Seeking Light in the Darkness of "Race"[1]

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores racialism through a lens that integrates a sociological and Bahá'í-informed perspective. A historical sketch of how the race concept evolved is offered, along with a contemporary analysis of what history has wrought at the macro and micro levels of society. Viewing racialism as a dark, subjugating aspect of social life, the author presents the oneness of mankind as an enlightening force that, when actualized through individual agency and collective social action, has the power to transform society as small-scale efforts snowball into community-level movements.

Resumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur examine le racialisme à travers un prisme qui intègre à la fois la sociologie et la pensée bahá'íe. Il brosse un tableau de l'évolution du concept de la race et offre une analyse contemporaine de ce que l'histoire a engendré aux niveaux macro et micro de la société. Voyant dans le racialisme un aspect sombre et assujetissant de la vie en société, l'auteur présente le concept de l'unité de l'humanité comme une

force éclairante qui, lorsqu'elle se traduit par des actions sociales individuelles et collectives, a le pouvoir de transformer la société à mesure que des actions à petite échelle se combinent et entraînent des mouvements d'envergure communautaire.

Resumen

En este artículo, el autor explora el racismo a través de una lente que integra una perspectiva sociológica e informada por la Fe Bahá'í. Se ofrece un bosquejo histórico de cómo el concepto de la raza evolucionó, junto con un análisis contemporáneo de lo que la historia ha formado en los niveles macro y micro de la sociedad. Viendo el racismo como un aspecto oscuro y subyugante en la vida social, el autor presenta la unidad de la humanidad como una fuerza iluminadora. Esa fuerza cuando se actualiza a través de una agencia individual y una acción social colectiva, tiene el poder de transformar la sociedad, de los esfuerzos pequeños a los movimientos de nivel comunitario

INTRODUCTION

At this critical juncture in the life of society, it is tempting to focus on the most visible signs of racial conflict being featured on various media platforms, whether mainstream news outlets or social media. The level of urgency that currently appears to be building up with respect to race[2] is

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1   I dedicate this article to the memory of Heather Heyer. I would also like to thank Jeremy Lambshead for his invaluable assistance in helping me improve this article.

2   The word *race* has been used throughout this article with some regret given its insignificance with respect to its original biologistic intention. Its usage has been employed due to its general usefulness for social discourse.

largely a result of the level of media attention. However, I would argue that the situation has been urgent for a long while. Before the recent episodes of teens and even preteens being murdered with impunity, names like Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, and Nicole Brown Simpson became familiar to us. Albeit often under the radar of the news media, patterns of racial inequality have persisted in the criminal justice system, at various socioeconomic metrics, and in the sense of social esteem granted to those of a particular racial background.

With this in mind, this article seeks to analyze race primarily from a sociohistorical perspective. This "big picture" approach, I would argue, is more effective in uncovering the social significance of race as opposed to focusing on highly visible incidents that are, in the end, symptoms or flare-ups of a deeper problem. Presented for your consideration is a painstakingly forged reconciliation of sociological, spiritual, and experiential knowledge concerning race. In other words, this article reflects a standpoint based on what I have thus far gathered from sociological scholarship and my study of the spiritual teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, all filtered through my personal experience. Despite the inherent challenges and limitations, I believe that speaking about what I know to be true at this point in my holistic journey as a Bahá'í and an aspiring scholar is the most effective way for me to contribute to the discourse.

While I acknowledge that there are numerous examples of positive interracial interactions and social patterns, this article is focused on fundamental questions such as why "race" seems to be a permanent feature of society, how we got to the present situation with respect to race, and what might be some factors in liberating our social world from the dark scourge of race. As a result, this article tackles mainly large-scale sociohistorical dynamics that involve individuals, but mostly transcend them, especially those who stand out as exceptions to the rule. Given the sensitive nature of race as a subject matter, it could prove beneficial for the reader to be mindful that terms such as "White," "Black," "whiteness," and several others are mostly employed as general terms that do not imply a sweeping categorization of every individual characterized as such.

The scope of this article is, for the most part, purposefully limited to the United States, given its unique racial history and the sociological sense that race looks different in different social contexts. Our exploration begins with a sociological perspective that focuses on the nature of race and how it has expressed itself throughout US history up to the present day at both the structural and interpersonal levels of society. It is established within this discussion that race has evolved from misguided ideas on human diversity to become a cancerous element of our contemporary social structure that subjugates the populace and constrains our ability to forge authentic

interracial bonds. We then explore insights from the Bahá'í Writings that offer an enriching social vision regarding human diversity and the means to establish community life conducive to interracial brotherhood. Finally, I offer some thoughts on how attaining and sustaining an authentic form of identity, and deepening this transcendent sense of identity in the company of like-minded collaborators, is the key building block to constructing transformative communities that embody the principle of the oneness of humanity—the pivotal social verity of our time that unites science and religion.

As a whole, this article runs counter to at least two tendencies, one tied to Bahá'í-centered discourse on race and the other tied to the social sciences in general. Focused mainly on the current moment and the racialized social condition of the United States as a whole, there will be scant mention of the race amity initiatives spearheaded by the US Bahá'í community at various points in its history. This omission is a result of both its peripheral relationship to my central thesis and a purposeful choice to avoid any triumphalist tone when speaking on a deleterious aspect of society that has so far proven to be intractable. With respect to the social sciences, this article counters their inherent materialism and the concomitant tendency to avoid metaphysical phenomena and their potential to effect social outcomes.

The primary assertion of this article is that the inability of previous generations to root out racism as a social force that perpetuates systemic and dehumanizing injustice means we are living under the weight of a *racialized social structure* in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism"). Birthed by what those in power felt were the exigencies of *capitalistic materialism*, this racialized social structure is animated by sociohistorical forces that place whiteness, as a way of being, at the very center of social life, producing a system of social relations that bestows privileges to those regarded as White and social burdens upon those regarded as non-White. The racialized social structure exerts a subjugating influence on society due to its historical embeddedness and the fact that we are born into this racialized social environment, profoundly shaped by it during our lifetime, and most likely to be outlived by it. As a result, deep racial inequalities are widely regarded as "the way it is," something that we are powerless to change rather than an outcome of systemic injustice. This means that efforts at countering the forces released and sustained by the racialized social structure will need to be revolutionary in character, focused on the principle of universal justice, and animated by forces that transcend material reality.

The animating principle that is conducive to fueling such countering efforts is the *spirit of oneness*. Seeing it as the conscious expression of the oneness of humanity at the individual and collective levels, those inspired by the spirit of oneness will work for social

change and transform communities in direct accordance to the strength of the collaborations forged, and these transformed communities will effect the institutional and cultural changes that will ultimately lead to the de-racialization of society.

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RACIALISM THROUGH A
SOCIOLOGICAL LENS

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While it is rare for contemporary social scientists to agree on a lot, there is general agreement regarding the subject of race. There is a consensus that although existing phenotypical differences are real—exemplified in diversity of skin color, facial features, and other physical characteristics—such differences are in no way rooted in mutually exclusive biological categories. In short, racial categories are not a scientifically valid means of subdividing the human race. Given this fact and the visible inequalities largely founded on a history of racialized discrimination, social scientists consider race to be a social construction.

The *social construction of race* concept is based on the premise that while "race" is not real in a scientific sense, it is real in a *social* sense. Speaking very concisely, *racialism* began as a set of ideas, and people then enacted these ideas through their behaviors, crystallizing the ideas into a structure of beliefs, and this structure of beliefs over time became encoded into the life of society. In other words, race evolved from false ideation in its genesis to an aspect of social reality that we take for granted as "the way things are" (Berger and Luckmann). If subscribing to race had been just one option available in the "free market of ideas," maybe the eventual collective realization that it was a misguided idea would be all we need to get over it and move on. Instead, race was codified into law and structured into the very life of society through culture and custom (Zinn 38). An idea is fairly easy to discard, but the institutionalization of an idea and the resulting structural effects are much harder to do away with. Understanding that race is a social construct provides us with a gateway to a more nuanced understanding of it, which involves seeing the phenomenon as rooted in false ideas yet carrying significant social consequences.

RACIALISM: IDEOLOGY
AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

One of the most prominent sociological theories built upon the social construction of race concept is *racial formation*. Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that race is an unstable construct within the sphere of social meanings that is constantly being contested in the arena of political struggle (116). The racial formation process is animated by *racial projects*, which are said to be "historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (Omi and Winant 117). Each is "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and

an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (117). At a macro level, the way in which race is interpreted directly connects with social policy and how interventions either seek to uphold or attack the existing social structure. For example, if race is regarded as a historical phenomenon that has lingering effects, such an interpretation would tend to support policies aimed at ameliorating past discrimination. Conversely, if race is viewed as insignificant, as something to be ignored regardless of what has taken place in the past, such an interpretation would lend credence to a more "hands off" approach (Omi and Winant 118–19). In short, the existence of numerous racial projects operating in the field of social action strongly suggests that the meaning of race is consistently contested along political and cultural lines.

If racialism is a body of ideas, racialization is the institutionalization of these ideas through dominant racial projects and the internalization of the beliefs and practices concomitant with a particular instance of *race-making*. I would argue that the evolution of the process of racialization can be segmented into three eras: 1) the conquest era (1419-1619), 2) the nation-building era (1620-1945), and 3) the post-war era (1946-present). Each historical period of modernity exemplifies the dynamic of contestation highlighted in racial formation theory. Despite race being a contested terrain with respect

to social meaning, we will see that each era is profoundly shaped by forces tied to social power. The concept of *hegemony* becomes central to this conversation. For the purposes of this article, hegemony represents a system of ideas and social practices that are promoted and maintained by a dominant group in society as a necessary component to sustaining popular consent to their authority. Once popular consent is generally achieved, societal notions and related practices emerge as a "common sense," laying the foundation for the establishment of a *hegemonic order*. Although the existence of a hegemonic order does not negate the fact that social meaning is a contested terrain, it does mean that it takes a concerted effort to deconstruct and dislodge it (Omi and Winant 127).

Additionally, it should not be lost that during each of these periods, the creed of material accumulation is the primary driver. While the conquest era can be defined by the rawness of its capital accumulation process, during the nation-building period we find that the process of accumulation is much more complex, involving a web of trade patterns that evolved into an industrialized, transnational economy. Lastly, in the post-war era, questions emerge with respect to how to redress the racialized exploitation and discrimination that was characteristic of a history of oppression—questions with pecuniary implications in a "zero-sum" socioeconomic/sociopolitical framework.

A Brief History of the Process of Racialization

At the beginning of the conquest era, we find that the early European explorers were faced with a bit of a conundrum when they encountered populations in the New World that were very different from them. Different in skin, in language and culture, and in myriad other ways, questions arose regarding where these "natives" stood in the "family of man." Surely these people could not be equal to the Europeans, but to what extent could they be exploited or enslaved? Over time it became clear that this contact with native populations throughout the Americas consolidated a worldview that placed European Christian civilization at the center while peripheralizing Native American and African populations that were regarded as heathens to be exploited. It is this dynamic of in-group and out-group distinctiveness that released the seeds of modern racial awareness.

Although racial considerations are in their infancy at this point, it is argued that the conquest era is one defined by the *religious civilization* standpoint. Despite the existing competitive struggles and the internal turmoil that they produced, European powers were united by the sense that their civilization was locked in a battle with barbarism; therefore, the subjugation of such peoples was not only conducive to riches, but could be seen as a Christianized campaign for social betterment. Interpreting human diversity along these lines facilitated a sense of ideological coherence between the merchant conquerors, the monarchs, and the ecclesiastical authorities (Omi and Winant 122). While the hegemonic order of the day was well established—an order that served to justify the material appropriation of newly entered lands and the total domination of the people residing there—a few brave souls consulted their conscience and challenged the "common sense" of the time Dominican friar and Spanish historian Bartolomé de las Casas may be the most prominent example of one who, having witnessed the human atrocities, implored the Catholic Church to respect the rights of Native Americans, at least in some form or fashion. Las Casas's plea to the Church was heard, at least for a time, but the cosmic weight of the conquest era greatly diminished the impact of that counterhegemonic attempt (Dussel).

What began as European conquest eventually became European colonialism. While conquest was largely defined by the material appropriation of foreign lands, colonialism was defined by emerging European nation-states maintaining a sustained presence in these lands, exemplified by the eventual presence of formal institutions. As Europe's colonial enterprise expanded, a burgeoning intellectual revolution was developing that would have a lasting impact on the North American colonies as well as on Europe as a whole. The Enlightenment ideas promoted and embraced by a growing contingent of Europeans conflicted

with the reality that much of the economic life of Europe depended on slave labor and the material appropriation of foreign lands. In an attempt to achieve logical coherence between Enlightenment ideas and European domination, a set of notions regarding human diversity were advanced that would accrete to *scientific racism.*

I contend that it was the consolidation of this racialized logic that has permanently shaped American culture when it comes to race. The political machinations aimed at separating Whites and Blacks, the racial logic being promoted by highly esteemed philosophers and the religious and political leaders of the time, and the compelling vulnerability of enslaved Africans and Native Americans, fused together in a socially toxic mix to produce a highly racialized society that lingers with us to this day. Despite the sociopolitical changes that resulted from the emancipation of the slave population, Reconstruction, the emergence of Jim Crow, and the Great Migration to the North, the social meaning of race was still rooted in biologically essentialist notions. Such a racialized conception was reflected in the strict segregationist structure of the South and the pattern of widespread job and housing discrimination in the North. Regardless of where Black persons found themselves, at the institutional and interpersonal levels of society they were most likely to be regarded as inferior beings whose civil rights and pursuit of happiness need not be respected or even considered.

The most successful racial project to transform a historical instance of racial "common sense" was the one at the core of the civil rights movement, which is widely regarded as coming into form in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Partially facilitated by Cold War global politics, the civil rights movement successfully transformed the social meaning of race through an organized and concerted effort that included non-violent protests, appeals to the federal government, the legal advocacy of the NAACP, and voter registration drives (Carson). Each of these efforts had one thing in common, which effected a lasting transformation of the social meaning of race—the unequivocal affirmation of the humanity of Americans of African descent. The hegemonic order regarding race was dismantled by the protagonists of the civil rights movement and members of the general public that were inspired to embrace a new social reality imbued with racial justice. The passage of the Civil Rights (1964) and Voting Rights Acts (1965), like the ignominious laws passed during the days of slavery, were the institutional expressions of the transformed meaning of race. It was understood for a time, however brief, that for American society to move forward the injustices of the past and the inequalities produced as a result had to be rectified through ameliorative social policies such as affirmative action.

This wave of social change, while powerful, meaningful, and revolutionary, was soon countered by another

wave of social sentiment that crystallized into an ideology that characterized social policies designed to redress historical wrongs as problematic. One of the key ingredients of this ideology was addressing racial issues in a race-neutral manner, and this discursive strategy is at the core of what is known as the *colorblind racial ideology* (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 3). Over time, in the battle for the social meaning of race, colorblindness reached a position of hegemony and a new version of racial "common sense" was consolidated. While various racial projects continue to wage, it seems that *colorblindness* is today's watchword for the hegemonic order of today.

COLORBLINDNESS AS THE RACIAL HEGEMONY OF TODAY

The ideological components of colorblindness combine classical liberal sentiments, such as liberty and equality before the law, with some of the discursive elements employed by civil rights activists, such as judging people by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin. According to Bonilla-Silva, this racial ideology is composed of four central frames: *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism*. Leveraging his analysis of hundreds of interviews, Bonilla-Silva is quick to point out that these frames are mutually reinforcing and often employed in various combinations in particular lines of discourse (*Racism without Racists* 74).

Abstract Liberalism is described as a frame that seeks to rationalize opposition to "racial fairness policies" based on principles such as equality of opportunity, individualism, and basing decisions related to hiring or admissions on merit alone. Briefly, the argument posits that society is best served when it allows equality of opportunity to be employed in a "race-neutral" fashion. Despite obvious racial inequities and their potential causes, any efforts to expand opportunities to disadvantaged groups are thus labeled as "preferential treatment" or examples of "reverse discrimination." Additionally, from such a viewpoint, programs like affirmative action are attacked as "group-based" preferential programs that disregard individual talents and capacities, which penalizes more qualified (i.e. White) individuals (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 78).

The second frame, *naturalization*, largely consists of sentiments that explain visibly racial phenomena as the "way it is," as natural occurrences that are the result of human nature. Features of the social landscape such as segregated neighborhoods, schools, and religious communities are viewed as products of the tendency of different racial groups to "stick to their own." It should be noted that Whites who make this claim are careful to attribute this behavior to all racial groups to ensure that it is known that "all groups do it" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 84).

One of the more potent frames of the colorblind racial ideology is

cultural racism. The success of the civil rights movement meant that overt claims regarding the racial inferiority of Blacks and other racialized minorities have been rendered immoral. As a consequence, inequalities are rarely conceptualized as a result of biological limitations; they are now conceived as resulting from a deficient culture that promotes certain undesirable traits and behaviors. For example, the status of Blacks in this country is viewed as resulting from laziness and the lack of motivation to upraise themselves through education and hard work. Often this phenomenon, in an attempt to be "gentle and kind," is attributed to the family life of Blacks and other minorities, the implication being that, "while it is true that they are lazy and unmotivated, it is not 100% their fault because they were never taught any better" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 87).

The final frame, and the one that seems to tie everything together, is the *minimization of racism.* This perspective portrays racial discrimination as a phenomenon that is no longer a significant factor in limiting the social mobility of racialized minorities. The elasticity of this particular frame is the source of its potency because it allows for the recognition of discrimination at the level of individual action while denying its structural impact. This dynamic enables proponents to decry instances of racially motivated violence, for example, yet still hang on to the belief that "we're moving past race" as a society since there are always some "bad apples out there." Another key element of this frame is attributing certain social outcomes that are racial in character to non-racial factors. For example, the widely stated claim from Blacks (and social scientists) that job discrimination still exists is regarded with skepticism, while other factors such as qualifications and attitudinal characteristics are used as explanations. More general claims of experiencing racial discrimination throughout one's life are regarded as making excuses and "finding what you're looking for" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 91).

A great example of the tensions created by the hegemonic order of colorblindness are readily apparent in the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Founded in 2013 as a spirited response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin, the movement received national attention in the wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Day). According to its website, "#BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society" ("About"). The counterhegemonic response being mounted by BLM seems to be especially directed toward opposing the criminalization of Black youth, especially with respect to policing as a matter of public policy. The goal of the movement in reference to the racial formation framework is to transform the meaning of race surrounding Black people. Success in this regard would equate

to measurable changes both in how Blacks are perceived and how they are treated in public spaces, whether by the police or the general public. From the BLM viewpoint, transforming the meaning of race will help minimize the instances of state violence against Blacks and uphold their common humanity and dignity.

Conversely, the spirited reaction against the Black Lives Matter movement can be summarized in the phrase "All Lives Matter." Those who sympathize with the logic underlying this counter-response are, for all intents and purposes, aligned with colorblindness. Just as colorblind proponents infer that the cardinal racial sin is to inject race into public policy as a means of addressing inequalities and injustices of a racial character, the advocates of "All Lives Matter" reject the mention of "Black lives" for similar reasons. The core critique of BLM from these proponents is centered on the rationale that the incidents highlighted by BLM are race-neutral incidents or at most are isolated incidents that do not merit the level of protest and angst raised. The "All Lives Matter" stance is a pure reflection of the hegemonic order of colorblindness, positing that in the absence of clear, explicit racism, the "real racists" are those who inject race into the conversation.

Racialized Social Structure as a Product of History

The inability of the US social collective to root out racialism at an earlier stage in its development has allowed this social malignancy to produce a structure of social relations that renders everyday interactions and practices as both *racist* and *rational* (Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism" 475). In other words, the racialization process has evolved to such a degree that actions that could accurately be read as racist could also be read as logical choices given the social context. For example, if a young White couple has been priced out of a certain residential area but finds that there is a hip, on-the-rise neighborhood within their price range, their moving into that neighborhood is logically beneficial to them, despite the fact that they are contributing to a large-scale pattern of Black displacement that is characteristic of gentrification. In essence, many of the contemporary racial dynamics are shaped by the socioeconomic vulnerability of Blacks, which leads to limited choices with respect to housing in conjunction with the more expansive options available to Whites in accordance with their particular tastes. This housing dynamic becomes more compelling when considering that the tastes of Blacks and other racial minorities have rarely been accorded a similar level of respect in the housing market, regardless of socioeconomic background (Lewis, Emerson, and Klineberg).

Overall, the reality of a *racialized social structure* as the outcome of the historical forces detailed earlier ultimately means that contemporary racial antagonisms are often reflective

of rational self-interests, given the perception that the material gains of an out-group will have an adverse effect on the in-group . This attitude creates a social dynamic in which the socioeconomic gains of racialized groups are regarded as offensive incursions into the field of social status and prestige, while the consolidation of socioeconomic gains on the part of the dominant group is viewed as the continuance of white supremacy. According to Herbert Blumer, these dynamics are undergirded by the "collective process of characterization," which perceives distinctive racial groups as alien and their desires for social mobility as indicative of harboring "designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race" (4). At the same time, the dominant racial group has a feeling of "proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage," which may explain the sense of ambivalence with respect to the social implications of gentrification and similar matters (Blumer 4).

The dynamic of mundane self-interested actions producing racialized outcomes and the manner in which socioeconomic gains are perceived across the color line testify to the degree that racialism permeates the sociocultural and sociopolitical life of the United States. This condition brings to mind a statement from the Universal House of Justice: "The expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus *more intractable*" (Letter dated 10 April 2011; emphasis added.). Racialism has become a fixed feature of the US social structure, its life, and its culture. Evidence suggests that even the most innocent daily activities can have racial connotations, be they shopping, eating out, watching television, going to the park, or choosing to live in a certain neighborhood. Our social ecology has been so thoroughly polluted by race that the reproduction of deep racial inequalities is seen as a natural features of contemporary society. Upholding social privileges for those regarded as White, while racial minorities bear the burden of denial, is a sociocultural phenomenon that appears to be fundamental to the contemporary American way of life.

RACIALISM: SOCIAL INTERACTION AND IDENTITY

It could be said that a natural outgrowth of the process of racialization was the erection of social barriers separating the White population from non-White populations, with Blacks being the primary example of a group from which to be socially distanced. During the post-Reconstruction period of US history, W. E. B. Du Bois, a preeminent Black sociologist and activist, introduced to the world "the veil" and "double consciousness" as interrelated sociological concepts. In his well-known *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses both concepts in the following way:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (45)

In post-Reconstruction America, Du Bois believed that the ascriptive nature of the racialization process and its resulting reification[3] prevents the racializing group (Whites) from recognizing the full humanity of the racialized because the process itself is one of "othering" segments of the population and portraying them as deviations from the norm of whiteness (Itzigsohn and Brown 237). Racialized subjects, therefore, are forced to reconcile their own sense of humanity while battling the dehumanizing forces that

go hand in hand with the racialization process. It is this very process that yields "double consciousness"—the sense of twoness that stems from the inherent struggle to enjoy the fruits of US citizenship while being regarded as undeserving.

One of the more troubling aspects of the veil is the way in which it prevents mutual recognition across the color line. As an ever-present phenomenon, the obscuring quality of "the veil" prevents true communication from happening between racializing and racialized groups (Itzigsohn and Brown 237). In a later work, Du Bois thus elaborated on the nature of the veil:

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but (an) aid to all the world . . . . It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations

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3 The treatment of socially constructed concepts as concrete aspects of the real world.

seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even that they hear, they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. (*Dusk* 66)

This eloquently descriptive allegory illustrates how difficult it is to communicate across the veil and achieve mutual recognition. It matters not how articulately or forcefully one speaks; the voice of the racialized either goes unheard or is misunderstood by the racializing collective. This dynamic creates troubling outcomes for the racialized group, but the racializing group does not go unaffected.

As a consequence of the incongruous relationship between its continual defense and assertion of its common humanity and the actual amount of progress made, the racialized group struggles to appreciate the humanity of the racializing group. Along with the exhausting efforts to reaffirm the humanity of their group comes a congealed sense of resentment and a corresponding lack of faith that those on the other side of the veil can exhibit fairness and show a degree of reason when it comes to racial matters (Du Bois, *Dusk* 67). The effects on the racializing group, instead, center on its

relative social blindness—its inability to recognize the humanity of the racialized as well as their "own position as oppressor within the system of racialization" (Itzigsohn and Brown 243). Because of their position of dominance within the system of racialization, the social vision of Whites is limited to their own world of privilege. The veil does not allow them to fully see, understand, or empathize with the community in its entirety. Even the most well-intentioned White persons are said to be ill equipped to accurately interpret the Black experience, which leads them to misdiagnose the remedy for race-based inequalities (Du Bois, *Dusk* 67).

The inability to walk in the shoes of racialized groups blinds Whites to the oppressive nature of the system of racialization and fosters a sense of social delusion. This delusion has two reinforcing components, the first being the sense that the existing social order, despite the presence of racial inequalities, is essentially just, and the second being that Whites are, therefore, ontologically superior to racialized minorities. The presence of the veil as a powerful social barrier produces two separate lifeworlds—one Black, one White. While the White world can be discerned through the limitations it imposes on the racialized world in contrast to its position of privilege, the world of Blacks and other racialized minorities is invisible to Whites because of their inability to see through the eyes of the "othered" while they themselves are enmeshed in privilege (Itzigsohn and Brown 243).

THE PROBLEM OF WHITENESS

I would argue, in alignment with numerous scholars, that much of the story of American-style racialism is defined by the creation, maintenance, and perpetuation of *whiteness*. Generally speaking, *whiteness* refers to a particular worldview and a concomitant dimension of behaviors and practices that reflect an internalization of white racial identity. According to Ian Haney López, white racial identity is ultimately defined by the double negative of being "not non-White." In short, López finds that there is a significant relationship between contemporary white racial identity and the judicial rulings of various US courts regarding immigration at a time when immigration was limited to those regarded as White. Finding that the courts focused more attention on the non-White plaintiffs, rather than defining what constitutes whiteness, he asserts that white racial identity is primarily animated by a sense of normative transparency, which renders the existence of non-Whites as differentiated from this standard of transparency. In essence, non-Whites become "raced," and this differentiation from the standard is regarded as ontologically inferior. Therefore, whiteness is not simply the opposite of non-whiteness; it is perceived as the *superior opposite* (López 20).

Matthew Hughey elaborates on the nature of whiteness in *White Bound*. In this book, he identifies "dimensions of hegemonic whiteness" that appear to be consistent among Whites, regardless of their political affiliations (e.g., white nationalist, anti-racist). Hughey asserts that hegemonic whiteness is composed of two comingled elements: first, the conceptual framing of whiteness as both different from and superior to forms of non-whiteness; and second, the marginalization of any alternative forms of whiteness that do not conform to the formulated ideal (16). In essence, whiteness operates as an aspirational form of identity, separating good Whites from bad Whites, while non-Whites are essentially barred because of how they are inferiorized.

Revisiting earlier concepts, whiteness as a combination of a worldview and collective social practices tied to that worldview is a logical expression of agency on the part of a socially privileged group. Due to the racialized nature of the social structure, Whites mobilize their resources in ways that are rational but that have the effect of perpetuating their social privilege—*white privilege*. In addition, the obscuring quality of the veil, conjoined with the social blindness that regularly affects any privileged group—whether on the basis of race, gender, or class—results in renders any attempts of racially subordinated groups to transform the existing social order as hostile, misguided, or premature. Consistently perceived as "social aliens," racialized minorities encounter a barrage of messages that, for all intents and purposes, communicate to them the need to accept a

lower status because, according to the rules of whiteness, they will never be accepted as social equals.

It should be made abundantly clear that individual Whites can refuse to participate in whiteness or even choose to dedicate time and energy to disrupting whiteness as a social force that ultimately seeks to defend social boundaries in the face of "intruders." By the same token, the compelling weight of the racialized social structure suggests that it takes high levels of personal resolve and social perceptiveness to navigate such a path. The objective here is not to cast aspersions on White people but to identify how the perpetuation of whiteness as a social force concretizes the social relations that act as the brick and mortar of the racialized social structure. The collective failure to disrupt a system of social relations that effectively places whiteness at the center of each social space of significance is tantamount to deliberately perpetuating the entrenchment of racialism as a dimension of social life.

The socially toxic mix of whiteness, a racialized social structure, and the related inability to recognize the common humanity of "the other" across racial lines are powerful social forces that greatly constrain our collective vision as well as our collective will to build toward a social reality imbued with the oneness of humanity. Shoghi Effendi, as part of a larger statement, exhorted in a cautionary tone that a "revolutionary change in the concept and attitude of the average white American toward his Negro fellow citizen" would be necessary to avoid bloodshed (*Citadel* 126). All signs indicate that such a transformation in consciousness is still necessary, as the mainstream discourse on race appears to be paralyzed by ideological posturing, while blood is literally being shed as a result of cross-racial conflict.

THE GUIDING LIGHT OF ONENESS

If we can use our social imagination and perceive US society as being in a state of organic growth much like a garden and as being ultimately judged by the health of the garden in its entirety, we would be anxiously concerned with the health and growth of each plant, hopeful that each would bloom and display its latent beauty. If a friend were invited over and happened to see our garden and observe the health of the lilies while lamenting the state of the violets, what would be the appropriate reaction? Would we blame the significant differences in the state of the flowers on their individual traits, or would we take responsibility as gardeners and admit that we've neglected the violets? Better yet, what actions would we take to ensure that the violets grew just as healthily as the lilies? How would we treat the soil? How would we go about extracting the strangling weeds?

In the 240-year history of the United States, plus the more than 100-year period before the Declaration of Independence, those in positions of leadership have failed to tend the garden

of humanity existing on this soil in a way that leads to the organic growth and health of all. To the contrary, the tendency has been to direct resources to those deemed "worthy" through periodic social interventions and to deny the same benefits to those deemed unworthy by the dint of race. Whether it was the extension of land to former White indentured servants while slave codes were being enforced, the New Deal policies (1933-1939) during the Jim Crow era, or the extension of GI Bill benefits (1944-1968) at a time when redlining policies and housing discrimination were the de facto laws of the land, the process of racialization has expressed itself through a social system that has exhibited receptivity to the social plight of Whites while largely ignoring the plight of racial minorities.

Much of the racial story in the US has hinged on the issue of justice. Historically, those deifying whiteness have sought to defend the racial status quo of various eras regardless of the injuries inflicted upon humankind as a whole, while those asserting the need for equal justice envisioned a society that bonded all its citizens to the rule of law with no glint of racial preference. Speaking on the issue of justice, Bahá'u'lláh said, "The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men" (*Tablets* 66–67). In the context of this article the implication is clear: until the standard of justice is met, interracial conflict will continue to fester and erode ties between citizens and social institutions.

As of today, evidence suggests that interracial social relations are encumbered by the specter of whiteness, meaning that large-scale social institutions, whether public or private, legal or commercial, exhibit a high degree of responsiveness to Whites as a social group, despite the consequences to non-Whites. The various examples of this dynamic could fill scores of pages; therefore, it is prudent to say that for Blacks, there are many stories of unmerited police interactions, whether precipitated by the phone calls of neighbors or through police officers' insidious practice of racial profiling. Similarly, the history of Native Americans is replete with examples of White incursions into their sovereign territory in the guise of justified legal action, when in fact such annexations are more reflective of the dominant group doing as it pleases. If we envision social progress as the garden of humanity on full display and not as lilies standing out while the other flowers wither and wilt, it is imperative that justice, both legislated and enforced, be evenly applied to each citizen regardless of the accidents of birth.

HUMANITY REDEFINED

The Bahá'í teachings offer a transformative vision of the human race, paving the way for reformative justice that is inclusive of three major

themes: 1) the nature of human creation, 2) the socio-spiritual realness of the oneness of humanity, and 3) unity in diversity as a social way of being. In a collection of verses titled The Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created" (Arabic no. 68). Bahá'u'lláh not only signifies that humanity was "created from the same dust"; He also exhorts us to ponder and reflect on the *implications* of how we were created. In the current social context, this mode of active reflection and internalization of the social meaning has the potential to free us from snap judgments that employ racial stereotypes as social templates that characterize certain groups of people as "safe" or "dangerous," "trustworthy" or "criminal." Understanding that skin color, style of dress, and other outward characteristics say little about one's inner character and potential is surely a progressive step, although counterintuitive in a highly racialized environment.

If we accept that humanity is of a single origin, questions regarding the social significance of it all naturally emerge. On this subject, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

All humanity are the children of God; they belong to the same family, to the same original race. There can be no multiplicity of races, since all are the descendants of Adam. This signifies that racial assumption and distinction are nothing but superstition. In the estimate of God there are no English, French, Germans, Turkish or Persians. All these in the presence of God are equal; they are of one race and creation; God did not make these divisions. These distinctions have had their origin in man himself. Therefore, as they are against the plan and purpose of reality, they are false and imaginary. (299)

Considering the themes outlined in this article, what emerges as especially significant is the statement that racial divisions and distinctions "are against the plan and purpose of reality" (299). What does this mean with respect to our common ability as US urbanites to identify in what part of town Blacks and Latinos live? What is the implication when there are clear patterns showing that a racialized group has been overpenalized and, at the same time, underserved by the criminal justice system? If we are encompassed by a social environment that is inimical to a social reality more congruent with human nature, what is the scope of our responsibilities to ensure a more complementary environment? The dictates of colorblindness would have us simply accept the society we've inherited and chalk up numerous indications of racial inequality to "natural" human processes.

Accepting the ontological realness of the oneness of humanity and its

rootedness in the image of our creation offered by Bahá'u'lláh, it would be fair to ask how humanity should address racial diversity. Further deepening the garden metaphor I borrowed from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I share the following passage in its purer form:

> Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed the oneness of the world of humanity. He has caused various nations and divergent creeds to unite. He has declared that difference of race and color is like the variegated beauty of flowers in a garden. If you enter a garden, you will see yellow, white, blue, red flowers in profusion and beauty—each radiant within itself and although different from the others, lending its own charm to them. Racial difference in the human kingdom is similar. If all the flowers in a garden were of the same color, the effect would be monotonous and wearying to the eye.
>
> Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh hath said that the various races of humankind lend a composite harmony and beauty of color to the whole. Let all associate, therefore, in this great human garden even as flowers grow and blend together side by side without discord or disagreement between them. (68–69)

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, human diversity, specifically that of a so-called racial character, should be regarded as a virtue, a delightful element that is indicative of the inherent beauty of the whole of humanity. Additionally, He offers a vision of society in which people of distinct ethno-racial backgrounds freely associate with one another "without discord or disagreement between them" (69). But given the racialized character of existing social relations, how can this condition be realized?

It seems that a major first step would be the institutionalization of interracial justice in terms of both the "laws on the books" and their enforcement. Holding people accountable for their actions regardless of their role within the criminal justice system and the non-politicization of agencies responsible for ensuring equality under the law would be key ingredients to justice being wielded in ways that lead to a greater sense of interracial unity. It could well be argued that mass incarceration and the differential treatment of Whites and racial minorities when confronted by police emboldens those tantalized by the notion of white supremacy while exasperating those who envision a social world more in keeping with our metaphysical realities as children of the same God, equally valued and equally beloved.

Overcoming "the Veil"

The principle of the oneness of humanity—animated by universal equality with respect to human station and an unrestrained appreciation of human diversity—offers a corrective social vision for which to aspire, but

what are the implications at the level of identity and social interaction? The concept of "the veil" posits that a racialized social barrier is not only in place, but is so embedded in the field of social relations as to obscure the ability of a racial group to see the common humanity of another group. With a penetrating sense of social perceptiveness, especially for one who never set foot in the United States, Shoghi Effendi, shortly before the start of the Second World War, counseled both White and Black Bahá'ís in the following way:

> Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds.
>
> Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part, show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget

the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds. (*Advent* 40)

In these two paragraphs, the leader of the worldwide Bahá'í community implicitly acknowledges the weightiness of the racialized social structure and its potential to have a deleterious effect on the ability of a religious community to live out its socially transformative principles, especially those tied to the oneness of humanity. Speaking primarily to the US Bahá'ís, Shoghi Effendi, I believe, is exhorting both Black and White Bahá'ís not to content themselves with a surface-level sense of brotherhood. Most significantly, a religious community still slight in membership was encouraged by its leader to fight an uphill battle in defense of its core beliefs against the social forces that surrounded it.

We established earlier that the veil has a negative effect on the ability of both racially dominant and racially subordinate groups to fully see the humanity of the other. Those in the dominant group are prone to assume their inherent superiority when engaging with racialized minorities, while racialized minorities tend to assume that members of the dominant group will somehow reveal racist tendencies, however unintended, that may cause offense. In this context, wouldn't it be easier to avoid contact altogether? It may be so in the short term, but Shoghi Effendi, cognizant of the true nature of humanity and

its ultimate purpose, in clear language encourages both groups to muster the heart and soul to fully engage in an intimate manner until any walls separating them are destroyed through the power of their mutual affection.

It is rather remarkable how well Shoghi Effendi was able to read the reality of the racial situation in the United States. Clearly, he was able to determine that both Blacks and Whites have challenges to overcome in order to meet the standard of being free from racial prejudice. It seems the primary challenge for Whites is to detach themselves from feelings of superiority and the related tendency to be condescending toward racial minorities. Similarly, the primary challenge for Blacks seems to be showing a willing receptivity to Whites that is free of the tendency to presuppose someone's intentions as a consequence of the influence of an oppressive history. Both are encouraged to cleanse their eyes, hearts, and minds of their societal miseducation and to see one another anew. In this context, Shoghi Effendi goes on to say:

> Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved. Let neither think that they can wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith. Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in common country. Let them rather believe, and be firmly convinced, that on their mutual understanding, their amity, and sustained cooperation, must depend, more than on any other force or organization operating outside the circle of their Faith, the deflection of that dangerous course so greatly feared by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the materialization of the hopes He cherished for their joint contribution to the fulfillment of that country's glorious destiny. (*Advent* 40–41)

Although speaking primarily to what was then a small religious community struggling to live up to its Founder's spiritual teachings, Shoghi Effendi clearly intended for these words to have deep implications for the United States as a whole. The racialized social barriers that exist must be overcome by the force of interracial engagement. This engagement must go beyond civility and politeness and lead to genuine, systematic, and heartfelt interactions that have the effect of slowly melting away the iciness that tends to characterize cross-racial social relations. This social imperative implies a burgeoning community of mavericks that can serve as an effective model to

help fellow citizens see what can be, instead of limiting our collective social imagination to what is.

The Quest for Authentic Identity and Social Transformation

> *O Man of two visions!*
> *Close one eye and open the other.*
> *Close one to the world and all that is therein,*
> *and open the other to the hallowed beauty*
> *of the Beloved.*
> —Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words
> (Persian no. 12)

While a forceful engagement across the color line is necessary in order to overcome "the Veil," something deeper is necessary to animate and sustain our efforts. The subjugating weight of the racialized social structure requires the means of fortifying ourselves against the dark forces of racialism and also a way to strike back and build new patterns of interaction that will accrete to a new social order imbued with the spirit of oneness, expressed in the implementation of the principle of "unity in diversity." As human beings, we are organically linked with the social environment that surrounds us. Shoghi Effendi emphasized that there is a dynamic of mutual reactions when it comes to the inner life of the individual and the social environment in which he or she is embedded: "Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these

mutual reactions" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 26 November 2012). Keeping in mind the racialized character of the US social environment, we are challenged to vie for transformational outcomes that effectively cleanse society of this scourge by resisting the influence of racial ideologies and their concurrent social practices, while harnessing their agency, or individual initiative, to effect change. The way in which we view ourselves as human beings becomes critical at this stage.

As we have established, "race" as a social construction has its beginnings in the colonial period, deployed as a means of justifying the systemic exploitation of those who were phenotypically and culturally different. This dark social experiment has always been rooted in capitalistic materialism, or the set of values and practices that regard the accumulation of wealth, goods, and power as chief priorities. Despite historical class differences existing between those regarded as White, the force of racialization created conditions that allowed Whites on the lowest economic rungs to hold themselves in higher esteem than members of other racial groups. While whiteness appears to be a significant cultural reality for those of a middle-class background or higher, for those in the low-income group whiteness has become a critical fulcrum in their lifeworld. Whenever racial minorities seem to be gaining a socioeconomic foothold, it is typically lower-income Whites that bluster the most.

In my own preliminary research, I have observed that in this day, Blacks often bear the brunt of the policing of social boundaries associated with whiteness. In seemingly race-neutral social spaces, whiteness exerts its presence in both subtle and overt ways through microaggressions and hyper-surveillance, respectively. An example of a typical microaggression is a social slight in a public place such as a restaurant, where the service received by someone of color is clearly of lesser quality when compared to the attention rendered to someone of a lighter hue. Hyper-surveillance is often witnessed in retail establishments, where racial minorities, especially Blacks and Latinos, are regularly followed or watched.

What a transformative social outcome with respect to race requires is a social imagination that rejects the racialized social structure, regarding it as a manifestation of evil, and promotes the revolutionary recovery of one's authentic self-identity. This revolutionary form of identity can then be leveraged in collaboration with others to effect social change. While it should ever be kept in mind that society requires transformation on gender, class, and other social fronts , speaking to race specifically, it is imperative that each individual take a stance of active resistance against the forces of racialization in accordance with their social position within the racialized social structure.

For American Blacks and other racial minorities, this response might take the form of active defiance in the face of racial stigmatization. Regardless of social perception, the determination to be oneself, to recognize one's equal worth, and to realize one's inherent potential as a "mine rich in gems" is paramount (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 162). Succumbing to internalized racism and becoming a shell of one's self in relation to one's potential as a human being is not only a personal failure; it is equivalent to a candle's flame being snuffed out by the winds of human negation, thereby leaving more darkness in its wake. Once an individual has established a solid footing on the path of racial defiance, it is critical that he or she initiate togetherness by joining hands and hearts with a group of collaborators, and in this way, walk a path of service that, while difficult and arduous, is nevertheless a path that will ultimately lead to a social reality in which the inherent nobility and the exquisite talents of racialized minorities will not only be recognized, but, more importantly, will also contribute vitally to the prosperity of humankind.

For American Whites, actively resisting the racialized social structure will come in the form of rejecting whiteness as a way of being. It will demand a heartfelt struggle to recognize the ways in which whiteness requires the marginalization of non-Whites and how colorblindness at its core implies the cultural erasure of racialized minorities as people with unique capacities, histories, and social needs. Most of all, overcoming the

racialized social structure requires tearing down the social walls that have been erected over time as a means to maintain a "pure community" from the incursion of "racial otherness." The fundamental recognition that human authenticity means "to be with" instead of "to be better than" or "to be in control of" becomes paramount for individuals socially positioned among the dominant group in the racialized social structure.

The Bahá'í Writings offer a metaphysical definition of human existence that allows those interested to transcend identities tethered to the existing social structure. As an elaboration on the Abrahamic verity that man is "made in the image of God," human beings are regarded as fundamentally noble spiritual beings capable of reflecting all of God's attributes. This capability to mirror the Ultimate Spiritual Reality within the inherent limitations of human nature or ontology is what is said to separate human beings from all other earthly life forms. A corollary aspect of human reality is free will, including the capacity to subdue our material nature, which is informed by the struggle for existence, for the sake of our essential reality— our soul—which the Bahá'í teachings affirm emanates from the Creator.

In this sense, human existence is defined by the journey of the individual, even as human history is defined by the collective journey of "an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 109:2). And yet, both journeys are susceptible to one of two conditions—duality or oneness. Living in a state of duality refers to a state of being in which one is cognizant of their metaphysical self but fails to fully nourish that aspect of themselves, leading to a condition of spiritual alienation. A condition of oneness, on the other hand, can be defined as living in a spiritual state in which one nourishes and sustains a spiritualized self-image, which has the effect of forging a deep connection with the spiritual reality of the Creator, oneself, and all of humanity (Saiedi 166). The metaphysical sense of connection that results from living in a state of oneness is an expansive embracing of human reality that frees one's identity from any particularity, which means that one can perceive more keenly his or her interconnection with all other human beings (166).

While living in a state of oneness is ultimately liberating to one's consciousness, it can lead to much pain when one witnesses daily occurrences associated with a dehumanizing social existence and has to navigate a social world that is struggling to manifest the latent socio-spiritual truth of the oneness of humanity. The inner transformation that results from abiding in a state of oneness necessitates entering the field of social action to engage in a path of service that has the effect of both contributing to the betterment of society and deepening one's authentic sense of identity. As individuals changed in this way collaborate to transform communities, and as these communities work to transform social

institutions, the matrix of social relations that are the bones and sinew of the racialized social structure will be transformed as well, with the ultimate result being the realization of social justice and the concurrent emergence of social relations that are emblematic of unity in diversity. It is in this context that 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments on the implications of interracial unity:

> Strive earnestly and put forth your greatest endeavor toward the accomplishment of this fellowship and the cementing of this bond of brotherhood between you. Such an attainment is not possible without will and effort on the part of each . . . . Each one should endeavor to develop and assist the other toward mutual advancement . . . . Love and unity will be fostered between you, thereby bringing about the oneness of mankind. For the accomplishment of unity between the colored and white will be an assurance of the world's peace. (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 39)

CONCLUSION: SEEKING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS OF RACE

Racialism, as a set of beliefs that conveniently sought to bridge the gap between Enlightenment ideals and the hyper-exploitation of non-Europeans, evolved to take on a structural character through formal legislation and informal practices that soon became customary. The cyclical history of American-style racialization is one defined by the erection of a hegemonic order to preserve white racial dominance, the incursion of social movements to disrupt and dismantle the structure of dominance, and an orchestrated backlash to reestablish dominance in a new form.

The large-scale social trends that gave birth to and nurtured the racialized social structure have also profoundly affected individuals and communities at the interpersonal level of society. As human beings born into and navigating this society, we encounter the social barriers that have been constructed to separate Whites and non-Whites, walls that act as a subjugating force that disempowers those who have the propensity to forge social bonds across racial lines. Relatively mundane aspects of social life—such as living in neighborhoods, shopping, dining out, and driving—take on a significant racialized character precisely as the result of how thoroughly racialism has imbued social relations.

The divergent social experiences of Whites and non-Whites and the inability to walk in the shoes of "the other" makes mutual recognition across racial lines difficult. While there are always exceptions, the general trend is for Whites to regard their social position as being the result of their hard work, ingenuity, and values, while the position of Blacks is seen as due to their deficiency in being and doing the same. Blacks, on the other hand, tend to view their social position as resulting from a history of

racialized oppression and the continuance of discrimination even in today's time, which, in turn, characterizes the social position of Whites as ill gotten. Regardless of the materialistic roots of these sentiments, the most problematic aspect of this dynamic is the failure of both groups to recognize the common humanity of the other. For Whites, this translates to a failure to see fully that Blacks are fully capable of accomplishing anything intellectually, physically, and spiritually that Whites can accomplish, while Blacks fail to see that Whites have the capacity to be loving, fair-minded, and socially just.

Shoghi Effendi, shepherding a religious community seeking to realize the oneness of humanity, counseled both Black and White Bahá'ís to battle with the dark forces of racialism in order to build a unified community imbued with an authentic sense of interracial brotherhood that would serve as a beacon of hope for their countrymen. Cognizant that both groups are organically linked with their social environments, he implored them to engage in an interracial fellowship that was spiritually authentic and would lead to the recognition of the inherent nobility of "the other." Along with this encouragement, Shoghi Effendi shared the following regarding Blacks and Native Americans, respectively:

> The qualities of heart so richly possessed by the Negro are much needed in the world today—their great capacity for faith, their loyalty and devotion to their religion when once they believe, their purity of heart, God has richly endowed them, and their contribution to the Cause is much needed. (qtd. in Hornby 533)

> The Guardian attaches the utmost importance, as you know, to the teaching of the natives of America. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Master pays the utmost attention to this most important matter. He states that if the Power of the Holy Spirit today properly enters into the minds and hearts of the natives of the great American continents that they will become great standard bearers of the Faith, similar to the Nomads (Arabians) who became the most cultured and enlightened people under the Muhammadan civilization. (qtd. in Hornby 524)

In the context of our current society, it is important to acknowledge the subjugating effects of the racialized social structure, the social imperative of realizing and institutionalizing the principle of the oneness of humanity, and the need to transcend racial identities for a sense of identity that is more congruent with modern science and religious scripture. In texts ranging from the Book of Genesis to the tablets penned by Bahá'u'lláh as the nineteenth century came to a close, human beings have been characterized as being made in the image of God. As genomic sciences have validated

the physical unity of humanity as one species, we must bind again with the metaphysical verity that the human essence is universally noble, which means that every human being is deserving of honor, rights, privileges, and the ability to realize his or her inherent potential—regardless of the accidents of birth, whether related to skin color, gender, or nationality.

As a cadre of individuals come to recognize their human essence as reflecting the metaphysical unity of individuality, godliness, and interconnectedness with all of humanity, they will naturally seek to collaborate with the like-minded and channel their agency to effect social change. While they are surrounded and impacted by the racialized social structure, their efforts to create change are corollary to their ability to sustain their authentic sense of identity and to reinforce it in the field of social action in collaboration with others. Efforts of this kind taken on by individuals, and then by collaborative groups, will eventually compound and secure the participation of the larger community, as the hope of interracial unity and reconciliation dawns through the power of example. Surely, such efforts are already taking place. Surely, it will be a tremendous struggle to undertake a project of social transformation that aims to *de-racialize* society for the sake of securing a future for generations to come that is more congruent with the "plan and purpose of reality" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 299).

The light to be sought within social environments that have been darkened by the specter of "race" is the light of oneness. The source of this light lies in the metaphysical plane of existence, meaning it is both transcendental to our sociopolitical reality and requires some form of spiritual education to effectively tap into its transformative power. The fact that the reality of oneness transcends our sociopolitical reality makes it an especially potent and creative force for attracting human hearts and building community from a renewed foundation, free of racialized assumptions and sensibilities. As individuals abide in the reality of oneness—that inner sense that their human reality cannot be divorced from the Source of all reality, nor from the reality of all of humankind—they will be liberated from the subjugating influence of the racialized social structure to the point of actively struggling against it and thereby forge bonds with like-minded collaborators to de-racialize society for the sake of both reformative justice and experiencing a social reality that is much more humane. The road will be long, painful, intense, and arduous, but for the sake of our very humanity and the humanity of those who will come after us, "we shall overcome."

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