

Habits of Hate: A Pragmatist Analysis of Habits of Racism and Nativism

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the 2008 presidential race and the early days of his historic presidency, many commentators and pundits wondered aloud whether the nomination and eventual election of Barack Obama signified that we, as a nation and a culture, had finally purged the miasma of our original sin of racism and had even transcended race. Leaving aside the common assumption that overcoming racism and transcending race are the same thing, the last two years have shed a harsh light on this fantasy by proving that, yet again, our particularly American form of race-based hate has adapted and survived.

There are many different ways of recognizing, describing, and combating racism. This essay extends my previously published research on the topic of whiteness and habit to advance the argument that A) racism (by which I mean primarily white supremacist racism directed against people of color) still exists as a corrosive impediment to the realization of a truly fair and democratic American community, and B) it is best understood as a network of flexible, persistent, yet correctable habits (MacMullan, 2005, 2009). The primary value of seeing racism in America as being a problem of bad habits rather than as conscious actions or attitudes is that it helps white people understand that we are all, to greater or lesser extents, vessels for hateful and uncivil habits even if we consciously reject the ideology of white supremacist racism. Further, by using a pragmatist framework of habits, we can reconstruct these habits and effect positive social change.

II. PART I: RACISM AND NATIVISM IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

The election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States was hailed as a great milestone in American history generally, and especially in our history of overcoming racism. Many commentators, including me, hoped aloud that the election of a person of color to our highest elected office signified that perhaps we had overcome the demons of racism, genocide, and slavery, and had made real progress toward a great American Community (Bai, 2009). For example, I penned the following

introduction to my book *The Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction* in the days between Obama's election and swearing-in:

Race remains a divisive issue in the United States, and racism still festers as a poorly understood problem. However, an array of signs indicates that we live in a moment of special opportunity during which we might yet grow true communities and heal the wounds of racism. The maturation of a generation of thinkers born after the civil rights movement, the success of dynamic political leaders of color such as President Barack Obama at rallying multiracial citizen-coalitions, widespread disaffection with self-interested and mercenary notions of citizenship and identity, and the ebbing of white democratic majority all hearten us to finally realize the long-deferred promise of healing and community. (MacMullan, 2009, p. 1)

Of course, we now know that this hope was, if not unfounded, at least premature. In fact, Obama experienced the briefest of presidential honeymoons, since he was quickly set upon by a small but boisterous minority who looked at Obama's unique place in American history as reason for suspicion, fear, and hatred. Indeed, before he was even sworn in as president, he had already faced a highly organized movement of so called "Birthers," including at least one senator, who asserted that Obama was not born in the United States but was in fact born in Kenya (Hollyfield 2008; Evans, 2010; Burghart & Zeskind, 2010). To this we add the allied conspiracy theory that he was a kind of Manchurian candidate or "secret Muslim" hell-bent on destroying America (Moseley, 2009). His first State of the Union debate was also the first such address in modern history blemished by an ugly outburst from a sitting member of Congress. Of course, the low bar for rude rhetoric directed at our first president of color was likely set by the song, widely emailed among Republican groups and frequently played on conservative radio programs, titled "Barack the Magic Negro" (*New York Times*, 2009). Perhaps the most important milestone for this rhetoric of hate directed at Obama occurred on July 28, 2009, when the media personality Glenn Beck appeared on the Fox News morning program *Fox and Friends* and calmly asserted that since President Obama decried the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, he had exposed himself as "a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture" and, even more plainly, "This guy is, I believe, a racist" (Politico, 2009). This last bit of commentary appeared on the most watched cable news channel and elicited absolutely no criticism on the show at the time or the network at any subsequent time. It was treated as if it were just any other run-of-the-mill political assessment. As disturbing as these instances are, they are but a very

small sample of the ever-increasing list of recent statements and actions that frame people of color as being somehow “Other” than “real Americans.” While I believe that we have made real progress vis-à-vis racism and race-based hate in this country, we are far from having expunged the miasma of white racism that defined the core of American identity and was codified in our laws for the first 175 years of our nation’s existence. It is essential to understand the current resurgence of hate, anger, and suspicion directed at people of color in the context of our long history of white supremacism that dates back to the first days of the American colonies and was first codified into law in 1790 when the First National Congress passed a unique immigration law that essentially linked whiteness and American identity. It reads in part:

All free white persons who have, or shall migrate into the United States, and shall give satisfactory proof, before a magistrate, by oath, that they intend to reside therein, and shall take an oath of allegiance, and shall have resided in the United States for one whole year, shall be entitled to the rights of citizenship. (United States, 1857, Vol 1., p. 184)

This simple law wove tightly into the tapestry of our civic life the idea of Whites as a superlative and privileged racial group. It extended full citizenship to the poorest immigrant from Europe while casting people of Asian, African, and indigenous descent into a legal limbo where they were unable to represent their interests, regardless of how long they or their family had lived in America.

The habitual residue of white privilege in America, by which I mean the assumption on the part of European Americans that they have the sole privilege of defining who or what counts as American, is not seen just in the anger directed at President Obama. I contend that these cognitive and behavioral habits are at play in a span of racist conduct, ranging from the merely stupid and insensitive to the viciously violent. Recent examples that illustrate this phenomenon of habituated racist acts that do not appear as racist to the people who commit them include calls to repeal the 14th Amendment in order to deny citizenship rights specifically to Hispanic children born within the United States, the demonization and criminalization of Hispanics seen in the debate regarding Arizona Senate Bill 1070, and public statements describing all Muslims as terrorists and the public anger surrounding the Cordova House (often called the “Ground Zero Mosque”).

III. PART II: A PRAGMATIST UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM AS HABIT

In order to explain my understanding of the present problem of racism in America, I need to set aside the present problem and explain the concep-

tual tools that I believe are best suited to understanding and reconstructing these habits of hatred. This section uses primary sources as well as more contemporary secondary sources to detail Dewey's theory of habit formation and explain the advantages of using a pragmatism framework for understanding and reconstructing these habits.¹

It might seem odd to turn to such a plain idea as "habit" when trying to address the sorts of socially, culturally, and historically thorny questions that are implicated in the problem of whiteness. However, the pragmatic conception of habit—introduced by William James, elaborated upon by John Dewey, and put to work by Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois—is a crucial conceptual tool for developing an apt response to the continued problem of whiteness. These habits—by which I mean sets of behaviors that are pre-conscious responses to an environment that rely upon inherited categories—have persisted long after the Civil Rights Movement removed whiteness as a legal category designed to protect white privilege. Reading race through the lens of habit in a fully pragmatic sense, we see that it is not an ahistorical essence that we all carry in our blood that is packed with ready-to-use meanings (though it does maintain that racial propositions and identities do rely on certain physical traits as markers). At the same time, this method of interpreting race rejects the so-called "color-blind" approach to racism that assumes that since the conceptions of race have no direct genetic or biological correlates, the idea of race is merely a cognitive error that can be remedied by purging our lexicons of any terms that lack scientific proof. Instead, this reading characterizes race as a meaningful feature of our experience. Race is a network of meaning that is made up of features that emerge from biology (namely the morphological features that are the signs of the different racial categories) as well as culture (the inherited but contingent ways of reading and responding to these features). On this reading, race is a phenomenon that organizes our behaviors, thoughts, and experiences of the world both consciously and pre-consciously. From a Deweyan perspective, race is "real" though not "given." An analysis of whiteness that pertains to the role of habit suggests that the best path toward a society free of invidious racism and hate leads through a period of conscious reconstruction of these habits through inquiry.

Emphasizing their fundamental role in our development as organisms, Dewey argued that "habits may be profitably compared to physiological functions, like breathing [or] digesting . . . in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment" (Dewey & Boydston, 1976a, p. 15). As this passage indicates, habit formation is not only a basic human function, but is also a function that is inherently interactional. Habits form a connection between our broader biological, cultural, or social environment and us.

Thus, since human interaction is widely affected by cultural forces, habit formation is also a function that enables us to make sense of the world. It is

that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. (Dewey & Boydston, 1976a, p. 31)

In addition to the method of using impulse to change habit, Dewey gave us the broad outline of our goal. Again in *Human Nature and Conduct*, he states:

What is necessary is that habits be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current. Then they will meet their own problems and propose their own improvements. (Dewey & Boydston, 1976a, p. 90)

Habituation rather than conscious decisions becomes the focal point of Dewey's moral philosophy. In particular, he argued that we should examine and reconstruct our bad habits: those that continue to function in our behaviors, but have somehow fallen out of harmony with their environment.

A bad habit suggests an inherent tendency to action and also a hold, command over us. It makes us do things we are ashamed of, things which we tell ourselves we prefer not to do. It overrides our formal resolutions, our conscious decisions. When we are honest with ourselves we acknowledge that a habit has this power because it is so intimately part of ourselves. It has a hold on us because we are the habit. (Dewey & Boydston, 1976a, p. 21)

Moving from Dewey's theory of habit to the present problem, we can fruitfully read racial whiteness as a network of interrelated habits that gives meaning to what Dewey called "native tendencies," such as pugnacity, fear, pity, and sympathy (Dewey & Boydston, 1976a, p. 79). It is a pattern that involves both biological and cultural components. It is not biological in the way that scientists 200 years ago believed race was biological: a set of *fixed* behaviors, attitudes, and propensities that emerge, Athena-like, fully dressed from our flesh. Instead, race is, in part, a biological phenomenon in terms of the embodied aspects of human life and our perceptions of the morphology of people around us. Race is at the same time a cultural pattern by virtue of the ways in which we give meaning to native impulses (such as

fear or nurturance) and how we make sense of changes to our embodied experiences. One of my primary claims is that much of the current racial and nativist hate that has worsened in the last two years is best understood and resolved as habitual patterns of suspicion and aversion that originate from much earlier, often forgotten and ignored, chapters in the history of North America. To see why, let me discuss briefly Dewey's analysis of prejudice.

Dewey defined prejudice as "something which comes before reason and cuts it short; it is a desire or emotion which makes us see things in a particular light and gives slant to all our beliefs" (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 243). He further argued that race prejudice derives from an instinctual "universal antipathy" toward anything or anyone different from our habituation (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 244). Dewey asserted that after a cursory examination of human anthropology, "We are struck by the instinctive aversion of mankind to what is new and unusual, to whatever is different from what we are used to, and which thus shocks our customary habits" (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 243). It is this apparently universal aversion to the strange that serves as the impetus behind racial prejudice. As Dewey and Boydston put it, "The facts suggest that an antipathy to what is strange (originating probably in the self-protective tendencies of animal life) is the original basis of what now takes the form of race prejudice" (1976b, p. 245).

Dewey claimed that the root of racial discrimination does not have to do with race *per se*. In language that we will later see shares much with Du Bois' assessment of the relationship of race and racial friction, Dewey argued that

this friction is not primarily racial. Race is a sign, a symbol, which bears much the same relation to the actual forces which cause friction as a national flag bears to the emotions and activities which it symbolized, condensing them into visible and tangible form. (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 253)

There is nothing inherent about people of African, Asian, indigenous American, and European descent that necessitates violence between the groups. Instead, our political, economic, and social interests, as pressing parts of our social environments, become cashed out along the lines of racial and ethnic categories, much as these factors were cashed out along denominational lines for Europeans during the Reformation. Our original aversion to the different becomes infused with these other factors and, over time, becomes racial prejudice. Much of the fear and suspicion that we see manifesting along race lines is a product of different social, political, and economic vectors, including the extreme stress caused by the current great recession,

the gradual but momentous demographic trends that are literally changing the face of America and, yes, the election of the first president of color.

A Deweyan analysis does not hold that some or many white people are doomed to be bad neighbors to people of color when they are stressed out. Instead, it would look to the history of race in America and argue that white people, by and large, inherited bad racial habits (bad in the sense that they don't at all fit or work within the requirements of a pluralistic democracy) from earlier ages. These habits lead people to think and act as if non-white people and experiences are assumed to be suspect and to act and think that white people alone are entitled to decide what is fair, who belongs, and above all, who is a true American. None of this is necessary, but to correct these habits we need to study them, examine how they mediate the interaction of impulses and the environment, and, above all, reconstruct them into newer habits that meet the requirements of a pluralistic and just society.

In the context of the United States, it is crucial to note that different groups developed raced habits differently. Since before our polity was founded in the late 18th century, European-Americans defined themselves according to the legal category of racial whiteness that was granted a great number of exclusive legal, social, political, and cultural privileges and rights (Harris, 1993). Therefore, in this social environment, racialized habits "worked" not in some absolute or moral sense, but in the fact that one needed to know how to read race in order to fit with the rest of society. For people of color, this meant having to navigate white spaces with a great deal of suspicion and caution, whereas white interactions with people of color were marked by habits of entitlement, privilege, and licensed cruelty. One of the most important elements of a pragmatist analysis of race as a series of habits is the recognition that though all explicit and legal supports for white supremacy have thankfully been abolished, the habits largely remain.

This is why Dewey explained racial prejudice according to his theory of human instincts by noting, "We are carrying old political and old mental habits into a condition for which they are not adapted, and all kinds of friction result" (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 252). He claimed that most people will achieve a rational control of instinctive biases through "a change not only in education, and in the means of publicity, but also in political and industrial organization" (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 253). However, it is useful at this point to see how Dewey's conceptions of habit and racial prejudice might make sense of a current and disturbing phenomenon that clearly involves racial prejudice and hatred: the various political and legislative campaigns to stop the "invasion" of would-be construction, hospitality, and agricultural workers who cross the political border that has relatively recently bifurcated the land that has been part of Latin America

for 400 years, attempts by people to exercise their freedom to worship and assemble, even if they are Muslims in New York City, and the unique level of suspicion and distrust directed at our first African American president.

IV. PART III: HABITS OF HATRED

This section uses the theories outlined in Part II to understand the resurgence of racist rhetoric and practices mentioned in Part I. In particular, this section will show that when we look at the current resurgence of hate and nativism through a pragmatist lens, we see that these are manifestations of *habits of entitlement* and *habits of antipathy to the strange*: that is, negative and antagonist reactions against people and cultures deemed as Other by a self-determined white mainstream. This section will also show that these habits are far from new and can be seen in slightly different forms throughout American history, including the demonization of Native Americans and Mexicans during the 18th and 19th centuries, fears about the “Yellow Terror” in the 19th century, and anti-German and anti-Irish discrimination on the grounds of protecting American religious freedom against Catholic Papism.

The Greek philosopher Socrates is said to have argued that all evil is done out of ignorance. That is, to the fool, evil acts appear good. A pragmatist analysis of racism as a failed habit gets at much the same point: To the person with racist habits, acts of cruelty, incivility, and even hate seem apt. Furthermore, an analysis of racism as habit helps us to understand and address a critical component of the problem, namely that the people who say and do these things invariably see themselves as being in the right, just as slave owners saw themselves as protectors of civilization, imperialists saw themselves as nobly bearing their “white man’s burden,” and perpetrators of genocide against native peoples were heeding the call of Manifest Destiny. This does not exculpate or explain away these acts. Quite the opposite; a pragmatist analysis of racism as a series of habits helps us see that these acts of hate occur in large part due to our failure to see and correct these habits. While some perpetrators of hate acts of racism do so out of a conscious and fully aware doctrine of white racism, many more commit racist acts because they are acting according to age-old habits of race that date to the time when white supremacist racism was accepted, even celebrated, as the law of the land.

In previously published work I refer to the three primary problematic habits of whiteness as *habitual antipathy to what is strange*, *habits of entitlement*, and *habits of guilt* (MacMullan, 2009, p. 170). I argue that it is fruitful to understand the current resurgence of racial hatred and animosity as being manifestations of the first two habits. The *habitual antipathy to*

what is strange is a wide-ranging and complex habit that affects white responses to issues or experiences that white folk perceive as being racialized. It is basically a habitual aversion to people, experiences, and things that are seen by white folk as being racialized. The phrase itself is borrowed from one of the rare passages in which Dewey addresses the question of race. It is worth being quoted at some length here, since it not only identifies one of the crucial impulses that need to be reorganized into new habits, but also even highlights how fears regarding race and economics underpin nativist movements, both in Dewey's America of the 1920s and in ours of the 21st century.

The facts suggest that an antipathy to what is strange (originating probably in the self-protective tendencies of animal life) is the original basis of what now takes the form of race prejudice. The phenomenon is seen in the anti-foreign waves which have swept over China at different times. It is equally seen in the attitude of the earlier immigrants to the United States toward later comers. The Irish were among the first to feel the effects; then as they became fairly established and the older stock became used to them and no longer regarded them as intruders, the animosity was transferred to southern Europeans, especially to the Italians; later the immigrants from eastern and southeastern Europe became the suspected and feared party. And strikingly enough it has usually been the group which had previously been the object of hostile feelings which has been most active in opposing the new-comers, conferring upon them contemptuous nicknames if not actually abusing them. Witness, for example, the fact that it was largely the Irish who took the most aggressive part in persecuting the Chinese upon the Pacific coast. (Dewey & Boydston, 1976b, p. 245)

This habit is the deepest root of racism and it stretches back to the very earliest days of European colonization, when myriad laws did not just encourage, but enforced the separation of Europeans from Natives and people from Africa. One of its earliest legal manifestations is the rule of hypodescent, or the "one drop rule," which defined whiteness as a "pure" racial category that could be sullied by even one drop of non-white ancestry. Historically we see this habit in the violent response that the European colonists had toward the indigenous people of this continent. We also saw it in the myriad laws and insults directed at people of African descent by Europeans, as well as in the selective interment and property theft reserved only for Asian Americans during World War II, to name just a few.

It is important to note that not all acts of racial hate or prejudice can be called habitual. Some people commit acts of racial hatred that are so calculated and planned that they cannot fairly be called habitual. Nonetheless, these few self-consciously racist and prejudiced people are able to greatly

magnify their ill effects on society by stoking the fears and anxieties of the much larger number of people who do not harbor any explicit ill will, indeed, many of whom are careful to say that they eschew racism, but nonetheless are still vessels for these age-old habits of race.

Despite our contemporary pretensions to colorblindness and worldliness, as well as our appropriate abolition of legalized white supremacy, the habit of antipathy to what is strange still affects the interactions between white folk and all other folk in America. The total manifestations of this habit are far too numerous to list, but we see it at work clearly in many of the recent acts of hatred and incivility directed at people of color by white Americans. We see this habitual aversion at play in stupid comments, for example when a Fox News commentator wondered if the Obamas' fist bump was in fact a "terrorist fist jab" ("Fox News' E.D. Hill Teased Discussion of Obama Dap," 2008), or when commentators on the same network ridiculed as "most peculiar" the traditional Yaqui blessing given by Dr. Carlos Gonzales of the University of Arizona College of Medicine at the memorial service for the victims of the mass shooting in Tuscon (Powers, 2011). Most times, the habit of antipathy to the strange does not sink to the level of hate. However, it is in many ways a trigger or pre-condition for acts of hate because it is an unconscious behavior that assumes and encourages both the isolation of white folks from others and the assumption, on the part of whites, that their positions and opinion are normative and that others are somehow uniquely "racialized" or "ethnic." However, the most dangerous instances of race hate, I would argue, are found at the confluence of this habit and the habit of entitlement.

The second relevant habit of whiteness we need to examine and reconstruct is the habit of entitlement, which is the habit on the part of white Americans to think and behave as if it were our sole purview to decide who or what counts as American and who or what should be seen as an outsider. Its origins also date back to before our republic's founding when many laws explicitly limiting crucial rights, such as those affecting property, marriage, travel, and legal representation, were reserved exclusively for people deemed white (Harris, 1993). We see this habit in the widespread attitude among many whites that multiculturalism has gone too far. We see this second problematic habit in the thinking that leads white Americans, most of whom descend from immigrants who settled illegally on Native lands, to believe that Latinos do not belong in places with names like San Francisco and San Antonio.

Virtually every act of racial hate in our history can be understood as a dangerous combination of the habit of entitlement and the habit of antipathy to the strange: an assumption on the part of white people that they unilaterally decide what is just and who belongs, coupled with a habitual aversion

toward people beyond the ken of whiteness. We saw these habits combine to deadly effect whenever white settlers razed Asian communities in the West out of fear of a supposed “Yellow Terror.” We saw these habits combine when white Americans used violence for centuries to deny African Americans their lives, liberties, and property. Indeed, the act that for centuries served as the paradigmatic expression of white violence and domination, lynching, combines both of these habits. It is the habitual antipathy toward African Americans on the part of some whites that makes them the target of disproportionate attention. It is a habitual response triggered by the gross stereotypes that reinforced the idea that they were *different* or *The Other*.

Moving to our present day, Tony Horowitz, in his essay “Immigration – and the Curse of the Black Legend,” described how politicians such as J. D. Hayworth of Arizona, and Tom Tancredo of Colorado (who was, during the Bush Administration, the chairman of the House Immigration Reform Caucus), frame Latinos/as as invaders hell-bent on destroying America and Western civilization. We see both the habit of entitlement and the habit of antipathy to the strange at work when we read that “Hayworth proposes calls for deporting illegal immigrants and changing the Constitution” so that children born to them in the United States “can’t claim citizenship” as when he tars those who “oppose making English the official language,” saying they “reject the very notion that there is a uniquely American identity, or that, if there is one, that it is superior to any other’” (Horowitz, 2006, p. 3). Tancredo is even more disturbing, saying that “the barbarians at the gate will only need to give us a slight push, and the emaciated body of Western civilization will collapse in a heap” (Horowitz, 2006, p. 3). Sadly, these extremely hateful public statements by elected officials are only timid versions of the “*reconquista*” conspiracy theory proposed by many of the people involved in the Minutemen vigilante projects, which holds that

Mexico is quietly infiltrating a fifth-column of revolutionaries into the United States with the purpose of territorial conquest. Moreover the infiltration is being accomplished with the treasonous collusion of various “liberal elite” institutions, e.g. the Catholic Church and the Ford Foundation, and the applause of muddle-headed multiculturalists. (Center for New Community, 2005, p. 5)

This pattern of treating Mexican and other Latin American people as if they were somehow uncivilized clearly demonstrates what I call the *habitual antipathy to what is strange*, because these people are seen as strange by these commentators, who clearly are operating from an extremely myopic cultural reference point. The willingness on the part of these commentators to frame them all, out of hand, as dangerous invaders of a land that was

Mexican long before it was part of the U.S., demonstrates what I mean by the *habit of entitlement* since they appropriate unto themselves the sole privilege of deciding which immigrants get to be heroes (the ones from Europe) and which ones are villains (the ones from Latin America).

The most visible example of the recent resurgence of habits of whiteness involves Arizona's "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act" (often called AZ 1070). Even though the law has a clause that prohibits racial profiling, it nonetheless charges law enforcement officials with investigating people who appear to be in Arizona illegally, which is to say, only people who appear to be of Hispanic descent. Mary Bauer of the Southern Poverty Law Center writes of this law's supposed color-blindness that

people with brown skin – regardless of whether they are U.S. citizens or legal residents – will be forced to prove their legal status to law enforcement officers time and again. One-third of Arizona's population – those who are Latino – will be designated as second-class citizens, making anyone with brown skin a suspect even if their families have called Arizona home for generations.

Bauer makes the link between AZ 1070 and the habits of whiteness even more troublingly explicit when she points out that

the law was drafted by a lawyer for the legal arm of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), whose founder has warned of a "Latin onslaught" and complained about Latinos' alleged low "educability." FAIR has accepted \$1.2 million from the Pioneer Fund, a racist foundation that was set up by Nazi sympathizers to fund studies of eugenics, the science of selective breeding to produce a "better" race.

It is clearly in any nation's self-interest to minimize, as much as possible, undocumented and illegal immigration. One of the very many odd parts of this saga is the fact that in modern-day America, where even very left-leaning politicians are obliged to speak and enact policies in favor of capitalism, it occurs to no one that the solution to undocumented immigration is to better facilitate the free movement of labor to satisfy the demands of the market by drastically increasing and facilitating legal immigration to the U.S. These habits are so strong that they even trump the "free market" ideology of otherwise very pro-business thinkers and politicians.

We also can see both of these habits behind the resurgence of nativism that has coincided with the Obama presidency and is, in fact, largely directed at him. Writing on the re-emergence of nationalism among some elements of the Tea Party movement, Devin Burghart and Leonard Zeskind

of the Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights (IREHR) argued:

It is a form of American nationalism, however, that does not include all Americans, and separates itself from those it regards as insufficiently “real Americans.” Consider in this regard, a recent Tea Party Nation Newsletter article entitled, “Real Americans Did Not Sue Arizona.” Or the hand-drawn sign at a Tea Party rally that was obviously earnestly felt. “I am a arrogant American, unlike our President, I am proud of my country, our freedom, our generosity, no apology from me.” It is the notion that President Barack Obama is not a real natural-born American, that he is some other kind of person, that abounds in Tea Party ranks and draws this movement into a pit of no return. (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010, p. 68)

We see clear evidence of the habit of entitlement on the part of these protesters who claim for themselves the right to frame the duly elected president of the nation as somehow non- or un-American. Unfortunately, the same report provides ample evidence of the antipathy on the part of these largely white groups toward other groups they deem strange, foreign, or hostile, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Jews (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010, p. 57). These expressions of hostility range the gamut from grossly racist signs and caricatures to the white nationalist calls for a return to legalized white supremacy (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010, p. 59).

Since the traumatic and horrible attacks of 9/11, we have experienced a great increase in hate and anger directed at Arabs and Muslims that clearly stem from these habits. We see these habits most clearly when Americans channel the fear and anxiety triggered by genuinely disturbing terrorist attacks and foiled plots into explosions of irrational behavior. Take for example the angry protests, local as well as on cable news and in the blogosphere, against proposals to build mosques in at least six different states (Goodstein, 2011). Of course, the greatest anger was directed at the proposed construction of the Cordova House in Manhattan, which came to be known as the “Ground Zero Mosque” (Blumenthal, 2010). Even though the religious leader behind the new center, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, had headed a mosque 12 blocks from the World Trade Center for more than a decade, had worked for President Bush as the director of global Muslim outreach, and was uniformly described as a moderate Muslim whose leadership was crucial in countering extremist Islam, he was nonetheless smeared in the media as an “unrepentant militant Muslim” (“Washington Times’ Kuhner Baselessly Smears NYC Imam,” 2010).

The arguments against letting American citizens develop their private property in order to exercise their rights of assembly and worship ranged from the paranoid (that is, that the mosque was a terrorist training facility)

to the merely misguided (that it was insensitive to the victims of 9/11 and their families to have a Muslim house of worship so close to Ground Zero). Nonetheless, whether mild or violent, these reactions against this proposed house of worship, as well as against many other mosques around the nation, demonstrate both of the primary problematic habits of whiteness.

First, that many white folk in America react toward Muslims and Arabs with antipathy is, sadly, all too well documented. John L. Esposito and Sheila B. Lalwani (2010) report that mosques or proposed mosques in at least six states have either been vandalized or opposed in just the last year, and Laurie Goodstein (2001) reports that protesters in Temecula, California “intentionally took dogs to offend those Muslims who consider dogs to be ritually unclean” (p. 2). Further, we can see that the present-day hate directed at Muslims and Arabs emerges from age-old habits of whiteness when we compare the charges directed at Muslims and Arabs—that they are a fifth column of an imminent global jihad to which all Muslims subscribe, that Muslims in America are so intolerant of other religions that our intolerance toward them is justified, that they are irredeemably dangerous—to almost identical charges leveled at immigrants from China, Japan, Latin America, and Ireland. Peter Walker, in his essay “Islamophobia and Anti-Catholicism—Two Sides of the Same Coin,” shows that we’ve seen this same irrational and unthinking hate before when he writes,

Those who speak of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West might not realize it, but they are echoing fears that Europeans and Americans harbored towards Roman Catholicism for hundreds of years. Of course, religious prejudice is nothing new, but the similarities between the Islamophobia of today and the anti-Catholicism of the past are striking. Early modern Protestants would have recognized many of the specific arguments today advanced against Islam and would have responded to much of the language, imagery and symbolism of contemporary fears of an alien, aggressive, domineering, intolerant and illiberal “Other.” Contemporary Islamophobia needs to be seen not as something that took root in America only after 9/11, but as part of a tension between Western nation-states and religious minorities that stretches back to the sixteenth century. (2010, para. 2)

Islamophobia also rests on habits of entitlement in that it manifests in attempts to truncate the rights of Muslims and Arabs according to the prejudices of a white majority. We see this habit of entitlement in the very fact that people are even discussing whether certain people should be allowed to exercise their rights. Just as white supremacist laws in this nation for years limited rights to Protestants of European descent, the current mosque opponents presume that Muslims and Arabs should not be allowed to do what white Christians are allowed to do unless it is acceptable to the

white Christian majority. Linking this particular nexus of prejudice to the larger resurgence discussed earlier in this essay, Larry Gellman in his essay “How Low Can We Go?” writes that for many people on the right,

the only real racists in our country are now people of color. President Obama, Van Jones, Sonia Sotomayor, and Shirley Sherrod. There are apparently no white racists any more. And every economic, law enforcement, and national character problem Americans face can be directly linked to our socialist Black president, dark-skinned Mexican immigrants, and Muslims (every one of whom is assumed to be a terrorist or embrace a religion that’s focused on death and destruction). Not a single one of our national ills can be traced to the behavior of the rest of us. The job of Real Patriots and Real Americans (white people) is to be increasingly outraged and point out how “we” are the victims of “them.” (2010, para. 7)

In concluding this section, my primary argument is that our communities are still tainted by residual, habitual racism that often appears reasonable to the people operating according to these habits, but in fact are expressions of habits that are out of sorts both with the requirements of a truly just and pluralistic community and with the intentions of those who live out these habits. If we see how much of the ugly resurgence of race-based prejudice, nativism, and Islamophobia in the last few years can be explained as a return to old habits of race, then we may well understand that in order to solve this problem we need to reconstruct these habits into new ones that fit with our values and the requirements of a pluralistic society.

V. PART IV: RECONSTRUCTING NATIVISM INTO COMMUNITY

This section demonstrates how we might apply Dewey’s theory of habit formation to our current problems of hatred directed toward Hispanics, Muslims, and others. In particular, it argues that once we understand the relationship between genuine economic distress and inchoate impulses of antipathy and dis-ease, we can take these latent and unformed feelings of fear and uncertainty and reconstruct them into different habits of social justice and community building that would not only have a better chance of affecting the real economic and social problems, but would actually be in line with our community’s democratic ideals.

In Dewey’s work on the relationship among concepts, habits, and social relations, we find a valuable but underused tool with which to reconstruct our social relations into patterns more in line with the requirements and promise of democratic community. However, in order to fully leverage this tool, we need to put into action his idea that bad habits cannot be

ignored or willed away: They must be reconstructed through careful inquiry. Assessing whiteness as a bad habit (bad meaning out of alignment with our commitment to democracy and human equality) moves our discussions on race away from the defensiveness and recrimination that perennially impede our ability to reach some kind of meaningful agreement on race. It would move us away from the issue of intent (such as the pointless “You’re a racist!” “No, I’m not!” back-and-forth), and toward the more productive question of “How do we, white people especially, *actually* treat each other, apart from our conscious beliefs about race?” Such an understanding of racism as a set of habits would enable us to see how racism in the post-Civil Rights era survives primarily by not being noticed, and that people might have the best intentions in the world and even consciously reject the explicit idea of white supremacy (or for that matter, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, or environmental irresponsibility), but if they have not inquired into how their habits affect *actual practices in the world*, then they might well be a vessel for age-old and withering venom.

The deleterious habit that I called the *habit of entitlement* is problematic because it entails channeling the impulse of pride, which like any other impulse is inherently neither good nor bad, into habits that are harmful to community and out of bounds within a society based on the ideal of human equality. Therefore, a reconstruction of this habit will require us to find a better channel—better in all senses of fairness, fitness, and feasibility—for the feelings of pride that are necessary for a happy human life.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote about the need for appropriate and considerate pride within any country:

Like every other country, ours has a lot to be proud of and a lot to be ashamed of. But a nation cannot reform itself unless it takes pride in itself—unless it has an identity, rejoices in it, reflects upon it and tries to live up to it. Such pride sometimes takes the form of arrogant, bellicose nationalism. But it often takes the form of a yearning to live up to the nation’s professed ideals. (Rorty, 1999, p. 253)

Our problem is not that we have too many people who are proud of being American. The problem is that we have too many people who are proud of an old, outdated view of America that is based upon a nostalgic, inaccurate, and Eurocentric view of history. The trick here is to find a vehicle for this necessary pride that is free of the arrogance and cruelty that long has manifested through the habit of entitlement.

We can channel the impulse of pride away from its traditional conduit—which for white folk means pride in the nationalistic and explicitly white supremacist history imagined by many of the people expressing hatred for Hispanics, Muslims, and others—and toward new, more complex

socio-cultural identities. In order to address the problem of whiteness, we need to find a way to decolonize the minds of white Americans by asserting the differences within whiteness. Doing so will help to facilitate a greater recognition of human equality by eliminating the exclusionary dynamic within whiteness.

In “*Hablando cara a cara*/Speaking Face to Face,” María Lugones offers a distinction that proves salient to our discussion. She points out that a genuine and even fierce pride in one’s people or heritage need not be racist.

“Ah, how beautiful my people (or my culture, or my community, or my land), how beautiful, the most beautiful!” I think this claim is made many times non-comparatively. It is expressive of the centrality that one’s people, culture, community or language have to the subject’s sense of self and her web of connections. It expresses her fondness for them. In these cases, the claim does not mean “better than other people’s,” but “dearer to me than other people’s communities, etc., are to me.” . . . Similar claims are made many times comparatively and invidiously and I think that *only then* are they ethnocentric. (1990, p. 52)

Lugones’ insight reiterates the need to find the best vehicle for this feeling of pride in order to remedy our current habits of whiteness. White Americans must carefully develop a responsible pride in our own cultural particularities without relying on racial exclusion. I mean a recovery that, accepting that it might be impossible to recover every moment and strand of one’s cultural past, strives to recover enough that one has a rich enough sense of history to steel against the dangers of amnesia and nostalgia. Not only will these multiple, non-antagonistic identities offer more compatible alternatives than practices borrowed from other cultural traditions, but they will serve to disintegrate the racial dualities that allow white racial oppression and violence to take place. By learning to have pride in our traditions, while engaging in a contextualization of our location within structures of class, gender, and race, white Americans can begin to decolonize our minds and participate fairly in our democracy.

Finally, we need to redirect the impulse of antipathy behind the *habit of antipathy to the strange*. In order to correct this still-functioning habit, white folks first need to be *aware* of whatever feelings of antipathy we might feel toward other people and then find another conduit for these feelings. Instead of *habits of antipathy to the strange*, I suggest we should cultivate *habits of antipathy to suffering*, or more succinctly, *habits of compassion*. If Dewey is right to say these impulses cannot be gotten rid of, and that we must instead sublimate, or more intelligently incorporate them into our lives, then we need to find a way to teach white folk (and indeed all

folk) to revile not each other, but each other's pain. On the one hand, this reconstruction takes hold of the impulse that is most tightly connected to the most problematic aspect of racism: the aversion that drives a wedge between people. On the other hand, it takes this impulse and seeks to harness it in a way that heals the wound that the idea of racial superiority numbed: the social and psychological wound caused by cruelty. The cruelty was rationalized in many false ways: We can kill them because they are mere savages, we can enslave them because they are animals, we can deny them equal rights and human dignity because they are not enlightened or legal citizens. Yet this wound affects both the socially dominant group and the socially dominated groups and impedes our ability to realize a healthy community.

Here I am suggesting only that this racialized dimension of our lives follow the pragmatist re-imagining of ethics and moral philosophy of the last two decades that was well articulated by Richard Rorty and others when they asked us as philosophers and people to think less about objectivity and much more about solidarity. Habits of antipathy to the strange throw up barriers between people that prevent the development of human community. Habits of antipathy to human suffering humanize us to each other, and remind us that the human community requires us to overcome the brute animal instinct to avoid our own pain in order to realize that noble human potential of enduring pain for the sake of the other.

NOTE

1. Several passages in this essay were previously published in *Habits of Whiteness* (MacMullan, 2009).

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