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A Report on the Banality of Racism

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ABSTRACT

A Report on the Banality of Racism

by

Samuel Kaelberer Mattson

I argue that the current state of racism in the United States of America is best described by what I, adapting Hannah Arendt’s concept, will call the Banality of Racism. Arendt’s work *Eichmann in Jerusalem* plays an important role in the philosophical development of Banality, but I also rely heavily on the work of sociologists and historians to make my case. I define the Banality of Racism as a combination of structuralized racism and the acceptance of dominant and mainstream white masculine culture, that includes a belief in narratives like the criminality of blackness and the post-racial attitude, which clouds our ability to think critically about racism and racial inequality. It thus makes it extremely difficult for us to determine what is and what is not racism. This leaves us unable to understand the oppression, challenges, and problems that African Americans and the ‘others’ in America face on a daily basis. At the conclusion, I propose that in order to overcome the Banality of Racism United States citizens have to confront our racial history and the legacy of oppression. Doing so will help to create more critical thinkers who can challenge current practices that continue to produce racial inequalities.
Introduction

America was a dramatically different place in 2012 than it was in 1955, yet, almost every passing year we hear a new but simultaneously similar story of the life of an African American youth cut short, a life cut short before she or he even had a chance to succeed in life. From Emmett Till’s death in 1955 to Trayvon Martin’s in 2012, the names have changed but the story is eerily similar. Americans live in a country today that promises greatness. It promises equal opportunity to all and the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, this opportunity does not seem to apply to all citizens of the United States. Whether it is sexism, homophobia, or racism, discrimination and oppression are still creating barriers to the American Dream. The way these various forms of oppression operate in America today have all changed, however, and so it is extremely important to wrestle with the reality of life for many Americans today who do not have complete access to the American Dream. Although oppression manifests itself differently in America, I will focus this thesis on contemporary race and racism.

When asked to describe racism, some will give a definition that encompasses a 20th Century understanding that involves blatant and outright hatred towards another group based on their race or ethnicity. However, many people in the United States do not even want to think or talk about the subject. These people believe we live in the colorblind and post-racial America that imagines race to be an outdated category that no longer matters and that, when discussed, only leads to further separation, inequality, and, ironically, racism. Despite the prevailing notion that racism is dying – except for the occasional recurrence of some old-fashioned racist
remark or action – neither the outdated position on racism nor the colorblind phenomenon accurately depicts the current state of racism in the United States.

I argue that racism is a fluid concept and dynamic structure that physically and psychologically oppresses and limits the opportunities of a person or group of people based on their race or ethnicity. Racism is not stagnant; it morphs, shifts, and has an intrinsic relationship to its historical context. The tremendous cost of slavery through the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, and the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement clearly define Americans’ understanding of race and the phases of racism in the United States. The somewhat tumultuous ‘ending’ of the Civil Rights Movement that has become associated with Martin Luther King Jr. occurred in 1968 and ushered in a complex phase of racism typified by uneasiness in acknowledging or addressing the impact of contemporary racism among the different ethnic groups in the United States, particularly the relationship between “black” and “white” America. One result of this anxiety is the desire to believe that color no longer affects how we act on a day-to-day basis.

What the advocates of this position in particular and the general public more broadly fail to realize is that racism still influences our behavior, albeit in a transformed guise whose expression stems from the norms that characterize white American culture. I argue that the current state of racism is best described by what I, adapting Hannah Arendt’s concept, will call the Banality of Racism. The Banality of Racism is a combination of structuralized racism and the acceptance of dominant and mainstream white culture that includes a belief in narratives like the criminality of African Americans and the post-racial attitude, which clouds racism and racial
inequality and therefore makes it extremely difficult for people to determine what is and what is not racism. This leaves people unable to understand the oppression, challenges, and problems that African Americans and the ‘others’ in America face on a daily basis. Whereas early and mid 20th Century racism was more blatant and easily identifiable, the indiscernibility of the Banality of Racism makes it more sinister. Hegemonic white culture often criminalizes and considers African Americans a threat to American society. For instance, African American men not only have high incarceration rates, but also are often the object of suspicion and police brutality. Today, the Banality of Racism makes it hard for most people even to recognize these problems as manifestations of structural racism. Structural racism indicates the ways that white people benefit from institutions while racial minorities are excluded or marginalized. As a result, white people often fail to see the horrifying and detrimental effects that this racism continues to have on American culture and, in particular, the lives and families of African Americans.

Here it might be helpful to clarify the term banality. The Oxford English Dictionary defines banality as ‘a commonplace.’ This means that it is ubiquitous. It is inescapable and yet it is hardly noticeable or noteworthy. To average white Americans, racism is trivial. They believe that now that we are supposedly post-racial, racism does not really exist anymore, but if racism does appear, they think that it is the action of an individual monster or an overtly evil person. They see the racist as someone like a member of the Ku Klux Klan who goes on night raids, lynchings, and burns crosses in people’s yards. While these racists are certainly still
out there, it is the Banality of Racism that allows people to identify the virulent racist people as racists but not also recognize that they too participate in racism.

Racism is present all over the United States in many different and complex ways. It is structural and institutional, symbolic, and individual. Racism is implicit in the ways neighborhoods are occupied, in what is a *de facto* form of segregation, what school one attends, and what one learns as a consequence of exposure to institutions, symbols, and systems of knowledge. Living in a racially structured neighborhood does not make one necessarily a racist, but failing to recognize the racism in those structures and symbols allows racial inequality to continue and the Banality of Racism to grow. This racism is hard to notice, however, and that is, yet again, what constitutes the Banality of Racism. Structuralized racism is commonplace and those who do not notice this continue to promote racism and participate in racist behaviors. To speak of the Banality of Racism is not to say that racism is in its experience or essence banal. The effects of racism are at a minimum oppressive and at their worst life-threatening. With a better understanding of how racism affects us today, we can learn that racism is still everywhere all the time and that it is different now than it used to be.

The danger of the Banality of Racism is especially apparent in the killing of the 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. On February 26, 2012, Martin was walking alone in his Florida neighborhood on the way home from a convenience store. It was raining, so Martin was wearing a hood over his head. George Zimmerman, a resident of this neighborhood and volunteer watch coordinator, noticed Martin and considered him suspicious. After calling the police, Zimmerman continued to pursue Martin, despite
the fact that the authorities specifically told him that they did not need him to do that. After following this teenager around, first in his car and then on foot, he got into an altercation with Martin, during which Zimmerman pulled out his gun, shot and killed him. Martin had reacted to Zimmerman out of fear and tried to defend himself from this man who had stalked him for some time. After several months, the state finally charged Zimmerman with second-degree murder. At first, both the legal proceedings and media attention skirted the issue of race and focused primarily on the Second Amendment and the ‘Stand Your Ground’ law. While race eventually became a topic of discussion in the media, the jury found Zimmerman not guilty despite the fact that the jury, the media or the country had not had a serious conversation about race. People who think about the conditions of race and racism in the United States concluded, therefore, that black men are not considered equal citizens of the United States and do not have protection under the law or equal access to justice. I will argue that the almost exclusively white jury found Zimmerman not guilty because of the Banality of Racism – for reasons similar to the ones that Adolf Eichmann used to defend his actions during the trial that Hannah Arendt described in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The first section of this paper provides a synopsis of the Banality of Evil according to Hannah Arendt and draws analogies between the Banality of Evil and the Banality of Racism. While she never gives a comprehensive definition of the Banality of Evil, Arendt spends much of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* discussing it through her analysis of Adolf Eichmann. I then examine racism and racial inequality from a sociological perspective. Much of this discussion defines and analyzes the racial
narrative of how blackness has been criminalized. After describing the criminality of blackness, I analyze the Trayvon Martin tragedy. I give more detail on the incident itself and then explain why Zimmerman’s action should be seen as a murder and not just an act of self-defense. After the discussion of the tragedy, I return to Arendt’s core concepts, expanding them to address race and explain how this murder represents one instance of the Banality of Racism. Finally, this study suggests what we need to do about the Banality of Racism and how best to implement solutions. I recommend that we as a country refocus how we tell our history and narratives so that they express a more accurate version of the past and how it relates to the present. Without a critical and sustained evaluation of our cultural narratives we will continue to promote an inaccurate view of the United States of America and thereby maintains racial inequality and alienation.

**From the Banality of Evil to the Banality of Racism**

In the summer of 1961, Hannah Arendt attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a member of the Hitler regime of Nazi Germany whose job it was to decide where to deport Jews from Germany. Arendt, like many others, expected to listen to a monster and mastermind of evil who was capable of organizing the deportation and death of millions of people. However, after attending his trial, Eichmann did not appear as a monster, a raving anti-Semite, or a bloodthirsty individual. She concluded that evil operates in a society through its structure and cultural norms more than through the isolated acts of individuals. This evil, in this case anti-Semitism, is so pervasive that it makes it difficult, but not impossible, for members
of that society truly to recognize the depth at which these structures and norms inform and direct their behaviors and judgments. According to Arendt, this form of evil that manifests itself in systemic social structures throughout culture is aptly called the Banality of Evil. Although she does not provide a definition of the Banality of Evil, her account highlights three main characteristics: banality expresses itself in cultural lessons, narratives and norms that give it the appearance of legitimacy, it includes an inability to think critically and underdeveloped judgment, and it generates the apparent absence of evil or racist beliefs and intentions. More importantly, the Banality of Evil arises when the norms in question entail the denigration, exclusion, or extermination of people who fall outside of those norms.

One of the ways that culture produces the Banality of Evil is through language and narrative. We often learn phrases and narratives that teach us about history and ourselves without actually learning the complexity of that history. These narratives present us with morals and bodies of knowledge that we need in order to act in the world. As Arendt points out, “Eichmann's great susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases, combined with his incapacity for ordinary speech, made him, of course, an ideal subject for 'language rules.'”¹ Eichmann picked up the cultural phrases and political tales that the Nazis told about Jews and other supposed sub-humans, but he never stopped to question them. These narratives degraded and dehumanized Jewish people. Sometimes the language we use has subversive meanings and sometimes our narratives are outright debasing. For instance, the Nazis and others blamed the economic downturn after the end of

World War One and the Treaty of Versailles on Jewish people. Arendt highlights this aspect of Eichmann’s understanding of cultural narratives when she claims that “he repeated the same embarrassed clichés about the Treaty of Versailles and unemployment; rather, as he pointed out in court, ‘it was like being swallowed up by the Party against all expectations and without previous decision. It happened so quickly and suddenly.’”2 The stories that the Nazis told about Jewish people were deeply anti-Semitic, but they also fit into a historical legacy of anti-Semitism in Germany and Europe generally. George Mosse’s *Towards the Final Solution* chronicles the history of anti-Semitism in Europe and how it ultimately allowed the Nazis to build on Jewish stereotypes for political aims. Mosse shows how anti-Semitism has played an integral role in European culture and has continuing relevance to the present.3

The stories we tell about the past allow us to act in the present. Narratives make it possible for us to position ourselves in and make sense of the world. The problem is that narratives often simplify and obfuscate historical truths. Arendt’s analysis suggests as much when she says:

Eichmann needed only to recall the past in order to feel assured that he was not lying and that he was not deceiving himself, for he and the world he lived in had once been in perfect harmony. And that German society of eighty million people had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann’s mentality.4

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2 Arendt, 33.
4 Arendt, 52.
In this passage, Arendt discusses the danger and power that narratives and language have for the masses of people. The incorrect or incomplete historical narratives we tell and the phrases we pass around have a profound impact on our actions, even if they are contradictory or completely wrong. The lies function so well because they fit into a worldview that cultural narratives establish and education reinforces. Eichmann felt comfortable with his actions because they fit so cohesively into his understanding of the past and the language that dominated his daily interactions.

Arendt argues that the Banality of Evil clouds a person's moral judgment and makes it difficult to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong. In part because of the acceptance of cultural narratives and this refusal to think for oneself by critiquing social norms, Eichmann passively declined to distinguish right from wrong. He merely accepted the narratives he learned with no critical reflection. According to Arendt, the inability or unwillingness to think critically rendered Eichmann unable to analyze the world around him. She describes best the manifestation of the Banality of Evil in the individual when, talking about Eichmann, she claims that:

He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace.\(^5\)

While historically we tend to associate racism with the acts of depraved and angry individuals, Arendt’s claim is that this is not always the case. In fact, the most potent forms of evil are those that which becomes normal and clouds our ability to think.

\(^5\) Arendt, 287-288.
Arendt underscores the power of this analysis when she claims that “an average, ‘normal’ person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong.” A lack of critical self- and cultural evaluation is not something exclusive to Nazi Germany or Adolf Eichmann; instead it arises whenever there is a compartmentalization of thought and a highly bureaucratic government or workforce.

As a result of the absence of reflection that underpins the Banality of Evil, Arendt suggests that the individual lacks the kind of direct intent we expect to find in acts of evil. Eichmann’s testimony speaks to the Banality of Evil in Germany. According to Arendt, he claimed that, “there were no voices from the outside to arouse his conscience.” Eichmann supposedly believed that there were no dissenters, and he understood his actions as just doing his job. This speaks to his normality and his thoughtlessness. The norm was anti-Semitism. It became a part of everyday life, so much so that most Germans refused to think about its impact and continued to live their life and “just do their jobs.” For Arendt, the lack of any explicit stance on anti-Semitism was not necessary to commit racist atrocities.

In her characterization of Eichmann, Arendt notes that Eichmann had “obviously also no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind. He ‘personally’ never had anything whatever against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew hater.” What gives the Banality of Evil its power is that it ironically prompts those who

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6 Arendt, 26.
7 Ibid., 126.
8 Ibid. 26.
claim to not harbor any ill will or hatred to perform despicable acts. In her
discussion of Eichmann's trial, she highlights Eichmann's lack of intent when she
claims that

Foremost among the larger issues at stake in the Eichmann trial was the
assumption current in all modern legal systems that intent to do wrong is
necessary for the commission of a crime. On nothing, perhaps, has civilized
jurisprudence prided itself more than on this taking into account of the
subjective factor. Where this intent is absent, where, for whatever reasons,
even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and
wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed.9

Of course, the Israeli court did not struggle to conclude that Eichmann committed a
crime, but the remark about the absence of intent describes the effect of the Banality
of Evil. Arendt thought that Eichmann did not have an evil intent, at least not in the
guise of pure hatred towards Jewish people. She did not believe that hate and anti-
Semitism motivated his role in the Nazi Party, but rather that he was just following
orders and, in doing so, looking for social acceptance. This does not mean, however,
that she thought that he had not committed a crime. Her analysis points to the
problem that an uncritical and widespread acceptance of cultural norms that
promote racial inequality and perpetuate racism makes judging criminality even
harder for everyone who does not challenge the legitimacy of the norms. She
believed that Eichmann was not an evil person in the way that we typically think of
Nazis as monsters in our current culture; rather he was caught under the power of
the Banality of Evil. Instead of thinking about his actions, he just acted in accordance
with the prevalent norms of European society. This explains, but does not excuse,
his behavior.

9 Arendt, 77.
In summary, Arendt argues that the Banality of Evil is pervasive. One of her key observations about the Banality of Evil is its normality and broad acceptance in society. She suggests “the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, that they were and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.” According to Arendt, Eichmann was a normal German civilian. She believed that any German civilian could have carried out Eichmann’s job because he did not have any evil motives but was simply climbing the social and employment ladder. People are often motivated by the self-interest of personal advancement, and according to Arendt, this was as true of Eichmann as any one else. Additionally, it was almost impossible for Eichmann to know that his actions were wrong because he never understood the reality of the situation. He intuitively understood the dominant norm of his society, one that denigrated and oppressed Jewish people, but never stopped to think about or question his own actions. While Hannah Arendt never really articulates a concrete definition of the Banality of Evil, her many examples can be summarized from the case against Adolf Eichmann. She explains how the Banality of Evil is an institutional phenomenon. It pervades culture through narratives and can extend to social institutions like the criminal justice system, as I will later argue. The Banality of Evil renders people unable accurately to assess moral issues in regard to equality. It does so through a process that normalizes the acceptance of inequality and racism in a way that erases personal intent and responsibility.

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10 Arendt, 253.
Arendt’s thesis is not without its challengers, a good example of which is the recently published *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer* by Bettina Stangneth. Stangneth uncovers evidence from Eichmann’s time in Argentina that suggests he did have deep-seated anti-Semitism. This challenges Arendt’s understanding of the Banality of Evil because she premises her analysis on his lack of individual evil, or anti-Semitism in this case. She claims that he was a normal citizen and joined the Nazi party because he could benefit personally from it, not because of any ill will towards the Jewish people. If Strangneth is correct, however, his motives were explicit and deliberate in a manner that coincided with the party’s anti-Semitism. Eichmann is thus closer to our usual notion of a moral monster than the unwitting victim of the Banality of Evil.

Although this is an important challenge to Arendt’s Banality of Evil thesis, it can be addressed. In an article on Stangneth’s book, columnist Seyla Benhabib argues that

> Although Arendt was wrong about the depth of Eichmann’s anti-Semitism, she was not wrong about these crucial aspects of his persona and mentality. She saw in him an all-too familiar syndrome of rigid self-righteousness; extreme defensiveness fueled by exaggerated metaphysical and world-historical theories; fervent patriotism based on the “purity” of one’s people; paranoid projections about the power of Jews and envy of them for their achievements in science, literature and philosophy; and contempt for Jews’ supposed deviousness, cowardice and pretensions to be the “chosen people.” This syndrome was banal in that it was widespread among National Socialists.\(^{11}\)

These characteristics Benhabib outlines support the Banality of Evil because they identify cultural factors that were thoroughly woven into German norms and

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narratives. Nationalism in particular can have a powerful impact on critical discourse. Nationalism often refutes and denies any critical conversation that might tarnish the good reputation of the country. More importantly, Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann’s lack of intent or commitment to racist beliefs speaks more to the absence of any fanaticism that would distinguish him from his countrymen than to a lack of personal anti-Semitism. Benhabib thus underscores the cultural pervasiveness of the attitudes that saturated the culture of which Eichmann was a part, thereby making them seem all the more banal to him and the Germans.

Although she may have been wrong about the extent to which Eichmann consciously embraced anti-Semitism, Arendt’s hypothesis still allows for more overt anti-Semites to exist even in the context of the Banality of Evil. In fact, outright evil can bolster the Banality of Evil in everyday life. Blatant vitriol can make it seem as though that expression of evil is the only true form of evil. In other words, the existence of people who express and act according to an extremist agenda focuses society’s attention on those instances of evil and deflects attention from the ideational narratives that inform most people’s view of the world around them. In other words, the Banality of Evil still explains how the normal, everyday person could participate in and act out evil or racist actions without really understanding the situation or consequences. According to Benhabib,

by coining the phrase “the banality of evil” and by declining to ascribe Eichmann’s deeds to the demonic or monstrous nature of the doer, Arendt knew that she was going against a tradition of Western thought that sees evil in terms of ultimate sinfulness, depravity and corruption. Emphasizing the fanaticism of Eichmann’s anti-Semitism cannot discredit her challenge to a
tradition of philosophical thinking; it only avoids coming honestly to terms with it.\textsuperscript{12}

Essentially, Arendt’s argument is that the Banality of Evil explains how the average individual could participate in and carry out racist and evil actions without really understanding the situation or consequences.

An additional challenge to Arendt’s thesis is that the Banality of Evil undermines accountability. Scholars like Barry Clarke and Joseph Beatty, argue that the social implications of the Banality of Evil diffuse individual responsibility into societal responsibility.\textsuperscript{13} Characterizing Eichmann as unintelligent and morally unaware makes it impossible to hold him responsible. This objection does not seriously challenge the integrity of Arendt’s analysis. While the pervasiveness of the Banality of Evil clouds someone’s ability to make moral judgments, it does not make it impossible for her or him to think or absolve her or him of personal responsibility for her or his actions. The philosopher Paul Formosa clarifies what Arendt means when she describes Eichmann as ‘having an inability to think.’ He claims that if thinking is genuinely ‘an ever-present faculty in everybody,’ it is clear that Arendt is using the term ‘inability’ in a very strange sense to mean something like ‘failing to’ or ‘choosing not to’. If we grasp this, we see that the ability to think is actually an ever-present possibility in every normal person, though its exercise is always contingent. Given Eichmann’s ‘normality’, it seems to follow that even if Eichmann did not think he nevertheless might have.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12} Benhabib, “Who’s On Trial, Eichmann or Arendt?”
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 504.
\end{flushleft}
Eichmann did not lack the ability to think, he just chose not to think critically about his actions and beliefs. His choice to readily accept and embrace these attitudes and norms without thinking critically about them in fact makes him responsible for his actions. The bureaucracy of the Nazi government in his case aided this process of passively choosing not to think. He chose just to follow the rules, pursue self-interested goals and the cultural norms of society, which allowed him not to think about the moral context of his actions.

Formosa suggests that Arendt’s analysis falls short in a different way, however. He claims that Arendt thinks of Eichmann as a ‘nobody’ and that is problematic for holding him responsible because she argues that ‘nobodies’ cannot make moral decisions. Formosa attempts to rectify this issue by arguing that where Arendt finds a lack of personhood, [J.S.] Mill instead finds merely a lack of character. Arendt’s move here is surely the wrong one. Rather we can still see Eichmann as a person, possessing spontaneity and the ability to act autonomously, and so worthy of basic respect and able to be held responsible, but also as possessing a lack of character which allowed him to perpetrate evil by thoughtlessly adhering to status quo rules and customs.\footnote{Formosa, 514.}

Formosa is right to suggest that it is a lack of moral character that affects Eichmann and not a lack of personhood. As a human being, Eichmann has a certain amount of freedom that allows and even requires him to act regardless of the constraints. This freedom demands the responsibility to act morally and simultaneously gives us the ability to hold people accountable for that freedom. Consequently, it is a lack of moral character instead of a lack of personhood that allows society to hold him responsible for his actions. The thesis of the Banality of Evil does lead us to believe
that individuals hold racist beliefs without acknowledging them, but it does not ultimately excuse them from acting upon those beliefs.

My special thesis is that Arendt’s basic position can be applied in the context of American anti-black racism. Instead of the Banality of Evil, which refers specifically to anti-Semitism in the case of Adolf Eichmann, I will speak to the Banality of Racism. All of the characteristics of the Banality of Evil as Arendt describes them apply similarly to what I am calling the Banality of Racism:

1) Expression in cultural lessons, narratives, and norms,
2) The inability to think critically (clouded judgment),
3) The apparent absence of evil or racist beliefs or intentions.

I define the Banality of Racism as a combination of structuralized racism and the acceptance of dominant and mainstream white culture, that expresses itself through a belief in narratives like the criminality of blackness and the post-racial attitude, which clouds racism and racial inequality and therefore makes it extremely difficult for people to determine what is and what is not racism. It is especially relevant to those in particular who believe in the post-racial ideology. The culture of post-racialism and colorblindness makes it seem as though racial inequality has passed and no longer has an effect on society today, when in fact the legacy of racial inequality and racism still lingers. Additionally, post-racial believers in the United States claim to understand true equality and justice, but cannot tell what is right from wrong or what is racist or not. The culture of a post-racial and colorblind America makes it particularly hard for people to think critically about racial inequality and also enables them actively to resist any discussion of race.
Another characteristic of the Banality of Racism is that one need not hold expressly racist convictions to be a racist. We often think of racists as those who are members of a racist party like the Ku Klux Klan, yet this way of thinking does not fit our society anymore. Certainly, there still are members of racial-hate groups and even blatant racists, but many people today are racist without knowing it. They do not become racist from any personally chosen conviction and that makes it difficult to call specific individuals or actions “racist.” For example, whereas the American slave owners of the past thought that they were good and righteous people, they certainly never claimed to hold a belief in true equality. Today, however, most of us explicitly believe in equality, which becomes all the more problematic in the context of the racist attitudes and acts we sometimes endorse, implicitly or explicitly. While people may not say something intentionally and explicitly racist, they often do make a racist comment. The Banality of Racism makes it possible for people to claim that they believe everyone should be treated equally and yet simultaneously claim that black people naturally have a lower I.Q. than white people, for instance.

State of Racism and Racial Inequality Today

Before returning to my analysis of the Banality of Evil, or the Banality of Racism in the context of American racism, some context about the state of racism in America today will be necessary. This section begins to unpack some of the racial injustices that African American people experience on a regular basis in the United States of America. The discussion here relies heavily on the work of sociologists who have researched the many ways that racism presents itself in American society.
While I will certainly discuss some issues that all African Americans face, I intend to focus my analysis on the criminalization of blackness. The criminalization of African Americans demonstrates the insidiousness of the Banality of Racism. It allows people to excuse beatings, killings, and generally to accept unequal racial statistics as somehow outside the realm of racial injustice. Coupled with the criminalization of blackness, I believe that the cultural phenomenon of colorblindness, a belief in a post-racial America where race no longer matters, helps explain the Banality of Racism and can make sense of the murder of Trayvon Martin and the destruction of countless African American lives.

I suggested earlier that racism is a fluid concept and a dynamic structure that physically and psychologically oppresses and limits the opportunities of a person or group of people based on their race or ethnicity. Sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, the authors of “Race in the Twenty-First Century,” help add nuance to my definition of racism by explaining how it operates in society. They argue that racism manifests itself in two forms in society: institutional and interpersonal. According to Desmond and Emirbayer, “institutional racism is systemic white domination of people of color, embedded and operating in corporations, universities, legal systems, political bodies, cultural life, and other social collections.” Interpersonal racism, on the other hand, is found, “in everyday interactions and practices. Interpersonal racism can be overt; however, most of the time interpersonal racism is quite covert. It is found in the habitual,

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commonsensical, and ordinary practices of our lives. Our racist attitudes, as Lillian Smith remarked in *Killers of the Dream*, easily, ‘slip from the conscious mind deep into the muscles.”

Our attitudes, ones that we may not even intentionally have, affect the lives of others. The criminalization of African Americans and colorblindness are forms of racial narratives that operate on both a systemic and institutional racism, like the mass incarceration of African Americans, and in interpersonal confrontations, i.e. Zimmerman’s confrontation with Trayvon Martin.

One of the most destructive forces that helps to maintain racial inequality in the United States is the criminalization of African Americans. A simple way to understand this is to listen to the words that people use to describe black men in interpersonal interactions. It is particularly noticeable when people, generally white people, talk about black men or bring them up in connection with a crime. One often hears the terms ‘thug,’ ‘gangster,’ or ‘aggressive’. For instance, when Richard Sherman, a professional football player for the Seattle Seahawks, expressed his excitement for making a great play and his frustration with a player on the other team, many viewers proceeded to call him a thug and gangster on social media. Richard Sherman, however, is neither of those things off the field and several people defended him, noting that he graduated from Stanford University, one of America’s highest ranked universities. While this is just one example of people ascribing dangerous and criminal behavior to a black male, it can have much more serious effects, especially if the people affected are not professional football players or do not have a degree from Stanford University.

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17 Desmond and Emirbayer, 31-32.
An incredible amount of evidence illustrates how the criminality of blackness has developed as a narrative. This narrative does not need to relate strictly to the criminal justice system or some illegal action of the kinds I discuss below in order to affect the lives of African Americans, however. One of these social institutions, for example, is the educational system. According to recent studies, black students are three and a half times more likely to be suspended from school.\(^\text{18}\) Some people might argue that these children have an attitude issue and deserve to be suspended. However, research shows that teachers label black children troublemakers more quickly in the classroom than their white counterparts. These teachers see the students’ conduct fitting into a pattern of bad behavior that does not even exist yet. Stanford psychology professor Jennifer Eberhardt, one of the researchers, claims that “we see that stereotypes not only can be used to allow people to interpret a specific behavior in isolation, but also stereotypes can heighten our sensitivity to behavioral patterns across time. This pattern sensitivity is especially relevant in the schooling context.”\(^\text{19}\) The stereotyping that places African American children into the categories of ‘problem student’ or ‘repeat offender’ prefigures the criminality of blackness as it is applied to adults. Teachers see students as problem children because they have learned to associate blackness with criminality and bad behavior.

In fact, Stanford psychology graduate student Jason Okonofua suggests that “most


social relationships entail repeated encounters. Interactions between police officers and civilians, between employers and employees, between prison guards and prisoners all may be subject to the sort of stereotype escalation effect we have identified in our research."  

Racist assumptions manifest themselves in these instances of the criminalization of blackness because instead of seeking to understanding the context and background of these young African American children, schools punish them and label them as problem children.

Another way that criminalization impacts the lives of African Americans is the use of irresponsibly violent and deadly force by police and others. According to ProPublica, an independent, investigative journal’s analysis of federally-collected data on fatal police shootings, young black males are killed at a rate of 31.7 per million whereas white males of the same age are killed at a rate of 1.47 per million. This stark difference does not come from some perverse notion of cultural difference, as some like to argue. Joshua Correll, a psychology and neuroscience professor at the University of Colorado, has researched peoples’ reaction times to shooting criminals on an online video game. He found that people drew their weapon quicker to shoot African American characters in the game than to shoot white characters.

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20 “Teachers More Likely to Label Black Students as Troublemakers,” Association for Psychological Science.


One can see more evidence of police brutality and irresponsible force in the video recording of police officers killing Eric Garner, a middle aged black man in the summer of 2014. In the video, police confront Garner and attempt to arrest him. With multiple police officers around him forcing him to the ground, one of the officers maintains a chokehold around his neck. Garner repeatedly claims that he cannot breathe until he goes silent. After he is successfully subdued, the police officers realize that he has actually stopped breathing entirely and pronounce him dead.\textsuperscript{23} While it may perhaps be the job of the police to arrest people for committing crimes, they are also supposed to do so responsibly and safely. Unfortunately, Eric Garner is only one of the many African Americans that face police assault and force on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{24} In part because of narratives like the criminalization of blackness, the Banality of Racism affects the interpersonal interactions of people on a daily basis.

While these cases of violent force can sometimes garner national attention, the most institutionalized case of racial inequality comes in the form of mass incarceration. In the essay "Racialized Mass Incarceration: Poverty, Prejudice, and Punishment," sociologists Lawrence D. Bobo and Victor Thompson point to three features of American society that have helped establish the mass incarceration of African Americans: black poverty and public policy, the War on Drugs, and the impact of racial prejudices and punitive measures. According to a study,


\textsuperscript{24} Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Walter Scott are a few African American victims who have garnered national attention in recent times.
massive economic restructuring, in the form of the de-industrialization of the American economy (i.e., a shift from heavy goods manufacturing to a service-oriented and information processing economy) and the de-concentration of industry (i.e., a shift of goods manufacturing from cities to suburban or ex-urban rings), combined to create new, persistent, and intensely high rates of poverty and unemployment for inner-city African Americans, particularly those of low education and skill levels.

This economic shift helped produce an environment that is suitable for and susceptible to high levels of juvenile delinquency, open drug use, and crime in general. Of course, this sort of environment affects whites in similar manners. Nevertheless, historical forces such as the first and second great migrations in the early to mid-twentieth century led to a concentration of African Americans in the inner city and urban settings and so they are disproportionately affected by such economic changes. During the great migrations, which started at the beginning of both World War One and World War Two, many African Americans abandoned rural farming in the South. Wartime needs for manufacturing in both the First and Second World Wars created many job opportunities in the North. Sixty years later, the American economic industry has shifted from production to service, so many of these manufacturing plants have closed, leaving those in these urban environments without jobs. While some whites are now stuck in these urban environments as well, the fact of their whiteness, or white privilege, extends them greater opportunities to take advantage of other job openings. In a study on the hiring process, the Chicago School of Business found that “applicants with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely to get called for an initial interview than applicants with

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African-American-sounding names. Applicants with white names need to send about 10 résumés to get one callback, whereas applicants with African-American names need to send about 15 résumés to achieve the same result."26 People with a whitesounding name are more likely to get a job than a person with an African American-sounding name. White privilege operates at every level in society and hiring practices are no different.

Without job opportunities, the War on Drugs disproportionately affected these predominantly African American neighborhoods and, therefore, African American families. Bobo and Thompson also suggest that with the implementation of the War on Drugs by the Reagan Administration, police officers shifted their attention towards sheer numbers of drug arrests instead of spending the serious amount of time it takes to track down the chief drug dealers. In order to increase the number of arrests and simultaneously increase funding, police focused on the public space drug market. The public space drug market exists mostly in the communities and environments of poor and job-sparse communities that African American families were forced into through the redlining policies of the past and also by the process of de-concentration and de-industrialization described in the previous paragraph.27

Additionally, despite studies suggesting that illicit drug use is roughly the same across racial categories, about 14% blacks are about 34% of those involved in

27 Bobo and Thompson, 335.
drug-arrests, and blacks make up about 50% of those serving state prison sentences for drug offenses, while whites only make up 26%. These statistics show that African Americans are more likely and unfairly to be arrested and twice as likely to spend time in prison for drug use than whites. The unequally high numbers of imprisonment also correlate with more punitive measures like the “three strike policy” that mandates a lifetime sentence for individuals convicted of three crimes at any point in their life. Additionally these numbers stem from racial prejudices in the criminal justice process that express themselves through the acceptance of stereotypes like the criminality of African Americans that makes them seem guilty just because they are black. Those who are affected by the Banality of Racism and therefore conditioned to believe in the criminality of African Americans are more likely preemptively to believe an African American is guilty of the crime that she or he have been accused of committing.

While the Banality of Racism reveals itself institutionally in education and the criminal justice system, it also finds itself entrenched in the culture of the colorblind ideology. After the activism of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s cooled down, many whites found it easier to suggest that with the passage of Civil Rights legislation we had reached equality and a post-racial state. In response to this phenomenon, colorblindness came about. With a belief in post-equality, people began to justify various elements of racial inequality as outside of the realm of race, like the historical legacies of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. They gave other

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28 Bobo and Thompson, 333.
reasons to address racial inequality, including racially-coded phrases that place the blame of inequality on bad culture and a lack of responsibility.

In their article “I Did Not Get That Job Because of a Black Man,” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Amanda Lewis, and David G. Embrick studied some of the current phrases people use that demonstrate the disconnect of colorblindness from racial inequality. They examined four phrases that are some form of:

1. ‘the past is the past,’
2. ‘I didn’t own any slaves,’
3. ‘If Jews, Italians, and Irish have made it, how come blacks have not?’
4. and finally, ‘I did not get a job (or a promotion or was admitted to a college) because of a black man.’

From these four expressions, they found that the phrases are “powerful tools that help most whites maintain a colorblind sense of self and, at the same time, to reinforce views that help reproduce the current racial order.” Each of the four phrases says something different about how race works today. The first two deny any historical legacies of racial inequality and turn attention away from racial inequality towards lack of responsibility. The third phrase and the final phrase claim that race is no longer a factor in jobs, etc. because we are post-racial and everyone has equal opportunity to succeed. The fourth puts the onus on affirmative action policies that many consider irrelevant today.

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Desmond and Emirbayer capture the problems with colorblindness accurately when they claim that “color-blindness is not only a self-contradictory code – ‘at once I see and fail to see your blackness’ – but it is also a fundamentally wrong response to racial injustice, one that ‘fosters the systematic denial of racial subordination and the psychological repression of an individual’s recognition of that subordination, thereby allowing it to continue.’”

Because of the legacies and social structures that have been in place for a long time and that privilege whiteness, colorblindness often leads to ignoring the kinds of racial inequality discussed above and intentionally shutting off discussion about racism. People who believe in the colorblind ideology in the United States are rejecting their ability to think critically and that rejection empowers the continuation of racial inequality. Instead of facing reality, colorblindness allows white people to “see themselves, simply, as normal. And herein lies the power of whiteness. By refusing to speak its own name, whiteness presents itself as normality.” Of course, there are many different outcomes to presenting whiteness as normal, but it leads unconsciously to the acceptance of white norms and the rejection of anything else. Because the norms in our American society are so prominently defined by whiteness, it allows “colorblind” people to reason that everyone has the same starting point and has had equal opportunity to succeed, which makes criminal blackness seem even more base and deviant.

Colorblindness doesn’t just adopt whiteness as the norm, it also makes any discussion of race impossible. In a post-racial world, race no longer serves as a

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30 Desmond and Emirbayer, 41; quoting Law professor Neil Gotanda.
31 Ibid., 38.
means for identification. Therefore, identifying with a certain race makes race a matter of choice. Additionally, if the default norm for race is whiteness, then claiming that a race other than whiteness plays a role in one’s life is choosing to be outside of the norm. That means that people who claim to be racially profiled are choosing to believe that their own race factored into the profiling and could not possibly come from the profiler because the profiler does not see race as a factor. In part, the implicit rejection of race allows people unconsciously to accept racist tropes and stereotypes, such as the criminalization of blackness. In their discussion of unconscious racism, Desmond and Emirbayer draw on law professor Charles Lawrence’s analysis:

To the extent that this cultural belief system has influenced all of us, we are all racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions upon which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation.\textsuperscript{32}

This unconsciousness of racism is inherent to the Banality of Racism. Because people have accepted colorblindness, they have uncritically developed and maintained racial narratives and prejudices. Colorblindness clouds our ability to think, act, and pursue justice with any real sense of equality.

My argument is that the Banality of Racism is a cultural phenomenon that makes it difficult for everyday people to recognize racism and racial inequality. To some degree, it explains how it is possible for people to watch the death of Eric Garner on tape and not see anything wrong. As a nation, we have generally accepted the criminalization of blackness almost unconsciously. In part because of the

\textsuperscript{32} Desmond and Emirbayer, 33.
colorblind ideology, the Banality of Racism impairs our ability to think and to judge questions of morality and equality. This type of racism looks different than slavery and Jim Crow era racism and is so entrenched in our culture that some people adopt it without knowing. We constantly reinforce it through social structures and institutions like the criminal justice system and through our various interpersonal interactions. In order to address the Banality of Racism we need to have an honest discussion of racial inequality and the racial prejudices that we all maintain to various degrees.

**Trayvon Martin**

Before I apply my thesis of the Banality of Racism to the Trayvon Martin tragedy, a review of how the events of that day unfolded will be helpful. On February 23, 2012, Trayvon Martin was walking home from a store where he purchased some skittles and an iced-tea. On his way back, it started raining so he cut through a gated community near his dad’s house. While passing through the neighborhood, Martin passed George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman, and his home. Zimmerman called the local police department to report Martin as a suspicious character. During his phone conversation with police, Zimmerman identified Martin as in his late teens, Black, and wearing a dark hoodie. He started the conversation with “This guy looks like he’s up to no good or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around looking about.” He goes on to say that, “Something’s wrong with him. Yep, he’s coming to check me out. He’s got something in his hands. I don’t know what his deal is.” Later in the phone call, Zimmerman tells the police that Martin is
running and it appears that Zimmerman is trying to follow him. The police tell him that, “We don’t need you to do that,” but he dismisses it.  

Martin was also on the phone with his girlfriend at the time. From her description of his voice and thoughts, he was afraid of Zimmerman. At first he was not very fearful, but the longer Zimmerman followed Martin the more frightened he got. Eventually he took off running until he suggested to his girlfriend that there was nowhere to run. The phone conversation stops at that point, at which time it seems that Martin decided to confront Zimmerman. They got into an altercation and Zimmerman pulled out his gun and shot Martin to death. The police brought Zimmerman in for questioning, but did not arrest him until later after public outcry. On April 10th, the local D.A. announced that they were charging Zimmerman with second-degree murder. Almost three months later, on July 13th, the 6-person all female jury found Zimmerman not guilty. The lack of an original arrest and the not-guilty verdict generated an incredible amount of public discussion, anger, and demonstration. Much of the discussion centered on the role that race played in Martin’s death.

While many people refuse to believe that race was a factor in Trayvon Martin’s death, they often deny the issue to avoid any confrontation with the idea that we are not a post-racial nation. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that an analysis of the Trayvon Martin tragedy reveals how it was indeed a telling event about the state of race and racism in the United States today. I will show how this

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event reflects and can be effectively analyzed through the lens of the Banality of Racism, demonstrating the devastating consequences of the manifestation of racism today.

As discussed earlier, there is a disparity between police treatment of minorities and people of color in general and white Americans. Take this imaginative story for example, two fairly similar videos of a white man fighting with the police and the video of a black man fighting with the police. At the end of the video or as a result of the altercation, the white man is arrested and the black man is shot to death. The common argument by people that watch the video that often follows is that the black man was killed because he did something wrong. That leads to the question about why the white man was not killed or, conversely, deserved to live. A common response is that it would have been justifiable for the police to kill the white man as well. While I would personally argue that neither should be killed, the treatment of these two men is unequal. Although a comparison of videos of police fights in the white community and the African American community may be arbitrary, several prominent police incidents have been caught on tape that captured American mainstream attention. The two that come to mind are the Rodney King and Eric Garner videos. In the Rodney King incident, someone filmed the police while they brutally beat Rodney King, an African American man, in the streets. After the trial in 1992 resulted in a not-guilty verdict for the police, large-scale riots exploded all over the country. I have noted that this past summer, a video emerged of police attempting to restrain an African American man by the name of
Eric Garner. The video shows several police officers bringing him to the ground and using a chokehold that made it unable for him to breathe and resulted in his death.

The fact that almost twenty years later, the same event can occur with the same lack of respect for black life is frightening. In many ways, Judith Butler’s analysis of the Rodney King video is readily applicable to the Eric Garner video. Butler argues that we read racist stereotypes into what we see, but we do it so easily that we actually think we see what we are reading. The world we see in everyday life fits into a racial and social context and that affects the limited world we see through videos and images even more so. She gives an example of how people racially read the video of Rodney King:

Watching King, the white paranoiac forms a sequence of narrative intelligibility that consolidates the racist figure of the black man: “He had threatened them, and now he is being justifiably restrained.” “If they cease hitting him, he will release his violence, and now is being justifiably restrained.” King’s palm turned away from his body, held above his own head, is read not as self-protection but as the incipient moments of a physical threat.

His movements are questioned and analyzed differently than they would be if a white person were the object of the beating. There is a certain level of presumed guilt, which can only come from the color of his skin and the belief in an infallible police department and criminal justice system. Ultimately, the not-guilty verdict serves an acceptance of the reading of this incident. Butler adds to this analysis:

This is not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to ‘see.’ Indeed, the trials call to be read not only as instruction in racist modes of seeing but as a repeated and ritualistic production of blackness...

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This is a seeing which is a reading, that is, a *contestable* construal, but one which nevertheless passes itself off as ‘seeing,’ a reading which became for that community, and for countless others, the same as seeing.\(^{35}\)

During the trial of Rodney King, the prosecution asked that a commentator narrate the actions in the video while it was shown to the jury. Butler argues that this literal reading of the video is an instruction in the racial construction of the criminality of blackness. Twenty years later, when a similar incident occurred, the assumed guilt and criminality of Eric Garner had time to develop and become normal and banal.

While he was not a police officer, George Zimmerman functioned as a proxy for white law and therefore took the same role as the police officers in the aforementioned videos. First, his position as a neighborhood watchman gave him some authority and power to feel responsible for protecting the neighborhood. It is clear from his phone conversation with the police that he felt that they were on his side and that he could continue his pursuit of Martin. Clearly the police briefly requested that they did not need him to follow Martin, but they did not repeat their demand for him to stop. Additionally, upon his discovery, the police made no arguments out of the fact that they did tell him to end his pursuit. His refusal to follow the order was a non-issue for the police because had they truly intended for him to stop they would have recognized his pursuit of Martin as aggression. Instead, the police did not use this as a reason to challenge him in any meaningful way. Certainly the police could not have known how the incident would progress, but generally if someone disobeys a direct order then they are supposed to be held accountable. Unfortunately, this did not happen and thus not questioning his right to

\(^{35}\) Butler, 16.
continue his pursuit of Martin gave tacit approval of his authority to serve as a state-sponsored official.

It is also the case that there is a long history of white civilians pursuing justice and punishment for African Americans who often did not even commit crimes with approval from the police and justice system. The Equal Justice Initiative released a report about lynchings in the American South, where almost 4,000 lynchings occurred from the end of Reconstruction until the 1950s. Some of these instances included white mobs entering jail cells and pulling victims out of prison in order to lynch them. Police rarely, if ever, dispersed these mobs and the lynchings themselves often acted as community gatherings and picnics with the support of the police. This legacy of police and white community cooperation and the criminalization of blackness that I discussed earlier sets the groundwork for a culture that accepts Martin's murder and Zimmerman's role as law enforcer. Philosopher and lawyer Timothy Joseph Golden characterizes this phenomenon when he claims that:

In virtue of the structurally complete yet wholly unethical transcendence of an epistemologically grounded ontological field and semiotic framework saturated with anti-black racism, Zimmerman ‘knows’ that Trayvon Martin is a ‘criminal.’ Zimmerman can, totally oblivious to Trayvon Martin’s ethical demand upon him purport to identify himself with the law, and by no means other than his own self-declaration, supported by a larger white systemic culture, impose demands on Trayvon Martin, who, because of his dark skin falls under the transcendent, signified (res) of ‘criminal.’

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37 Timothy Joseph Golden “Two Forms of Transcendence: Justice and the Problem of Knowledge,” in Yancey and Jones, 78.
Golden’s analysis helps tie the development of the criminalization of blackness together with Zimmerman’s ability to represent the law demonstrates how combined they created a scenario that allowed him to pursue and kill Martin. Many people missed this when they heard about the incident because they conflated the criminality of African Americans with non-raced terms like ‘thug’ and ‘culture.’ Yet the ‘epistemologically grounded ontological field and semiotic framework’ that Golden mentions allows people to dismiss this incident and explains how they can see and read two different stories in the Rodney King and Eric Garner videos.

The danger that the reading of the videos and Martin’s death presents is the belief that this is a normal and correct way of watching and understanding the events. In her book More Beautiful and More Terrible, Imani Perry agrees that the problem of the tacit approval of this reading makes it become normal. She claims that the, “acceptance of this view results in an environment in which a pattern of discriminatory targeting seems benign, for when social understandings are so uncontested that they become invisible, the social meanings that arise from them appear natural.”\(^{38}\) It is not the case that these two videos were not contested, because indeed they were by social commenters, but these incidents happen so regularly without video evidence and truly open conversation that the majority of these events go unchallenged. The lack of any such conversation allows for this interpretation to go unquestioned more easily.

Not only were Trayvon Martin’s actions that day put under a microscope and scrutinized, but people also questioned his presence and right to be in that gated community. Philosophers Stephen C. Ferguson II and John H. McClendon III suggest as much when they argue that “when under question as to why he was present in the vicinity of this gated community, Martin was required to establish his right by offering proof to the satisfaction of Zimmerman. Akin to a runaway slave or the pass laws of the former Apartheid South Africa, White authority trumps Black rights. And, in the last resort, the exercise of violent force is used to maintain the established class and racial order.”

To many whites across the country and Zimmerman in particular, Martin’s presence as a black man with a hoodie threatened the peace of the white neighborhood. We often believe that our communities are safe zones from danger and therefore safe from dangerous people. The criminalization of black bodies makes it so that the presence of a black person in a gated and majority white community represents a criminal in the neighborhood. In her essay “Imagined Communities: Whitopia and the Trayvon Martin Tragedy,” Maria del Guadalupe emphasizes the impact that the criminalization of blackness has on majority white spaces. She argues that this combination of white community safe-zones and the criminality of blackness impacted the Martin tragedy. For Guadalupe:

Trayvon’s black male body – wearing a hoodie, apparently the apparel of those “up to no good,” armed with a bag of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea – transgressed the boundaries of a Whitopia, and it was the protect-and-defend mentality exhibited by some occupants of this demarcated white space that resulted in the loss of his life. David Dow puts it succinctly, “when

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you mix a license to kill with deep and embedded racial distrust, you have a recipe that is certain to produce tragedies like the Martin killing.”

Martin’s black body represented a threat to Zimmerman and he wanted to protect his community. The words Zimmerman uses in his phone call with the police demonstrate clearly that he associated Martin with criminal behavior. During the phone call, he said, “These assholes. They always get away.” His mention of ‘these assholes’ refers to the black men and teenagers about whom Zimmerman had repeatedly called the police. Zimmerman has continually associated black men with criminality and dangers to his neighborhood. In pursuing Martin, Zimmerman only needed Martin’s black skin as evidence to determine Martin’s motives and inherent criminality.

This racial profiling and criminalization of African Americans characterizes the Banality of Racism and affects all African Americans. Perry addresses the nature and results of racial profiling and the criminalization of blackness when she claims that:

The concept is not simply that greater policing of Black and Latino people is necessary but also that their collective behavior operates as an indicator that rights have been forfeited. The logic of the oft repeated question ‘why should you be upset about being racially profiled if you have done nothing wrong,’ I would argue, emerges only because of a conceptual subtext of group forfeiture of rights. In this view, the Black and Latino individual should expect to have to prove his rights-worthiness.

Perry points to an important phenomenon here. Racial profiling emerges as an approved action because of the view that black and brown men are more often than

40 Maria del Guadalupe, “ Imagined Communities: Whitopia and the Trayvon Martin Tragedy,” in Yancey and Jones, 34.
41 Yancey and Jones, “Introduction,” in Yancey and Jones, 3.
42 Perry, 92.
not viewed as criminals. The people who watched the videos of Eric Garner and Rodney King and decided that the cops did the right thing needed something other than the victim’s blackness to blame, however. The media and others tried, therefore, to bring in much outside information to make it seem as though the victims were guilty and, since the victims were unable to prove their ‘rights-worthiness,’ any punishment was just. The same type of ‘reading’ applies to the murder of Trayvon Martin.

Because Martin is African American, he had to prove his ‘rights-worthiness’ to George Zimmerman, the jury and prosecution, and the country. Instead of understanding him as the typical high school teenager, the media and others jumped on every available fact of him doing something ‘wrong’ in order to assassinate his character. Any of these faults became a problem for his whole character. When people found minor flaws he had and the “frightening” pictures of him in a hoodie, society labeled him as unworthy of rights and therefore he got the punishment he deserved. Immediately after the incident, the police allowed Zimmerman to return home without punishment. It was not until two days later that they arrested him.

Before local outrage, the police did not question Zimmerman’s right to kill Martin or his right to protect himself even if it required murdering without evidence. Ferguson and McClendon describe how this situation arose. They claim that, “under the cloak of the law, White civilians by means of racial profiling can now violently act with impunity. Hence, under the guise of ‘Stand Your Ground’ law, local police allowed Zimmerman to go free merely on his own account of events... The inherent danger of a Black man-child wearing a ‘hoodie’ functioned as a sufficient condition
for carrying out the racist murder of a Black man-child.” The police did not question Zimmerman’s actions and they did not even question the fact that they told him not to pursue Martin in the first place. Although Martin had done nothing to warrant attention other than being black in the ‘wrong’ neighborhood, Zimmerman justified his actions as self-defense and the police and general public accepted it as true.

As we have seen, race can justifiably be seen to function as a means to incriminate Martin, but race also played a complex role in the case of George Zimmerman’s character. On the one hand, Zimmerman’s mixed racial categorization allowed some to argue that this incident had nothing to do with racism because it did not fall under the simplistic white on black racist discourse. Nevertheless, whiteness as the dominant culture that assumes whites are good and nonwhites are questionable also served to vindicate George Zimmerman. While the media assassinated Martin’s character, the media represented Zimmerman as someone who had accepted white cultural norms. At the time, he was happily married, employed, a homeowner, and an active and positive member of his community. This tragedy also served to validate his masculine role as protector. As a male, Zimmerman felt it was his duty to protect his wife, home, and community from the presumed criminality of Martin. Although race had an enormous impact on Zimmerman’s characterization, it was not discussed as much as Martin’s race, which serves as another example of how whiteness functions as the norm and is often invisible. The colorblind phenomenon allowed Zimmerman to fit into this norm of

43 Ferguson II and John H. McClendon III, 50.
whiteness (being a home-owner, married, etc.) but silenced the discussion of its impact on people’s perceptions of this tragedy.

With access to the privileges of whiteness in the mindset of Zimmerman, the police, and the jury, the jury found it justifiable for Zimmerman to stalk Martin and murder him. Even if he had been the perfect kid that did not have a blemish on his record, as Butler suggests, Martin would always have represented a threat because of his race. Zimmerman read Martin’s attempt to get away as guilt that he did not belong in the neighborhood, and that he was up to no good, instead of the fear and anxiety that Martin felt from Zimmerman following him. In her preface to an edited volume on Martin’s death, Janine Jones captures the racial limitations of the reading of this event when she writes that:

Because justice is not blind, and its particular way of seeing does not allow for the comprehension of black males as non-aggressors, especially when it comes to possible encounters with people, places and things that fall under the auspices of whiteness. Historically (including the historical present), this is true even when a black male is running away from such an encounter. So just imagine how a black male is conceived when going towards such an encounter!\(^{44}\)

Martin was terrified, backed into a corner and chose his only option. Martin responded not out of aggression, but out of fear and a sense of no alternative. The criminality of blackness and the country’s racist legacy condemned him to death and did not possibly allow him any justice. Everyone should recognize this as the murder of a scared teenager and not some aggressive criminal. Martin did nothing wrong that day, was shot down in the street and denied justice. This is why this

\(^{44}\) Janine Jones, “Preface: Part Two,” in Yancey and Jones, xvii.
tragedy is so powerful and representative of the Banality of Racism that affects Americans today.

**Banality of Racism and Trayvon Martin**

Here I return to Hannah Arendt’s analysis and the Banality of Evil and how it draws out further consequences or implications of the Banality of Racism that become notable in light of the Trayvon Martin example. My analysis of the tragedy assumes that the motivations on the part of George Zimmerman and the other individuals involved reflects racist social structures that are systemic to American culture. I will build a case that this lens an appropriate - albeit polemical - interpretive framework for explaining this event. I refer to the American state of racism as the Banality of Racism. As I mentioned before, our manifestation of the Banality of Racism is a combination of structuralized racism and the acceptance of dominant and mainstream white culture that includes a belief in narratives like the criminality of blackness and the post-racial attitude. These factors cloud racism and racial inequality and therefore make it extremely difficult for people to determine what is and what is not racism. Because of the Banality of Racism, people’s moral judgments are clouded. They cannot fully understand the difference between right and wrong when it comes to issues of racial inequality.

On the one hand, social institutions in the United States perpetuate a system of racism that has historical continuity and at the same time claims to protect and to cherish equality and a certain nature of being post-racial. In part because racial inequality was never fully addressed or dealt with, it became normal and hidden by
our language of being post-racial. Additionally, our norms legitimize and express the Banality of Racism. Individuals find themselves stuck in this dual world of actual racial inequality and post-racial language and theory. In this way, the Banality of Racism obscures intentions in committing racist acts. It creates a way to carry out racist actions and promote racial inequality while being “normal” and promoting racial equality through speech. The murder of Martin and subsequent criminal case against George Zimmerman exemplify one instance and the far-reaching consequences of the Banality of Racism.

George Zimmerman was a ‘normal’ American. He owned a house, held a blue-collar job, participated in the neighborhood watch, and was married. His killing an unarmed 17 year old was nevertheless horrific. He acted under the assumption that he was doing the right thing despite the fact that he was unjustly judging Martin with insufficient evidence, clouded by the lens of the Banality of Racism. He is and his actions were ‘terribly and terrifyingly normal.’ As Arendt claims about Eichmann, “He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing.” Zimmerman had a similar understanding. He thought that he was just following society’s orders, which had the ‘force of law’ despite the police telling him not to do anything. While this might seem like a contradiction, the law and American culture has repeatedly made it clear that black men should be treated as criminals and that they can often be murdered with impunity.

Furthermore, Zimmerman was a neighborhood watchman and had always been a law-abiding citizen. He felt that it was his duty to protect the neighborhood.

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45 Arendt, 287.
In suspecting that Martin was a criminal and stalking him around the neighborhood, Zimmerman thought he could justify it, and we could accept it, as him simply ‘doing his job.’ Philosopher Timothy Golden agrees with this interpretation of the Martin tragedy when he argues that “the point here is that Martin is a ‘criminal’ before he even appears because his black body falls under the concept ‘criminal.’” Additionally, Golden argues that this could only happen “slowly and consistently,” through centuries of the racist white imaginary constructing black male bodies as ‘sinister,’ ‘criminal,’ and ‘up to no good.’ Zimmerman labeled Martin a criminal simply because he was black and in the ‘wrong place.’ Zimmerman drew from the criminalization of blackness from a history of American racism and through the Banality of Racism that pervades American culture today.

One of the fundamental aspects of the Banality of Racism and a characteristic of the post-racial world is the development of what Perry calls ‘post-intentional’ racism. In this ‘post-intentional’ racist world, people still act out racist actions and reproduce racial inequality but often without knowing it. Arendt suggests about the Banality of Evil that there is a lack of intent or commitment to evil or racist beliefs. The Banality of Racism functions similarly in this ‘post-intentional’ world. Stereotypes are one element of this ‘post-intentional’ conundrum. Research has shown that stereotypes can affect our decision-making processes without an explicit belief in those stereotypes. This phenomenon is essential to the Banality of Racism. One need not be outwardly a racist to act as a racist. In their essay “No Bigots Required: What the Science of Racial Bias Reveals in the Wake of Trayvon Martin,”

46 Golden, 75.
47 Perry, 20-21.
Phillip Abita Goff and L. Song Richardson claim that suspicion tends to produce a cascade effect, or racial ways of seeing that creates suspicion, fueled by the assumption of the criminality of blackness, that “do not require that someone hold explicitly racist beliefs. In fact, research has long demonstrated that even individuals who hold explicitly egalitarian beliefs are subject to basic human processes that provoke errors in perception and human judgment. Consequently, racial discrimination can exist even absent racial bigotry – racism without racists, as it were.”

It seems as though racism without racists means that people cannot be held accountable for racist actions.

Some might argue that the Banality of Racism excuses Zimmerman from being held accountable. This is not true, however. I argued in the first section that thoughtlessness does not serve as an excuse from responsibility. As a human being, Zimmerman has freedom and therefore is capable of critical reflection on his actions no matter how deeply he and the society he lives in are entrenched in the Banality of Racism. We can and must judge him because he lacked moral character in his decision to follow and confront Martin. Furthermore, Zimmerman, unlike Eichmann, disobeyed the suggestion from the police to not follow Martin. This defiance of police orders should be seen in two ways. First, it should have been used as the main point of evidence against Zimmerman to prove that he was the aggressor and Martin was the victim in this case. Second, since the police did not challenge this moment thoroughly and the jury did not seem to see this as a major point, it shows the pervasiveness of the Banality of Racism in the larger public outside of Zimmerman.

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Additionally, it was not only the role of stereotypes and suspicion cascades that implicated Zimmerman and the jury that found him not guilty in the Banality of Racism. Stereotypes come from somewhere; they do not just appear. In the American context, they stem from a long history of dealing with the issues of race and racism and are now a part of all our social institutions. Perry describes the dual nature of ‘post-intentional’ racism. She claims that “one could read post-intent as simply referring to the growing body of cognition research showing that there is a great deal of unconscious bias. But, at the same time that there is unconscious bias, there are quite conscious racial narratives about groups and places that are expressed all the time, in our humor, our entertainment, our schools, our news, our government, our places of employment, and on and on.”

Perry essentially argues that while stereotypes have an impact on our actions, they are not without a racist origin. The expression of racial narratives manifests itself in many of our social institutions. For instance, some American restaurants have dress codes that ban hoodies and sagging pants. While these are perhaps explicitly non-racial, they implicitly promote a social view of the criminality associated with blackness and hoodies. The racial legacy that promotes these racial narratives are continually taught and reproduced through actions.

Recall that Arendt explains why a lack of intent makes the criminal justice process more difficult for many people. She claims that, “where this intent is absent, where, for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been

49 Perry, 21.
committed.” The ‘post-intentional’ nature of Zimmerman’s murder of Martin made it hard for the jury to convict him. Because Zimmerman did not think he was doing anything wrong and because the jury and many Americans saw that he did not have the ‘intent’ to murder or was not an avid racist, they concluded that he was not guilty. The post-racial concept legitimizes the idea that if he is not a self-avowed and intentional racist, then he must not be a racist. Yet, the primary reason that Zimmerman chose to stalk and confront Martin was because of his race. The Banality of Racism hides the criminalization of African Americans in the talk of post-racial America as something that is not about race. Nevertheless, one can start to see from the case of Zimmerman and Martin that race was a major factor.

While Zimmerman may not hold explicitly racist beliefs, his pursuit of Martin was motivated by racism. Philosophers Goff and Richardson claim that:

as a result of racial stereotypes of criminality, it is more likely that individuals will evaluate the ambiguous actions of non-whites to behave as more threatening and suspicious than identical actions performed by whites. Furthermore, stereotype threat can cause non-whites to behave in ways that confirm the observer’s perception of threat. Thus, suspicious cascades reveal that non-whites face a greater risk of death or serious bodily injury at the hands of those who honestly, but mistakenly, fear them. These erroneous judgments about the need to act in self-defense can occur regardless of the actor’s conscious racial attitudes. All that is required to trigger the cascade is knowledge of stereotypes.51

A reasonable explanation for why Zimmerman initially pursued Martin would underscore that within the normative structure of American society, Martin’s race and hoodie represented criminality. As the tragedy unfolded, Martin grew scared and acted the way any normal person would who is trying to get away from

50 Arendt, 277.
51 Goff and Richardson, 64.
someone following them. However, according to my analytical framework, George Zimmerman (and the jury) saw Martin's actions through a racial lens, he and the jury members interpreted Martin's fleeing as guilt. So although Zimmerman's understanding of the situation was truly his own and “post-racial," it was a racially motivated murder and he deserves to spend time in prison.

In America today, we teach and perpetuate racism implicitly instead of explicitly. We have a white male version of American history that functions as the mainstream narrative for most Americans. We recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of white men in American history, but often leave out the important roles that women and minorities played in the development of this country and the oppressive treatment of these groups by white men. For instance, two of the founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and George Washington are memorialized on Mount Rushmore. These two men owned many slaves and benefited greatly from the wealth that these slaves provided for them. However, instead of wrestling with the complexity of our history and creating empathy, this white male version of American history allows white males in particular to think of themselves as deserving of everything that they have done. Our history as a nation is really more complex than we talk about on a day-to-day basis and we often overlook and simplify the history of oppression in this country.

This uncritical analysis of our nation’s history allows people to disregard empathy. This empathy would help us begin to correct past mistakes and move towards a better future. Arendt points out that Eichmann, too, lacked empathy. She claims, “the longer one listened to him the more obvious it became that his inability
to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else."\(^{52}\) In accordance with the post-racial narrative, people today are not readily educated about the experiences of people not like themselves. Teaching people that there is a history of oppression in this country and that it impacts lives today would directly conflict with the colorblind ideology. That is how ‘post-racial Americans’ are able to disconnect their experiences from others. Post-racialism makes it so that Americans can think that everyone had the same opportunities and are not aware of their own privileges. In ignoring differences we hide legacies that have created racial inequalities today and therefore teach racist tropes and categories implicitly. Some might disagree with the idea that the teaching of racism today is implicit, because the racism of today is just the continuation of a historical process that is distinctly American. However, the language of the post-racial and colorblind ideologies hides explicit racism. It allows people to make racist claims implicitly. This gives rise to claims that begin with the phrase, “I’m not a racist, but...” that usually end in some racist or oppressive comment. Our ability to talk about racial events without explicitly talking about race is another element of the Banality of Racism.

My lens offers a compelling case that makes it difficult to see how Zimmerman could wholly escape this post-racial language and ideology either. One of the implicit racial narratives that came up during the trial was the assessment of character. The use of phrases like “it isn’t about race, it’s about culture” and “he was just another thug” is one way of talking about race without mentioning race itself.

\(^{52}\) Arendt, 49.
Racial narratives are powerful. Perry believes that they "not only give you a particular image; they tell you something consequential that will follow in the lives of people or characters in way that are presumably reflective of their membership in a particular group." Additionally, "they seem as though they are giving you more information than stereotypes, but they also entail the pruning of a lot of information, highlighting certain details and diminishing others, and a willing suspension of disbelief as long as you accept the narrative without skepticism." Narratives help us make sense of the world, but they can also lead us to make judgments about groups of people without real information.

Similar to Arendt’s discussion of the thoughtlessness and the absence of critical self- and cultural evaluation, we can see a lack of critical analysis of race in the death of Martin in the media during the trial. People often asked, “Was George Zimmerman a bigot at heart or was he a concerned citizen? Was Trayvon Martin a blameless innocent or was he a thug in training?” But as Goff and Richardson point out, “These questions aim to reveal whether the incident fits the archetype of old-fashioned racism. But, by focusing attention on these issues of character, we ignore the mechanisms of contemporary bias – and hobble our efforts at racial progress.” These questions are not the right questions. They make it seem as though we can think of Zimmerman as an intentional racist and determine his guilt from that standpoint. As I have argued, however, racist intent is not necessary because many no longer have intent to carry out racist actions that are inspired through post-racial narratives.

53 Perry, 45-46.
54 Goff and Richardson, 59.
We need to analyze these racial narratives critically so that we can begin to recognize the Banality of Racism. We forget to challenge our way of seeing the world and then allow people to assert that the case was not about racial profiling. Ultimately, the people who claimed that this case was not about race “reframed Trayvon’s death in terms of a fictional post-racial America that neutralized race, and contradicted the everyday reality of anti-Black racism experienced by Black people and Trayvon Martin on the night of his death. Whenever we deny the history of this country’s treatment of Black people, we fail all who are enfleshed in black skin.”\textsuperscript{55}

Denying the impact of race in the death of Martin denies him and his family justice.

George Zimmerman certainly was encultured by this language and these narratives and did not think critically about them. His thoughtlessness becomes particularly problematic when one considers the fact that he called the police and they instructed him not to do anything. Instead of listening to the police, he insisted on acting. He felt comfortable with his actions because it fit into the narrative that he had learned over and over again. This thoughtlessness of narratives contributed to his racist actions. Thus, it is not necessary for him to have any conviction and deep-seated hatred towards African Americans – just as Arendt points out about Eichmann. She claims that Eichmann “did not enter the Party out of conviction, nor was he ever convinced by it – whenever he was asked to give his reasons, he repeated the same embarrassed clichés about the Treaty of Versailles and unemployment.”\textsuperscript{56} Zimmerman is not a member of the Ku Klux Klan and was by all

\textsuperscript{55} George Yancey, “Preface: Part One,” in Yancey and Jones, xiv.
\textsuperscript{56} Arendt, 33.
measure a regular and unexceptional American citizen. It is this normality that is so striking and indicative of the Banality of Racism.

The Banality of Racism manifests itself in American lives every day. The death of Martin represents one example of the way that the Banality of Racism affects the lives of black and brown Americans. Zimmerman was a fairly normal man, but took the life of a teenager. When it came out that he was not an avid or identifiable racist, we lost the ability to talk about the role that race played in the case, in part because of a demand for a post-racial nation. The post-racial ideology obscures the case and denies justice. Our legal claims about equality and our inability to put Zimmerman behind bars conflict with each other. Martin was an unarmed teenager, and yet, a man who had the normal intention of protecting his neighborhood seems to have racially profiled him as a criminal and pursued him with fatal consequences. The criminality of blackness played a vital role in Martin's death. The fact that some African Americans are criminals does not count as a defense for the murder of any black man that someone may deem suspicious, just as the fact that there are white criminals does not justify murdering all white men we find suspicious. We need an open conversation that uncovers racial inequality and unlocks racially coded phrases and narratives. Otherwise, the United States of America will continue to create and maintain racial inequality that leads to the death of innocent people, like Trayvon Martin.
Solutions to the Banality of Racism

Historical narratives play a significant role in how we understand our individual and collective selves today. It is impossible to disregard the importance of these narratives when they contribute to the current state of racial inequality. Not only are historical narratives often overly simplistic and incorrect, there is a general lack of awareness and confrontation in the public sphere with this more complex history. I believe that a better historical education, particularly one focused on slavery, reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and mass incarceration can help pierce through the Banality of Racism and start to end racial inequality. This new education would be interdisciplinary in nature and help to make students critical thinkers in general. While one form of education certainly comes through the schools to younger and older children, this cannot be the only focus. It is fundamental to the United States of America that there be a serious public engagement about our country’s history of racial oppression. One such area of historical education and discourse can take place in the physical public sphere with the help of monuments and plaques. The physical presence of the past in the present can bring that impact to a level of consciousness and hopefully challenge people to think critically about the ways in which the past affects the present and ways the present still faces the challenges of racial inequality.

In the United States today, we claim to believe in liberty and equality. In fact, the country was founded on those philosophical ideas. Unfortunately, we have struggled to figure out exactly who falls under these precepts and who deserves to have equal rights. When the founding fathers drafted the Constitution, there were
many people still caught in the chains of slavery who did not have access to equality or rights. In 1865, the Civil War ended and the legal process of the emancipation of African American slaves in the South began. While there are many reasons why the Civil War broke out, the result was an end to legal slavery and a move towards a broader conception of freedom and equality that included African Americans. Unfortunately, the process of reconstruction began and ended entirely too soon.

Much of the country was still divided and unsure of how to treat the predominately poor and undereducated former slaves. Ultimately the South moved back towards a lifestyle built around cheap labor and unequal treatment socially, economically, culturally, and politically, while people in the North practiced de facto segregation. The struggle to gain freedom and equality continued for most African Americans. In the late 1950s and the 1960s, the battle for equality made it back into the center of attention for the rest of Americans. The period from 1950 to 1968 characterizes the historical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, a movement that nonviolent leaders, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., popularized. This simplistic overview of the Civil Rights Movement does not do justice to the whole battle for equality and freedom that began much earlier than the 1950s, arguably since the beginning of the United States itself. Potentially even more dangerous, however, is the historical assumption after 1968 and the legal end of the segregation that America moved into a reality of equality and freedom.

The confidence that America had finally reached a state of equality, equal opportunity and freedom in the legal realm led people to assume that we had reached equality across all fields. Racial incidents still occurred, but many began to
believe that we were headed towards a post-racial nation. The growth of the belief in a post-racial nation culminated in the election of President Barack Obama. Many saw the election of a black man as a sign that we have moved past our racist legacy and that now everyone has equal opportunity. Sadly, this is not the case. What is missing is an acceptance of equality outside of the legal world. Certainly, our legal practices can continue to become more racially tolerant, but because that was the main locus of change during the “Civil Rights Movement,” many laws were in fact changed for the better. Unfortunately, the battle for legal equality did not ultimately produce enough social, economic, and cultural change when it came to racial equality. The law might have changed, but the minds of most people had not and, thus, substantial resistance to those laws remains. Indeed some laws were implemented as catalysts to create this mental change, like Affirmative Action laws that required institutions to look at minority candidates. These laws have certainly had an impact but still could not change the minds of everyone.

In order to transcend the Banality of Racism and hopefully racism altogether, I believe that we need to match our minds and actions to our legal beliefs. We claim to believe in equal opportunity under the law but we continue to practice racial inequality. One of the ways to address racial inequality is through education. Children learn at an early age what it means to be part of a community. In the broader context of the nation, the United States of America is a community. Therefore, as a community, we need to understand and critically discuss who we are and what our beliefs are. This means, however, an honest historical narrative that discusses the bad as well as the good. With a better understanding of the country's
history and legacy of racial oppression, students will grasp how we got to where we are now. This new education and disposition would serve as a challenge to the transformed racial narratives that still produce racial inequality. One of these altered narratives, for instance, was the acceptance of the criminality of blackness. During slavery and reconstruction, this narrative existed on an explicitly racial basis that allowed people to outright say that black people were criminal in nature. Now with the alteration of the criminal justice system and mass incarceration, the racial narrative has changed from explicit racism to an implicitly racist narrative that fits into a “post-racial” world.

In the preface to *Pursuing Trayvon Martin*, philosopher George Yancey acknowledges the power of knowledge and education in the Trayvon Martin tragedy. He claims that “when Black Bodies are killed by white police officers – or by those, as in the case of Zimmerman, who function as proxies for white law and order against Black people – such actions implicate and are reflective of an entire history of *institutional systemic white racism* that is based upon white assemblages of ‘knowledge’ and an entire ideological apparatus underwritten by white hegemonic material power.”\(^57\) The history of institutional, systemic white racism manifests itself in the form of racial narratives like the criminality of blackness and, thus, as knowledge. This knowledge in the case of the Trayvon Martin tragedy functioned to support George Zimmerman and not Trayvon Martin. In order to create an environment that will allow this country to pursue equal justice, we need an

\(^{57}\) Yancey, xii.
education that addresses the history of institutional, systemic, white racism by creating critical thinkers who can recognize racial inequality and injustice.

Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, similarly believes that education plays an important role in the formation of racist thinking and racial inequality. He suggests that historical moments in the development of the United States, slavery, reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, and mass incarceration are misunderstood and contribute to racial inequality today. He argues that the lack of knowledge about these time periods continues to blind our conception and practice of justice.  

Portraying these major events in American history more accurately will impact the country’s understanding of the way race and racism functions today, ultimately creating a more accepting racial climate. For example, one of the historical lessons that I discussed earlier is generally presented in too simplistic a manner. As the Equal Justice Initiative’s report on lynching uncovered, the First and Second Great Migrations are more complex than a simple shift from rural farm jobs to urban industry jobs. African Americans left the South and took those urban industry jobs to flee the racial violence of lynching. The fact that we do not teach the full complexity of this facet of history in schools leads to an incorrect telling of American history that hides the pain of African American history and the violence of white oppression. Additionally, this is important because it helps explain the racial make-up of urban centers today.

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59 Robertson, “History of Lynchings in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names.”
One of the ways to change the education system is to create more integrative and interdisciplinary study. If we examine the history of the Great Migrations merely from an economic point of view, then we lose sight of the experience of racial terror that weighed heavily on African Americans at the time. This interdisciplinary approach would break up some of the compartmentalization of thought that can be so problematic. For instance, as Paul Formosa suggests,

the existence of certain types of bureaucratic structures can also become potentially dangerous. This is because these structures can create legitimating routines and bureaucratic functions that can be mindlessly followed as well as increasing dramatically the distance between an, in itself, banal action, and its (potentially) evil consequences, thereby deadening any moral awareness.\(^{60}\)

Education that is not interdisciplinary only continues the simplistic understanding of racial history and use of racial narratives that leads to compartmentalized and basic thinking. Formosa argues that bureaucracy promotes the continuation of the Banality of Evil, but that critical thinking can help challenge it. He claims that banal evil can only be perpetrated on large scale where there is widespread and unquestioned acceptance of evil practices, persons or institutions. Thus one way to combat such acceptance is to firstly encourage all people to think independently, without 'pillars and props' as Arendt puts it, but at the very least to encourage free and open critique of those persons, practices, beliefs and institutions that (potentially) lead to evil. Such questioning might at least alert others to what might otherwise go unquestioned, and this is one way of lessening the likelihood that people will be able to thoughtlessly perpetrate evils.\(^ {61}\)

Having an interdisciplinary and integrative approach to education helps mold critical thinkers who automatically look for complexities in narratives. Students of

\(^{60}\) Formosa, 516.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 515.
this instruction will be able to see and question racial legacies and inequality and ultimately challenge the Banality of Racism in society.

In-school education is only one part of the solution, however. The discussion about our racial past must have a public presence. Much like in Germany, America should use public spaces to recognize the complex history of racial oppression in this country. In Germany, one finds several powerful memorials, monuments, and plaques about the Holocaust. For example, German artist Gunter Demnig developed a project to place small “stumbling blocks” or “stolpersteine” in front of former homes of Jewish people that the Nazis murdered. Inscribed on each of the stones is the name of the victim, the day they were deported, and the day they were murdered. Demnig wanted to demonstrate how victims of the Holocaust had been an integral part of German and European society before the war; he wanted people to “trip over” their absence in German society today and wonder actively at their “disappearance.” These reminders serve to educate as well as show the impact of the past on the present. There are so many stones now that one can barely walk through the streets of Berlin without walking over or “stumbling” on one.62 This sort of public approach to the legacy of racial oppression can work extremely well in shifting attitudes and knowledge about the past.

The United States needs a similar approach to racist legacies, especially in the South. The Equal Justice Initiative recently finished a project to chronicle all of the lynchings in the American South from 1877 until 1950. The researchers

catalogued 3959 lynchings. Their report explored the ways in which lynching impacted race relations in the country and led them to argue that lynching shaped racial narratives that affect the criminal justice system today. They maintain that “mass-incarceration, racially-biased capital punishment, excessive sentencing, disproportionate sentencing of racial minorities, and police abuse of people of color reveal problems in American society that were shaped by the terror era.” With the findings of this report in mind, Stevenson claims that, “we cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted during the era of racial terrorism until we tell the truth about it. The geographic, political, economic, and social consequences of decades of terror lynchings can still be seen in many communities today and the damage created by lynching needs to be confronted and discussed. Only then can we meaningfully address the contemporary problems that are lynching’s legacy.” Stevenson asserts that without a deeper and more critical understanding of this country’s history, we will not fully comprehend the impact of racial inequality today.

Stevenson points to the powerful impact that education can have on creating a more equal society. One of the ways that he wants to address this history is through public structures. He hopes to place some sort of public memorial at the location of every lynching and, similarly, at the sites of killings such as Martin’s to bring to light the racist legacy of the past. He has already begun work to place

64 “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.”
markers all over the South where there were slave markets. These projects sound rather similar to the “stolpersteine” in Berlin and can have an enormous impact.

Of course, there are some potential issues with public memorials. First of all the “stolpersteine” can easily go unnoticed and therefore have no impact on society. On the other hand, large monuments and memorials may detract from the far-reaching and everyday possibility of running into a memorial that the tripping-stones offer. Philosopher James Young questions the impact of the large scale Holocaust memorial in Berlin. He claims that

if the aim of a national Holocaust memorial in Germany is to objectify this terrible past in order to put it squarely behind us and allow us to move unencumbered into the future, then let us state that aim clearly. But if its purpose is memory in perpetuity of a great country’s once having murdered nearly six million human beings solely for being born Jewish, then this monument must by definition remain unfinished, unbuilt, a forever unresolved process.

While it is not necessarily the case that a national memorial can create an atmosphere that forces people to think critically about the past, it is an important observation that we should not just bury the past, but deal with it on a regular, ongoing basis. Public memorials in America should take into consideration the different challenges and drawbacks that small monuments and large-scale memorials can have in society. Although alone, neither memorial offers a perfect solution, the combination of the two allows for public commemoration and active participation. Additionally public historians should regularly assess the significance

65 Robertson, “History of Lynchings in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names.”
66 James Young, “Germany’s Memorial Question: Memory, Counter-Memory, and the End of the Monument” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 1997), 878-879.
and efficacy of memorials, and offer different strategies that can keep the memorials relevant and effective.

The memorials should help us promote critical thinking and make sure that the past is not seen as dead or irrelevant. By tying the past into the present, a more critical approach to history will help instill a certain level of awareness and self-reflection on the present day. A lack of self-criticism and self-reflection leads to tragedies like George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin. For Yancey, the problem posed by the use of racial narratives like the criminality of blackness "is to elide the importance of a critically informed consciousness that is aware of the material conditions under which Black people have been forced to live; it is to foreclose critical processes of white self-interrogation." Had George Zimmerman thought for a minute about his position in society and respected Trayvon Martin's personhood, he would not have pursued and eventually murdered an innocent teenager. The lack of self-criticism and disdain for national criticism is depressing. To ignore the nation's complex history of oppression is more harmful than the honest recognition of mistakes. Ultimately with a focus on creating critical thinking skills and challenging the legacy of racial inequality in the United States of America, we can potentially challenge and ultimately combat the Banality of Racism.

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67 Yancey, xiv.
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