” through the “now you see it, now you don’t” rhetorical style “that matches the character of the new racism” (2010: 25). Colour-blind racism is insidious since, as Bonilla-Silva suggests, it ignores “the effects of past and contemporary discrimination on the social, economic, and educational status of minorities” by “supporting equal opportunity for everyone without a concern for the savage inequalities between blacks and whites” (2010: 31). William J. Bennett, a former US secretary of education, reproduces this narrative when he argues, in The Devaluing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children (1992), that America has already gotten “angry about racism and decided [that] it was wrong, [and] the country didn’t wait to eliminate the ‘root causes’ before going after it aggressively, in law and through social stigma” (146). Bennett’s argument assumes that racism is over and that it must be stricken from the American English vocabulary since it leads blacks to develop separatist notions of race that undermine American individuality. Bennett writes: "Along with abortion, race has become the most divisive issue in contemporary American politics. The great body of the American people believe in individual rights, not group rights, not rights conferred by sex, race, and religion” (1992: 179). Bennett’s rationale for individual rights comes from the hegemonic narrative of colour-blind racism which allows whites to remove race from the factors that impede the social and economic mobility of blacks. In doing so, whites disculpate the government, states and courts of the United States from any responsibility for the socio-economic conditions of African Americans by “blaming them
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[African Americans] for their own misfortune” (Cohen 2010: A1). This strategy of blame is deceptive because it frames racism in such a way that blacks appear as the people who perpetuate the problem, thus making the conversation revolve only around blacks as opposed to whites who contribute to inequalities without having to acknowledge and resolve them.

A parallel of colour-blind racism is the hegemonic story of post-racialism which represents the United States as a post-racial society in which blacks and whites are treated as equals. This hegemonic narrative stems from an ideology, espoused by both Democratic and Republican leaders, which argues that race equality has been achieved in the United States. Post-racialism has become popular in the American media since the moments preceding the inauguration of President Barack Obama. A few hours before Obama was pronounced the winner of the 2008 presidential election, Anderson Cooper, a reporter for CNN (Cable News Network), asked a panel of commentators including Bill Bennett, a well-known Republican, the meaning of the election “in terms of change of race relations in the United States.” Bennett replied, “Well, I'll tell you one thing it means ... You don't take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘The deck is stacked, I can't do anything, there's so much in-built this and that’” (CNN 2009). Bennett's comment suggests that African Americans can no longer complain about racial inequalities in the United States when there is a black president. His statement is emblematic of the hegemonic narrative of the first decade in this century that portrays America as a post-racial nation in which all the promises of black civil rights struggles have been fulfilled.

Post-racialism also emphasises the importance of individuality as opposed to group identity. Lawrence Auster (2008) writes: “Presumably a post-racial, beyond-race America will be one in which no one thinks about race any more, an America in which we all just see each other as individuals.” According to Auster, post-racial America also reinforces “The notion that the election of Barack Obama to the presidency will inaugurate a ‘post-racial’ America, an America that has gone ‘beyond race.’” Post-racialism is an admirable goal because it imagines a world in which blacks and whites in the United States live without racial division. As Patricia Zengerle (2010) suggests, post-racialism envisions the United States as a country in which “division and tension between black and white Americans” has disappeared. Despite such noble intentions, post-racialism constitutes more of a rushed idealism than what Zengerle calls “a thorough thinking through” which would reveal the persistence of race in the United States. As Zengerle suggests, post-racialism avoids the fact that “Racial conflict is America's deepest wound” (2010).

‘Class Trumps Race’ Hegemonic Stories

Another variety of hegemonic race narrative that permeates American public discourse is the view that class, not race, shapes the lives of African Americans. An influential example of this narrative is 1987’s The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy in which William Julius Wilson argues that the lack of amenities in African American
urban communities stemmed from the fact that “today’s black middle-class professionals no longer tend to live in ghetto neighborhoods and have moved increasingly into mainstream occupations outside the black community” (1987: 7). Wilson’s hegemonic story is also apparent in his claim that the flight of “nonpoor blacks from previously mixed-income neighborhoods” have “deprived these communities of the key structural resources including role models for their children” (Patillo 2007: 106-7). According to Wilson, “the declining presence of working and middle-class blacks” in “ghetto neighborhoods” has created a serious lack of “informal social control” and “permanent relationships” and a huge increase of poverty, “broken unions, out-of wedlock pregnancies and births” and, “to a lesser extent, separation and divorce” (2000: 87-88). Wilson’s portrayal of “ghetto neighborhoods” as characterised by deprivation and lack of “control” is consistent with hegemonic race stories which trace the challenges of African Americans to a culture of poverty and deficiency. In a *New York Times* article (2010), Cohen explains that “Culture is back on the poverty research agenda” because “the cultural roots of poverty ‘play important roles in shaping how lawmakers choose to address poverty issues’” (2010: A1). In response to Cohen’s article, Steinberg (2011) argues that the re-popularisation of the cultural argument has taken place within a 40-year period of “racial backlash” which has seen the systematic erosion of structural-level progress made during the Civil Rights Movement. At the forefront of this backlash is the removal of race from public discourse on structural inequality.

Wilson’s narrative resembles a hegemonic story because it represents African Americans as being responsible for their own predicament and de-emphasises the significance of race in their lives. While the flight of nonpoor blacks from innercity neighbourhoods has played a major role in the condition of these communities, African Americans still experience racism regardless of class. In *Socioeconomic Inequality: Race and/or Class*, Wilson himself writes in 2001, “To repeat, the growing joblessness among the innercity poor represents the most extreme form of economic marginality stemming in large measure from changes in the organization of the economy, including the global economy ... This is because the black population, burdened by cumulative experiences of racial restrictions, was overwhelmingly unskilled a few decades ago” (2001: 446). Wilson’s comment shows that the consequences of racism still need to be addressed in hegemonic stories about class and culture, which tend to emphasise classism over racism rather than the relationship between the two.

Another example of a class-based hegemonic story is Walter Benn Michaels’ *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, which argues that class trumps race (2006: 2-3, 6-7). Discussing Michaels’ theory, John Ernest (2009) writes in *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History*: “By race, Michaels means an assumed aspect of identity, something that enables individuals sharing that aspect to identify themselves as groups. For him, class is largely a function of economic differences and therefore much more solid. It might be problematic to identify yourself as black or white, but you certainly know whether you are relatively rich or poor” (2009: 46). By
arguing that class trumps race, Michaels dismisses the equal impact that both factors have on the lives of blacks in the United States. As J. Kameron Carter argues in *Race: A Theological Account* (2008), "one is led to refuse the either/or between race and class that Walter Benn Michaels seems to box himself into" because "racial construction and the realities of class formation are not mutually exclusive. Rather, race and class articulate each other" (2008: 382).

Furthermore, Michaels represents race as a consequence of genetic and cultural history that people use to separate themselves from others. He writes: "We love race—we love identity—because we love class. We love thinking that the differences that divide us are not the differences between those of us who have money and those who don’t but are instead the differences between those of us who are black and those who are white or Asian or Latino or whatever" (2006: 6). Michaels assumes that race is merely a physical and cultural identity marker that one arbitrarily adorns, overlooking the ways in which race is also a product of historical relationships that group or separate people; often without their choice. As Ernest (2009) argues, race is not as "simple" as Michaels assumes because "it is more than something we carry around. It can be understood more fully as something that awaits us as we move from place to place, something we bump into, something that often influences deeply, historically, how and (even today) where we live" (2009: 46). Michaels does not view race in such historical and structural contexts since he perceives it as an identity that blacks can choose to wear or not to wear. Race is not a chosen identity since it is a consequence of rigid relationships based on longstanding historical, social and economic inequities. Racism is the consequence of the survival of these relationships through unjust laws and stereotypes.

**‘Laissez-Faire’ Hegemonic Stories**

Additionally, there is a kind of hegemonic story that represents cultural deficiency as the reason blacks are unable to achieve equality in the United States. In their book, *Preventing Prejudice: A Guide to Counselors, Educators, and Parents* (2006), Joseph G. Ponterott, Shawn O. Utsey and Paul Pedersen describe “laissez-faire racism” as a "subtle racism" that does three things: “[First] laissez-faire racism attributes the economic and political failures of Blacks to their own cultural inferiority. A second component of laissez-faire racism is the denial by Whites that structural and institutional barriers to minority progress exist. Third, Whites who express laissez-faire racism are resistant to efforts that seek to remedy institutional and social inequality” (2006: 38).

Moreover, as Bonilla-Silva argues, “laissez-faire racism” ignores "the significant impact of past and contemporary discrimination in the labor market" against blacks (2010: 34) and overlooks the fact that whites “live mostly in white neighborhoods, marry and befriend mostly whites, interact mostly with whites in their jobs, and send their children to white schools” (48); which are choices that blacks can make only to be denied the schools, facilities, protection and other privileges that whites enjoy.
amongst themselves. Whites racially segregate themselves, but this is not seen as a deficiency or problem because it is not viewed through the lens of racial pathology in the same way that black communities are. When whites segregate themselves, this self-alienation is not seen as a racial activity with racial consequences.

Earlier, in 1995, Dinesh D'Souza utilised a hegemonic narrative which blamed black poverty on black deficiency and pathology. Denouncing affirmative action for blacks, D'Souza contended that it was not reasonable for “black students in education with a C average at a community college … [to] command incomes comparable with white students majoring in business with a B average at the University of Wisconsin or Cornell” (1995: 301). D'Souza’s hegemonic story is consistent with “laissez-faire racism”, a parallel of colour-blind racism, which, as Lawrence Bobo, James R. Kluegel and Ryan A. Smith argue, “involves persistent negative stereotyping of African Americans, a tendency to blame blacks themselves for the black-white gap in socioeconomic standing, and resistance to meaningful policy efforts to ameliorate U.S. racist social conditions and institutions” (1997: 16). D’Souza’s hegemonic story reproduces “laissez-faire racism” because it inferiorises black students with learning challenges by blaming their race for such limitations, overlooking the structural disparities preventing these students from getting equal education in America. D’Souza also perpetuates a fallacy by presuming that in order to benefit from affirmative action, minorities are necessarily less qualified in the first place. D’Souza’s hegemonic story ignores the fact that affirmative action is premised on rewarding people with the same qualifications who would otherwise miss out on benefits simply due to their race.

D’Souza’s hegemonic story is part of the narrative of “laissez-faire racism”, since it views blackness as a sign of inferiority, and not as an identity that exposes blacks to economic and social injustices from which white Americans are generally shielded. Ignoring such inequities, D’Souza demonises African Americans when he writes: “Perhaps the most serious of African American pathologies—no less serious than violence—is the routinization of illegitimacy as a way of life. The bastardization of black America is confirmed by the fact that nearly seventy percent of young black children born in the United States are illegitimate, compared with twenty-two percent of white children” (1995: 514-5). D’Souza’s hegemonic story fits into the myth of the ‘culture of poverty’ which ignores the existence of stable African American families and communities in which members have good relationships with another despite the challenges of structural inequities facing them.

**Black Conservative Hegemonic Stories of Post-Racialism**

Hegemonic race narratives are not solely promulgated by white scholars and authors but by black intellectuals as well. Black conservative intellectuals such as Shelby Steele and John McWhorter also utilise discourses which blame African Americans for cultivating victimology, separatism and obsession with white guilt. Steele criticises African Americans for being impaired by a rhetoric of victimhood and separatism in
a period that he describes as the age of “the promised land of freedom” (2006: 26). Paradoxically, Steele imagines this freedom as a stage that blacks can reach only through use of false deference towards whites. Steele’s hero is Booker T. Washington, whom he describes as a black leader who possessed an “accurate reading of whites” (2008: 66). In *A Bound Man*, Steele writes: “He [Washington] saw that whites simply would not tolerate racial equality or even much protest toward that end. So he advocated development rather than equality, and he favored a mask that showed blacks as humble, hard working, and accommodating of segregation” (2008: 66). Steele considers Washington’s deferential mask as a step which, when added to W. E. B. Du Bois’ “mask of protest”, worked so well “that it led to a new era of white guilt in which whites—particularly institutions—had to redeem their moral authority through blacks. And so today, continuing to read white America as we always have, we wear a mask focused on our racial difference rather than our common humanity” (2008: 66-7). The notion of racial difference is part of a hegemonic narrative that Steele develops in *White Guilt* when he describes the attitudes African Americans have towards race:

The black identity today involves a degree of nostalgia for some of the uncertainties that were the unintended consequences of racial oppression—the security of an enforced group identity and group unity, the fellow feeling of a shared fate, the comfort of an imposed brotherhood and sisterhood, the idea of an atavistic, God-given group destiny ... Today it is fashionable among blacks to say that integration was a failure, which is to imply that our true strength is in separatism (2006: 26).

Steele’s representation of African Americans as nostalgic for separatism rather than working towards an equality he sees as synonymous with integration is a hegemonic story that mistakes the social and economic deprivations that make race a tool of liberation from subjugation for a superficial marker of identity.

Steele draws attention to Obama whom he sees as an African American who has transcended race. Obama’s candidacy in the 2008 US presidential election is proof for Steele that white America “has undergone a moral evolution away from racism so transformative that there is now something like a desire in the body politic to see a truly qualified black person in the White House” (2008: 11). Steele credits Obama’s popularity among whites on the basis that he “separated himself from the deadly stigmas of black inferiority and white paternalism” (2008: 15). Steele’s hegemonic story considers black peoples’ emphasis on race as a pathology that stifles their political progress. Moreover, as Houston Baker suggests, “Steele’s account of the dynamic of bondage and freedom renders black liberation a deeply problematic social and moral occurrence. By his logic, black freedom is coexistent and coterminous with the field of white power because such freedom is purely derivative. It always travels in the shadow of the valley of white supremacy” (2008: 148). Steele’s hegemonic story is thus grounded on the problematic notion that freedom is given, not won.

Steele’s hegemonic story is consistent with both colour-blind racism and “laissez-faire racism”, because it represents a politically conservative view
of race relations in the United States that is non-threatening for white readers. Steele’s acceptance in mainstream American society partly derives from his acquiescence with “laissez-faire racism”, an ideology Bonilla-Silva characterises as compatible with colour-blind racism, because it “has rearticulated elements of traditional liberalism (work ethic, rewards by merit, equal opportunity, individualism, etc.) for racially illiberal goals” (2010: 7). The US media are comfortable with colour-blind racism because it allows the preclusion of a more complex and potentially uncomfortable discussion of the structural inequalities faced by African Americans.

McWhorter is in agreement with Steele, because he too disparages African Americans for clinging to race. McWhorter’s hegemonic story denies the severity of socio-economic gaps between blacks and whites in America. He claims that 1995 statistics which suggest that “the median income for black families was $25,970, while the figure for whites was $42,646”, are misleading because, he argues, “the black median income is dragged down” by “the extenuating factor of the low income of unwed mothers living on welfare” (2000: 10). He writes:

The median income of black two-parent families is about $41,307, as opposed to about $47,000 for whites. Even here, the gap is extremely difficult to pin on racism. In 1995, 56 percent of black Americans lived in the South, and wages are lower there. Finally, as often as not today, black two-parent families earn more than whites—they did in about 130 cities and counties in 1994, and in the mid-90s, their median income was rising faster than whites’ was (2000: 10).

McWhorter’s figures are part of the efforts of a few black conservative scholars to diminish racism by overemphasising misleading images of black prosperity. Such tactics work to discredit the idea that racism is a significant factor in American society by instead emphasising how blacks can supposedly achieve their dreams if they stop perceiving themselves as victims of white oppression. Expressing views that are similar to Steele’s, McWhorter urges blacks to find causes of their anxieties in their “ideological sea of troubles” which, he claims, come from three tendencies: the treatment of “victimhood not as a problem to be solved but as an identity to be nurtured”, the conception “of black people as an unofficial sovereign entity, within which the rules other Americans are expected to follow are suspended out of belief that our victimhood renders us morally exempt from them”, and “a strong tendency toward Anti-intellectualism at all levels of the black community” (2000: xi-ii). McWhorter’s arguments become a hegemonic narrative since they attempt to explain the limited conditions of African Americans as resulting not from economic and structural inequalities but the opposition and frustration that some blacks develop because of their alienation in American society. McWhorter’s hegemonic story is flawed because it is based on the myth of “the culture of poverty” which misinterprets African American ‘opposition’ to mainstream American culture as “victimology”, “separatism” and “anti-intellectualism” (2000: xi-ii), overlooking the ways in which African American representations of whites as “the former oppressor[s]” (2000: xi-ii) derive from centuries of disenfranchisement that have been replaced by new institutional and structural inequities.
McWhorter’s portrayal of urban blacks is also a hegemonic story since it co-opts a mainstream and conservative American political and intellectual narrative that is often used to explain away inequality and racism outside of the social, economic and material conditions of African Americans. McWhorter’s representation of African Americans in underprivileged neighbourhoods minimises the capacity of these blacks to develop entrepreneurship in legal activities such as hairdressing, painting, plumbing, and roofing as well as illegal activities and underground economies of drug dealing, hustling and pimping. Such illicit activities are viewed as detrimental since they perpetuate the myth of “the culture of poverty” but hegemonic narratives overlook, what could be seen in another light, as the entrepreneurship and resourcefulness that people who are involved in them possess. Elijah Anderson for example, describes, in Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City, the “rise” of an “underground economy” of blacks in urban America “which offers the most desperate [black] people an alternative to the regular economy that often does not support their basic human needs” (2000: 234).

**Counterhegemonic Stories of Racial Realism**

Unlike hegemonic stories which represent the conditions of African Americans through the prism of dysfunction, separation, post-racialism and classism, counterhegemonic stories explore these conditions through the lens of racism and class. Contesting hegemonic stories that dismiss the relevance of race and racism in the United States, counterhegemonic stories foreground the persistence of both in the lives of African Americans. Counterhegemonic stories challenge and offset the dominance of hegemonic stories and focus on the legal impediments and scholarly biases that perpetuate racism and the increasing socio-economic gaps that widen racial inequalities. Counterstories also challenge hegemonic notions of the ‘American dream’ by making visible the longstanding racial inequities in the United States.

Addressing the paradoxes of American law, Derrick Bell argued in 1990 in an essay called “Racial Realism” that the notion of racial equality for African Americans is an unobtainable and unrealistic goal since blacks will never achieve full equality in the US and will always be subjected to some kind of discrimination (1995: 302). For Bell, the seemingly objective and self-evident nature of American jurisprudence masks over all sorts of prejudices, moral beliefs and personal opinions that allow judges to continue to harm blacks and perpetuate their subjugated status (1995: 303-4). Referring to the 1978 Regents of the University of California v. Bakke decision, Bell argued that the court ignored historical and social circumstances when it declared that “an affirmative action policy may not unseat white candidates on the basis of their race” (1995: 304). To Bell, this definition of racial equality ignores the long history of discrimination that blacks have faced in the standardised tests, professional schools and urban policies that favour white students (1995: 304). As an alternative to such discrimination, Bell proposed “racial realism” or the process through
which blacks would persistently attack the legal principles of American jurisprudence and “have their voice and outrage heard” (1995: 302). This process involves day-to-day legal struggles against discrimination.

Writing at the same time as Bell, Gary Peller criticises American legal conventions and scholarship for conceptualising race as an idea that relates more to prejudices than to economic exploitation against blacks. Peller argues in “Race Consciousness” that from the 1970s, white liberals made “racial consciousness” difficult to achieve for blacks because they took “race” out of its historical meaning and inscribed it into a misleading abstraction of skin colour, stereotype, prejudice and racial “unconsciousness” (1995: 127). To Peller, this liberal rhetoric on diversity kept blacks away from “race-consciousness” or “the idea that race matters to one’s perception and experience of the world” (1995: 136). Peller used the example of the integration policies of the late 1960s which alienated black nationalism in the United States by representing it as a radical movement that was similar to the white supremacist nationalism of the same period. This equation of black nationalism with white supremacist nationalism was a systemic effort to weaken race and black radicalism in the United States. Peller states, “The sense of integrationism as the inevitable means to achieve racial enlightenment reflects both the institutionalization of a particular understanding of what racism means and the marginalization not only of white supremacists but also of the opposing analysis, which was represented in the sixties by Malcolm X and other black nationalists” (1995: 128). Consequently, integrationism weakened the African American community by alienating its black nationalist sociologists who viewed mainstream American scholarly norms as a form of colonialism. Peller summarises key aspects of this critique: “[Black] Nationalist sociologists argued that American scholarly norms constituted a form of ‘academic colonialism’ in which the discourse of universality and neutrality is embodied in assumptions about the superiority of white cultural practices and the corresponding inferiority of African-American culture” (1995: 142).

Like Delgado, Peller also focuses on the racism within American legal scholarship and professions:

In law schools throughout the country, admissions, hiring, and tenure debates proceed on the basis of standards of academic and scholarly merit which were constructed in a period when African-Americans were excluded from mainstream law schools and when the very law to be studied itself sanctioned white supremacy … black nationalists insisted that the existing social practices should not be taken as the standard, since those practices were created by a culture that considered it normal to exclude blacks—that is, a culture in need of transformation (1995: 143).

Thus black nationalism was alienated within American scholarship because it pointed to the paradoxes inherent in the liberal American narrative of integration without consciousness and freedom from hegemonic assumptions about race and class. These contradictions are challenged in other counterstories about the confinement of African Americans in poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods where they are unable to access the socio-economic privileges of middle and upper class white Americans and African Americans.
Counterhegemonic Stories of Racism and Discrimination

Counterhegemonic stories of racism and discrimination refute the assumption that class trumps race. This type of counterstory is apparent in Patricia Hill Collins’ argument that class and race work in tandem with other matrixes such as gender, sexuality and nation “as forms of oppression that work together in distinctive ways to produce a distinctive U.S. matrix of domination” (2000: 276). Such a counterstory attests to the ways race and class mutually reinforce one another as pervasive hegemonic tools that reproduce structural inequalities limiting the life chances of African Americans.

A similar kind of counterstory is utilised in Thomas J. Sugrue’s book *The Origin of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequalities in Postwar Detroit*. Sugrue shows that discrimination in workplaces, real estate and job agencies and de-industrialisation are the major forces that have led to the unemployment and impoverishment of thousands of blacks in Detroit since the early post World War II era (1996: 7-13). That is, the socio-economic problems of the black poor in Detroit can be found not only in the decline of manufacturers and the prominence of global outsourcing but also in the persistent racialised politics which have kept most black Detroiters in low-paying jobs and poor houses since the mid-twentieth century. The plight of the black underclass in Detroit is representative of larger historical trends, such as resistance against the full-employment and unionisation of blacks in America, which already took shape during the 1920s and 30s, before the suburbanisation process of the 1950s occurred. During the 1920s, blacks were reluctant to become involved in unions because they had learned in the past that political rhetoric of equality did not protect them from racial violence. In *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Migration* (1991), James Grossman writes: “When confronted with picket lines, union organizers, and employer propaganda and pressure, most black workers eschewed strong commitments to unionization. They did so for a variety of reasons: union racism, antiunion leadership within the black community, unfamiliarity with trade unionism, and intimidation by employers” (1991: 210). In addition, from the 1920s to the 1950s, blacks in the United States were hindered by the pervasive housing segregation in American metropolitan cities such as Chicago, St-Louis and Detroit. All these factors contributed to the formation, during the second half of the twentieth century, of a huge black underclass facing structural inequalities that would be revisited upon later generations of blacks.

In a similar vein, Angela Glover Blackwell’s essay in *The Covenant With Black America* opposes the hegemonic story where class trumps race by describing schools, jobs, stores and parks as some of the amenities that are deprived to most African Americans “because of policies and practices that are exclusionary” (2006: 101). Blackwell explains:

... despite laws against housing discrimination, it is still quite prevalent and most likely to be practiced against black people. Too many neighborhoods with good schools and desirable amenities are too expensive and do not allow renters. Some communities present so much hostility toward blacks
who do move there that black people are discouraged from attempting to even move into those neighborhoods (2006: 101).

Such predicaments derive from persistent structural problems such as pervasive joblessness, gentrification and the flight of middle-to-upper-class blacks which have worsened the plight of innercity blacks. Even if blacks wish to ‘de-segregate’, they face exclusion in white ‘segregated’ towns. The problem with hegemonic stories is that, once again, the racial effects of white segregation are ignored because they aren’t considered ‘racially’ problematic in the same sense that black communities are.

**Counterhegemonic Stories about Post-Racialism**

Counterhegemonic narratives about post-racialism oppose hegemonic stories of the Unites States as a post-racial society in which blacks and whites are treated as equals in the absence of race. In an interview with Amy Goodman (2008), Glen Ford argued that during the 2008 Presidential campaign some Democrats tended to represent African Americans as people who had “already come 90% of the way on the road to equality” and simply needed to go 10% of the rest of the way by voting for Obama. Ford rejects this narrative by arguing,

No indexes show blacks 90% of the way towards equality in any area of life. We’ve never made 65% more in income than white people. Black median household wealth is one-tenth white median household wealth ... In fact, we can’t find 90% figures relevant, outside of NBA teams and prison. But no white man, no white Democrat who said that would avoid being excoriated by the entire spectrum of black political opinion (2008).

In his counterhegemonic story, Tim Wise opposes the narrative of post-racialism because it contradicts the grim realities of the majority of people of colour in America. Wise explains: “For while the individual success of persons of color, as with Obama, is meaningful (and at this level was unthinkable merely a generation ago), the larger systemic and institutional realities of life in America suggest the ongoing salience of a deep-seated cultural malady—racism—which has been neither eradicated nor even substantially diminished by Obama’s victory” (2009: 8). Abby L. Ferber (2009) develops a similar counterhegemonic criticism when she writes:

Even in the face of legal and political gains, there is no evidence to suggest that the racial economic divide is decreasing. And the reality is that during economic downturns, minority communities suffer first and worst. Economic gains made by people of color are generally only very recent gains, and thus most tenuous and vulnerable. They are much less likely to have inherited wealth from previous generations to soften the blow during a crisis.

The drastic conditions of African Americans are apparent in *The Future of the Race* (co-authored with Cornel West) in which Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes his experiences with racism. In his counterstory, Gates describes his humble socio-economic background in a small town in Piedmont, West Virginia, where he was born on September 16, 1950, and how his father
“worked two jobs—loading trucks at a paper mill, plus a night shift as a janitor for the phone company—to keep” his family “well fed and well clothed” (1996: 3). Gates describes the drastic poverty of black families in the 1950s and 60s when “only 3 percent of blacks had a college degree. And more than half of blacks fell below the poverty line” (1996: 9). Gates notes, “In the year I graduated from high school. Almost half of black households took in less than fifteen thousand dollars” (1996: 9). Gates observes a similar predicament among many African American families in 1993, when the median net worth of blacks was “zero” while those of whites was “ten thousand dollars” (1996: 25). To these bleak statistics, Gates adds, “In 1993, 2.3 million black men were sent to jail or prison while 23,000 received college diploma—a ratio of a hundred to one” (1996: 25). Ironically, Gates experienced racism on July 16, 2009, when Cambridge police officer James Crowley arrested him on the front porch of his own home and sent him to jail after he allegedly refused to step outside when he was asked to do so. Gates’ arrest is not an isolated incident because it is part of the structural racism that routinely subjects blacks to racial profiling in the United States.

In his book, *Driving While Black: What to Do if You Are a Victim of Racial Profiling*, Kenneth Meeks (2000) describes “a classic example of racial profiling,” which is “the tactic of stopping someone only because of the color of his or her skin and a fleeting suspicion that the person is engaging in criminal behavior. It’s generally targeted more toward young black American men and women than any other racial group” (2000: 4-5). Gates’ arrest is an example of racial profiling because police were reportedly told by a white female caller that two black men had broken into a home. In the wake of instant fury and accusations of racial profiling from prominent African American civil rights activists such as Al Sharpton and Tom Joyner, the Cambridge police dismissed their charge of disorderly conduct. Although he received an apology from the Mayor of Cambridge (E. Denise Simmons), Gates demanded a request for forgiveness from James Crowley (Jan 2009). In an interview about the incident, Gates said: “There are one million black men in jail in this country and last Thursday I was one of them. This is outrageous and this is how poor black men across the country are treated every day in the criminal justice system. It's one thing to write about it, but altogether another to experience it” (in Pilkington: 2009).

Gates’ counterstory reveals how even a renowned African American scholar whose work emphasises racial tolerance and multiculturalism is vulnerable to racial bigotry. Gates’ counterstory shows that America is not a post-racial society, a fact that President Obama acknowledged near the end of a press conference of July 22, 2009, in which he said that the “Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody [Gates] when there was already proof that they were in their own home”. As Nicholas Graham points out, Obama noted that racial profiling has “a long history in this country” though “he stepped lightly regarding any role race may have played in the situation” (Graham 2009). Obama did acknowledge that blacks and Hispanics are frequent victims of racial profiling, though, as Andrew Mytelka argues, he also emphasised the “incredible progress that has been made” in race relations in the United States and cited himself as
“testimony to the progress” (Mytelka 2009). Obama later invited both Gates and Crowley to a ‘beer summit’ at the White House where the two people shook hands and had a cordial conversation.

The Gates incident reveals there are limitations in the ways structural racism can be discussed in media and political discourse at the highest level. This confrontation of race is unlikely to occur because President Obama has been avoiding the issue of race in the United States since the beginning of his term, probably for fear of alienating whites who supported him during his campaign. As Bonilla-Silva suggests, Obama does not want to be seen as “divisive”, a term he used during his “race speech” of March 18, 2008, in order to distance himself from a 2003 sermon in which Reverend Jeremiah Wright said: “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no. Not ‘God Bless America’; God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizen as less than human” (Wright: 2008). In his ‘race speech’, Obama said that Reverend Wright “expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic” (Obama: 2008). In a response to Obama’s representation of Reverend’s Wright’s speech as “divisive,” Bonilla-Silva writes: “This should be surprising to race scholars across the nation who regard racism as indeed ‘endemic’ and know that race has been a ‘divisive’ matter since the 17th century” (2010: 220). Moreover, Bonilla-Silva states:

His [Obama's] speech had three serious problems. First, Obama assumed racism is a moral problem (he called it a “sin”) that can be overcome through goodwill. In contrast, I have argued that racism forms a structure and, accordingly, the struggle against racism must be fundamentally geared toward the removal of the practices, mechanisms, and institutions that maintain systemic white privilege. Second, Obama conceived “racism” (in his view, prejudice) as a two-way street. In the speech he stated that both blacks and whites have legitimate claims against one another, that is, that blacks have a real beef against whites because of the continuing existence of discrimination and whites against blacks because of the “excesses” of programs such as affirmative action. Obama was wrong on this point because, as I explained in chapter 7, blacks do not have the institutional power to implement a pro-black agenda whereas whites have had this kind of power from the very moment this country was born (2010: 221).

Post-racialism is a myth akin to wishful thinking that does not address the structural inequalities upon which blacks and whites in the United States have historically been taught to live with one another. Such systemic barriers need to be dismantled before the idealism of post-racialism, which is apparent in Obama’s desire to get beyond race, can be achieved.

Counterhegemonic Stories of Prison Injustice

The continuing significance of race in the Unites States is apparent in counterhegemonic stories that reflect the effects of historically racist policies on the lives of African Americans. This racism is apparent in the
disproportionate imprisonment of blacks at an unprecedented rate; which is also comparable to the incarceration of Hispanics in the US and non-white minorities in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada. According to the Joint Center Databank, at the end of 2002, "Black inmates represented an estimated 45% of all inmates with sentences of more than 1 year, while white inmates accounted for 34% and Hispanic inmates 18%" and "As of December 31, 2002, black males from 20 to 39 years old accounted for about a third of all sentenced prison inmates under state or federal jurisdiction. On that date 10.4 percent of the country’s black male population between the ages of twenty-five to twenty-nine was in prison, compared to 2.4 percent of Hispanic males and 1.2 percent of white males in the same age group".1 In the same vein, the US Bureau of Justice Statistics states, "At midyear 2008, there were 4,777 black male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents being held in state or federal prison and local jails, compared to 1,760 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents and 727 white male inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents".2 These alarming statistics show that a racialised form of imprisonment has been destroying the core of the black community in the United States since the end of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960s, when subtle forms of segregations replaced those of preceding decades in many urban black communities. They suggest that incarceration has taken over from official segregation policies.

The impact of racism on the African American community is also visible in John Edgar Wideman’s counterstory in his 1971 novel Brothers and Keepers, in which he describes the character Robby’s difficult attempt to maintain his humanity and sanity in prison. Robby behaves diligently and receives an associate degree in engineering while in jail. Yet he becomes very affected by prison life and writes a heart-wrenching letter to his brother John about his penitentiary experiences. The letter reads: “Big time, no rehabilitation, lock em up like animals—then let them out on society crazed and angry. Shit don’t make no sense but the people cry for punishment and the politicians abide them—can they really be so blind?” (1984: 243). This passage suggests the impact of racism on African Americans who are incarcerated in the prison industrial complex in inhuman ways in order to appease hegemonic political leaders and constituencies. This imprisonment is a form of structural injustice that limits the freedom of blacks since, as Wideman asserts: “If you’re born black in America you must quickly teach yourself to recognize the invisible barriers disciplining the space in which you may move. This seventh sense you must activate is imperative for survival and sanity. Nothing is what it seems” (1984: 221-22). Wideman’s story points to the harsh existential realities for the majority of black men who are caught in the US prison system. Drawing from similar kinds of stories, scholars can make an inventory of inhumane experiences that black men face in the US criminal justice system.

Wideman’s story is part of a counternarrative that has existed at least since 1975 and which reveals the plight of thousands of young black men.

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1 See ‘African Americans and the Correctional System’ (2009).
2 See ‘US Department of Justice Prison Statistics’ (n.d.).
and women who are still victims of racial and economic oppression in the United States. Wideman’s story describes a type of incarceration that can be interpreted as a metaphor for a larger type of imprisonment, one that is physical, spiritual, economic and societal, but which is mainly reserved for blacks and other racial minorities in the United States. Though not everyone considers blacks criminals, the experience of being an incarcerated person of colour has become a cliché, since many blacks are considered criminals or sent to jail at some point in their life. In America, black men are becoming endangered species living in insecure spaces where chances of success are not only limited by the meanings assigned to their race but also by the codes of behaviour and activities that racism has imposed on them.

The impact of race on African Americans is further evident in the large-scale incarceration of blacks and the confinement of one-third of black children below poverty line in the United States. Recent statistics show that African Americans represent “15% of US drug users (72% of all users are white), 36.8% of those arrested for a drug-related crime, 48.2% of American adults in state, and federal prisons and local jails and 42.5% of prisoners under sentence of death”. In his essay, "Why The Death Penalty Should Be Abolished" (1998), Jeffrey Reiman quotes Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun’s statement that “Even under the most sophisticated death penalty statutes, race continues to play a major role in determining who shall live and who shall die” (122). In the same essay, Reiman argues, “a society that reserves the death penalty for the killers of whites but not of blacks treats blacks as of less worth than whites” (123).

Furthermore, as Floyd D. Weatherspoon points out, “The number of African-Americans under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system is almost too startling to state” (1998: 173). Weatherspoon goes on to say: “The U.S. Justice department reported in 1989 that more than a million African-Americans were then either on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole. Other reports which focus specifically on urban cities find that black males fare even worse. For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, 56% of the black males between 18 and 35 are under the supervision of the criminal justice system” (173). Other statistics show that “The United States imprisons African American men at a rate four times greater than the rate of incarceration for Black men in South Africa”. In a similar vein, Paul Street writes in “Color Bind: Prisons and the New American Racism” (2003): “At the millennium’s turn, blacks are 12.3 percent of the U.S. population, but they comprise fully half of the roughly 2 million Americans currently behind bars … And according to a chilling statistical model used by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, a young black man aged 16 in 1996 faces a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life” (31). Weatherspoon also gives the following data with 1989 demographic characteristics of US jail inmates: “46% White Males, 43% Black Males, 5.0% White Females, 4.0% Black Females, 2.0% Other” (1998: 173). These statistics reveal that the incarceration of black men is much higher

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3 See ‘People of Color and the Prison Industrial Complex: Facts and Figures at a Glance’ (n.d.).
4 See ‘People of Color and the Prison Industrial Complex’ (n.d.).
than that of white men; black men make up a small proportion of the population as a whole while their prison population is roughly the same as that of white men. Moreover, as is apparent in statistics from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, blacks were the most sentenced group of prisoners in the United States between 2000 and 2009 under state or federal jurisdiction and across race and sex.\(^5\)

**Other Counterstories of Inequalities**

In a similar vein, statistics about other aspects of the lives of African Americans are staggering. For instance, “according to the 2000 census, blacks make up approximately 13% of the US population. However, in 2005, blacks accounted for 18,121 (49%) of the estimated 37,331 new HIV/AIDS diagnoses in the United States in the 33 states with long-term, confidential name-based HIV reporting”.\(^6\) Furthermore, “according to 2005 data (the most recent available) from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for black teens and young adults in the age groups 15 to 19, 20 to 24, and 25 to 34, homicide is the leading cause of death”.\(^7\) Finally, according to a 2009 study by Sarah Fass and Nancy K. Cauthen, “34% of black children live in poor families. In the 10 most populated states, rates of child poverty among black children range from 28% in California to 48% in Ohio” (Fass & Cauthen 2008).

Equally grim conditions of blacks in the United States are found in Tavis Smiley’s *The Covenant With Black America*, a report on a 2006 African American convention on the primary concerns of blacks in the United States. In the book, David M. Satcher argues that “African Americans receive a lower quality of care in many areas in cardiovascular care, diabetes, surgery care, and the early diagnosis of cancer, to mention a few” (2006: 4). The study traces these structural problems to the small number of African American physicians in the United States (only ten percent), the propensity of African Americans and Hispanics to be more exposed to hazardous toxic substances, low income of blacks, and the existence of a “culture of medicine [that] is predominantly white European,” and which does not accommodate the specific needs of black patients (3-5). Hence, black Americans face significant disadvantages beyond the control of individual choice that affects inequality and which the post-racial myth obscures with its focus on individual responsibility, culture of poverty, dysfunction and other hegemonic metaphors. In CNN’s 2008 *Black in America I* report, Soledad O’Brien states, “Poor neighborhoods, poor choices, simply finding, let alone affording healthy food is a constant challenge in many black communities” (2008).

**Conclusion**

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\(^6\) See ‘HIV/AIDS and African Americans’ (n.d.).
\(^7\) See ‘Black Homicide Victimization in the United States: An Analysis of 2005 Homicide Data’ (n.d.).
Hegemonic discourses delay equality and justice for African Americans who are depicted as living in culturally deficient communities. These discourses underpin dominant race narratives in America which neglect the structural causes and manifestations of economic inequalities between blacks and whites in the United States and develop ideologies of a post-racial American society that is more myth than reality. Hegemonic stories are subtle and condescending narratives since they attempt to do away with race and the inequalities between blacks and whites in the United States while claiming that African Americans nurture a culture of poverty, separatism and victimology. Such narratives ignore the persistence of racial oppression in the political, economic and social lives of African Americans. Instead of shifting responsibility for racial inequality onto African Americans themselves, hegemonic narratives should look to the institutional and structural perpetuation of racism. Hegemonic stories fail to recognise the lived realities of racism and its effects on Americans where race is an identity shaped by economic and human relations rather than human genetics only. It is imperative, as counterhegemonic stories do, to critically interrogate race as a discursive form of power rather than something tied to bodies only.

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