Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition
The Changing Same

I know what the world has done to my brother, and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.

—James Baldwin

The publication of this revised twentieth anniversary edition of *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* provides an opportunity to update, clarify, and amplify the evidence, ideas, and arguments that appeared in the first two editions, published in 1998 and 2006. It also offers an opportunity to assess exactly how much has changed over the past two decades and how much remains the same. The harsh realization that so many of the indecent and unjust conditions evident twenty years ago remain firmly in place today, and in fact in most respects have grown worse, should be a source of deep sorrow. Some readers of the 1998 and 2006 editions contended that the book’s evidence about racially disproportionate susceptibility to premature death and the skewing of opportunities and life chances along racial lines were largely vestigial remnants of a distant past, merely dying manifestations of historical slavery and segregation that were fading away and would soon disappear. They imagined an unbroken upward trajectory of progress over time. Sadly, however, the racial wealth gap, the racial health gap, and most other measures of racial stratification and subordination today are even worse than they were ten or twenty years ago. Time does not heal all wounds. Problems do not solve themselves. Things will not get better unless we make them better.

Publishers and academic reviewers measure the success of a book by how many copies are sold, how many times it is cited in research by other scholars, how widely it is assigned in courses, and how frequently its chapters are reprinted in edited collections. By all of these measures, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* has done well. Yet this system of evaluation is a deeply flawed way of thinking about scholarly research. Books can become popular...
simply because they conform to the common sense of their era, because they confirm the ill-conceived ideas or poorly thought out prejudices of readers. Books by scholars ideally should aim to move the conversation along, to challenge dominant assumptions and change prevailing frameworks. Their goal should be to elevate the level of discussion, to complicate how questions are asked and answered, to make people dissatisfied with facile formulations and arguments. The ultimate influence and impact of research rests upon creating a new common sense and forging new frameworks for discussing enduring problems in subtle and sophisticated ways so people can use them to forge solutions.

During the past two decades, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* has played a part in shaping a shared social conversation that has changed the frame and shifted the focus of discussions about race. Twenty years ago, scholarly and civic discussions about racism relentlessly portrayed aggrieved racial groups as merely disadvantaged without acknowledging how they are taken advantage of by others. Public policy makers and academic experts at that time generally presumed that the superior life outcomes that whites experienced stemmed from their fortitude, fitness, and family values rather than from the locked-in advantages of the possessive investment in whiteness and its facilitation of opportunity hoarding. Proposed reforms in the past generally presumed that nonwhites had to make themselves better, more fit for freedom, more like whites, not that whites needed to surrender their stranglehold on the unfair gains and unjust rewards they derive from pervasive practices that produce artificial, arbitrary, and irrational discrimination.

Today, it has become commonplace, although hardly universal, to recognize that whiteness is not so much a color as a condition, a structured advantage sustained by past and present forms of exclusion and subordination. It is possible today for people to recognize that racism involves power as well as prejudice, assets as well as attitudes, and the distribution of property and power as well as the particularities of pigment. Twenty years ago, racism was popularly presumed to be the product of individual, aberrant, isolated, and intentional actions by individuals rather than the visible manifestation of processes that are structural, systemic, collective, cumulative, and continuing. The solutions proffered to solve racial problems in the past focused on individual attitudes and behaviors, on improving “race relations” and promoting racial reconciliation. Although better behavior by individuals will always be welcome, it is evident today that it is indecent to settle simply for more cordial and polite relations between the races while grievously unequal and unjust conditions remain in place. True reconciliation cannot take place unless it is preceded by recognition, contrition, atonement, repair, and restitution.

*The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* has played a role in changing the frame and shifting the focus of civic and scholarly discussions about racism, but it has not done so alone. It has been part of a chorus of many voices, one
link in a lengthy chain forged by a wide range of interlocutors. Every antiracist article and book becomes more powerful and more persuasive because of the others and the cumulative impact they exert. The broader conversation profits from our similarities and from our differences, from our agreements and from our disagreements. In shared social conversations about ideas, we do this work together. Everyone contributes and everyone counts. As literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin explains, there is no pure monologue in culture. Everyone enters a dialogue already in progress. Failure to recognize this fact can lead to distorted ways of working. Barbara Tomlinson and I addressed the ramifications of this idea in our 2013 American Quarterly article “American Studies as Accompaniment.” We noted that the audit culture and prestige hierarchies of academic research can make scholars think they should have the first word or the last word, that they should be the first to discover a new topic or else provide the definitive judgment on the subject so no more research needs to be done. The first and the last word, however, are delusions. Everyone builds on what came before and prepares part of what comes after. The real challenge of research is not to open up or close down debate with the first or last word, but rather to receive gratefully the wisdom of the past (faults and all) and transform its truths so they can be passed on graciously to new generations of critical interlocutors.

The text and footnotes of The Possessive Investment in Whiteness reference directly the explicit dialogic partners whose writings shaped it. In retrospect, I can now see how it was also influenced and informed by traces of works by authors not cited. Yet while of the utmost importance to the origins and evolution of this book, scholarly research provided only one part of the dialogue from which it emerged and to which it responded. As Cedric Robinson astutely observed, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness is not really a book about whiteness but rather a deployment of tools honed and refined in struggles shaped by radical Black studies and radical Black politics. It came from and sought to contribute to what Martin Luther King, Jr., aptly named “the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle” for a new and better world.

I started writing what became The Possessive Investment in Whiteness in the midst of a series of strategy meetings, public presentations, and classroom lectures designed to respond to attacks on affirmative action in California in the 1990s. The anti-immigrant and anti–affirmative action demagoguery of California governor Pete Wilson played a formative role in the dialogic process that led to the book. The Black Radical Tradition teaches that hegemony can be turned on its head, that poison can be transformed into medicine, that fighting back can maneuver even the most ill-intentioned enemies into becoming unwitting accomplices in our liberation. The mobilizations against Wilson’s ballot initiatives Proposition 187 and Proposition 209 that I describe in Chapter 11 provoked me to assemble the evidence,
ideas, and arguments that appear on these pages. I described much of what I learned from that struggle first in a presentation at the American Studies Association annual meetings in 1993. That talk became the basis for an article in the American Quarterly in 1995, which in turn led to the writing and publication of the first edition of this book in 1998. The ensuing fate of the book has been directly connected to the pulse of the people, to its utility as one of the resources deployed by masses in motion. In conjunction with the creations of many other authors and artists, its framework, terminology, ideas, and evidence have permeated parts of adult education classes for low-wage immigrant women workers, campaigns for educational equity waged by antiracist activists, discussions among church social justice study groups, depositions and friend of the court briefs in fair housing cases, policy briefs by financial equity advocates, lessons and lectures by classroom teachers, and creative works by visual and spoken word artists. Being the author of this book has blessed me with the extraordinary privilege and pleasure of meeting with, speaking with, working with, and learning with—and from—communities in struggle. These acts of accompaniment have taken me to a coalition against lead poisoning meeting at the Prince Hall Mason Lodge in North St. Louis and a fair housing celebration at a country club in the southern suburbs of Chicago, to a son jaorcho fandango in a community center in East Los Angeles and to interviews with fair housing litigants in their living rooms in West Palm Beach, Florida. Everywhere I have been, I have encountered principled people from many different backgrounds working together for social justice, from Ferguson to Flint, from Memphis to Milwaukee, from Boston to Austin.

Much has changed over the past twenty years because of these social movement mobilizations. Billions of dollars of sound investments have been made in racially isolated neighborhoods and communities because of the efforts of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, the Woodstock Institute, and other social justice organizations dedicated to realizing the promises inscribed in the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act. Fair housing advocates, activists, and attorneys affiliated with the National Fair Housing Alliance have won victories that have opened up a plethora of opportunities for secure, safe, and affordable housing, and have helped people acquire assets that appreciate in value and can be passed down across generations. Creative litigators have used fair housing laws to secure justice for victims of sexual harassment and assault, hate crimes, and environmental racism. Decades of citizen activism at the local level by people of many different races and religions led to the Supreme Court’s 2015 ruling in the Inclusive Communities case that confirmed the legitimacy and necessity of considering the racially disparate impact of seemingly racial neutral housing policies. Action inside courtrooms has been accompanied by mass mobilizations. Millions of immigrants and their allies poured into the streets in 2006 in a
proud display of multiracial, multilingual, and multinational solidarity. This mobilization led to the defeat of legislation pending in Congress at that time that was designed to impose draconian criminal penalties on the quotidian survival strategies of immigrants and their children.10 Because of #BlackLivesMatter, and #SayHerName protests, police killings of and assaults on unarmed Black people no longer proceed unchallenged but have instead provoked mobilizations by mass movements led by women of color, often by those who identify as queer or trans.11 Campaigns for educational equity and justice by parents, teachers, and students have foregrounded the idea of education as a public good to be protected rather than simply as a private commodity to be purchased.

Yet for all that has changed, sadly much remains the same. The arguments and analyses written by David Walker in the 1820s, by Anna Julia Cooper in the 1890s and by W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1930s still by and large describe the core features of the racial order we confront and contest today. Words uttered decades ago, including some in this book, could just as easily have been spoken yesterday. David Walker emphasized how the rewards of whiteness corrupt white people. Once group identity makes people accustomed to exploiting the labor of others, he argued, they became blind to the evil acts they perform.12 These patterns persist today. As New Orleans Ninth Ward spoken word artist, activist, and cultural visionary Sunni Patterson wrote after the devastation her city suffered in 2005, “And we know this place. It’s ever-changing yet forever the same: money and power and greed, the game.”13

The period preceding this 2018 edition of The Possessive Investment in Whiteness was marked by both the organized abandonment and yet punitive confinement of impoverished Black New Orleans residents in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the manipulation of the grand jury process to ensure that no charges were brought against the killer of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. Many of us have come to refer to this as the Katrina-Ferguson Conjuncture, a moment in history that discredits old practices and demands new ones, a time when social movements generate new personalities, new politics, and new polities. Along the way, a racially orchestrated economic crisis produced the greatest loss of assets in history for Black and brown people. Virulent rhetoric, violent acts, and vile policies have targeted immigrants of color, generating mass deportations and detentions. In popular culture and political proclamations, online and in the streets; in private acts of discrimination; and in public policies like “broken windows” policing and the privatization of public education, an unapologetic and unaccountable racism continues to be legislated, learned, and legitimated. Race is still experienced as an identity inscribed on the body that draws negative ascription from members of dominant groups, but it is also instantiated through state and vigilante violence, displacement, dispossession, and disempower-
ment, systemic processes of criminalization and mass incarceration, and plutocratic policies that revolve around institutionalized privatization and plunder.

We know that these practices and processes are transnational as well as national. They are as deadly in Sao Paolo as they are in San Francisco, as cruel in Manchester as they are in Minneapolis. They mean something different to people suffering from the violence of the U.S. empire outside its borders than they do to those us who live in the metropole. They impact Indigenous people and Muslims with particularly deadly force. Yet these many uneven and different kinds of racism still stem from some common causes. The key categories of economic and social life—no less than the core components of scholarly contemplation and critique—everywhere continue to rest on racist premises, presumptions, and practices that need to be opposed both locally and globally.

We have no choice but to start from where we are, to play the hand we have been dealt by history, to act in the arenas open to us with the modest tools we have at our disposal. In the United States, that means coming to grips with the unresolved and continuing legacies of conquest and colonization, of Indigenous dispossession and immigrant exclusion and exploitation, of sexual racism and of slavery unwilling to die. In the wake of what we have come to name the Katrina-Ferguson Conjuncture, white folks generally still insist on being on top. The old will not die and the new cannot yet be born. When Barack Obama attained the presidency of the United States in 2008, a wide range of civic and scholarly voices predicted that the United States was on the way to becoming a “post-racial” nation. Of course, we knew better. Today, it is clearer than ever that we are not postracial, even if, sadly, we are indeed post-Trayvon Martin, post-Rekia Boyd, post-Eric Garner, post-Sandra Bland, and post-Freddie Gray. The killers of these Black people have never been held accountable for their deeds. The racial and spatial distribution of power, opportunities, and life chances that this violence is enacted to uphold remains firmly in place. Nearly 4 million separate incidents of illegal but unprosecuted housing discrimination take place every year, relegating people of different races to different places, to different neighborhoods, schools, jobs, health conditions, and opportunities for asset accumulation.

What the Obama presidency initiated was not a new era of racial liberation but rather a new system of racial subordination, one where the triumphs of a few people of color designated as exceptional serve to rationalize and excuse the exclusion of the masses of racialized people designated as disposable. The direct, referential, and snarling racism of white supremacy’s past finds new life through the enactment and celebration of interpersonal hate crimes, ever more lurid and demeaning depictions of nonwhite individuals (including those lauded as exceptional), and the pervasive presence of recreational hate as a perverse but seemingly pleasurable spectacle in political discourse.
At the same time, racially specific denials of dignity, democracy, and opportunity are instituted through structural systematic practices that do not require overt references to race. White supremacy makes its presence felt through hate crimes and hurled insults, but it also works relentlessly and effectively through disproportionate vulnerability to police stops, frisks, arrests, and killings, to mass incarceration and the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction. The possessive investment in whiteness fuels depictions of aggrieved racialized populations as innately risky, as unworthy of protection or support, while subjecting them to housing insecurity, homelessness, foreclosure, and eviction, to labor exploitation and wage theft, and to racialized sexual harassment at work and on the streets. A wide range of policies secure racist effects without announcing racist intent. For example, laws that require would-be voters to have valid current forms of identification with their pictures on them, despite scant evidence of in-person voter fraud, make no overt mention of race. But in a society where racial profiling and poverty combine to make Black people much more likely not to have a driver’s license, or more likely to have licenses suspended because they cannot pay fines, the provision functions smoothly and seamlessly as a form of racialized voter suppression.

Yet the Katrina-Ferguson Conjuncture is also an oppositional conjuncture. As has been the case throughout history, new forms of domination produce new forms of resistance. Struggle always emerges from the seeds of a new society that rest inside the shell of the old. The same forces producing seemingly unlimited suffering and sacrifice have also given rise to new politics and new polities. Cedric Robinson reminds us that all systems of social control contain contradictions that can cause their undoing. Even slavery, he notes, “gave the lie to its own conceit: one could not create a perfect system of oppression and exploitation.”

The core contradiction of neoliberal society is race. The neoliberal policies, practices, and pedagogies that pervade contemporary society simultaneously require both the deployment and the disavowal of race. Race needs to be deployed as a justification for devaluing the common good. Privatization proceeds primarily by portraying public spaces and public institutions as unclean and unsafe, as the parochial preserve of unworthy people of color. Neoliberalism’s core oppositions between public and private, between producer and parasite, proceed through racialized metaphors about lack of responsibility and accountability. Yet race is also deployed as an excuse for the failures of neoliberalism, scapegoating people of color for the absolute inability of the “market” to deliver general prosperity. Concerns with the general welfare are eclipsed by complaints about “those people” receiving welfare. The people who have the most severe problems are seen as problems through this lens. Yet even while race is relentlessly deployed, it must be disavowed through the erasure of contemporary racism and its relegation to
a prior time in history. Racial projects are replete with historical social identities. They reveal the "market" to be a racialized social construct, not an autonomous entity. Racism requires aggrieved groups to expose the illusion of the market, to unmask capitalism as always already racialized. Yet racism also provokes aggrieved groups to draw on archives, create imaginaries, and inhabit identities that are inimical to the interests of market forces, that challenge the hegemony of market time and market space.

In response to the Katrina-Ferguson Conjuncture and its attendant oppressions and abandonments, masses in motion have collectively rejected an unlivable destiny. The cruel treatment of Black New Orleans and the denial of justice for Michael Brown were events designed to humiliate and subordinate. They were public spectacles crafted to demonstrate that Black lives do not matter. Yet for the targets of those messages, these events encapsulated, crystallized, and distilled their experiences with racial subordination over the previous four decades. They exposed the cruelty and mendacity of the people in power. They were seen as injuries that portended an unlivable destiny and as insults that required a collective response. They produced a turning point from which there can be no turning back.

New social movements are emerging in this conjuncture. They are often race based but rarely race bound. They recognize racism as a technology of power, as a justification and excuse for unfair gains and unjust enrichments. They see racism as innately intersectional, as ever present, but never present in isolation from sexism, homophobia, imperial conquest, and class subordination. These movements acknowledge the long fetch of history, the depressing collective, cumulative, and continuing consequences of slavery unwilling to die, yet they also perceive new possibilities for the present and for the future. They challenge the logics of color blindness and balanced budget conservatism by drawing on the enduring and viable repressed radicalisms of previous eras. They resonate with the call by Charlotta Bass to seek more than “dark faces in high places,” with the insistence of Vincent Harding that the goal of the freedom movement had to be more ambitious than merely seeking to desegregate the ranks of the pain inflictors of this world, with the assertion by Martin Luther King, Jr., that “the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism and materialism.” Social movements mobilize the insights and energy of people whose backs are not just up against the wall but who have been pushed through the wall. They bring together criminalized youth and adults, houseless survivors of urban development, people who refuse normative sex and gender roles and appearances, targets of police repression, victims of environmental racism, persecuted religious minorities, and immigrants. Their mobilizations challenge the social warrant of neoliberal privatization, personalization, and plunder by promoting plans, policies, and programs speaking to the interests
of those in greatest need, by deepening democratic and deliberative processes through collective decision-making, by developing new leaders and new understandings of leadership, by finding value in undervalued places and undervalued people, and by creating new cultures of mutual recognition and respect.

The pulse of the people in the streets, the music of the masses in motion, appears in vivid form in a wide range of antiracist mobilizations. It permeates the poetry of the people. Speaking for herself and for millions of others, Sunni Patterson concludes her poem “We Know This Place” with a clarion call that resonates with the energy and imagination of our time: “But come, come children, rally around, and maybe together we can make a sound, that will shake the trees and rattle the ground, make strong our knees cause we’s freedom bound. Hold On to the Prize. Never Put It Down. Be Firm in the Stance. No Break, No Bow. Forward dear children, cause freedom is now.” This always changing but forever the same struggle contains both continuity and rupture, both the depressing weight of stasis and the exhilarating possibility of change. Things will not get better unless we make them better, but change is in the air.

It can be daunting and depressing to confront the enduring depths and dimensions of racial oppression, to reckon with the needless suffering that takes place because of the possessive investment in whiteness. While I can see some reasons to celebrate the publication of a twentieth-anniversary edition of *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness*, it would have been far preferable from my perspective if the conditions I described twenty years had become so obsolete that a twentieth-anniversary edition of the book was not needed. My deepest hope now is that there will not be a need for a thirtieth-anniversary edition, except perhaps as a historical curiosity delineating how radically society had changed in the intervening ten years. Whether or not that happens depends upon all of us, on whether reading this book gives readers work to do, not just emotions to feel. It is one thing to talk about suffering but quite another to do something about it. It is not enough to craft eloquent or indignant descriptions of injustice, to wallow in the affects of alienation and despair, or to savor the peculiar pleasures of cynicism and resignation, to decry and condemn exploitation but not try to stop it. Racism is not a text, an ideology, or a secret oath. It is a set of uneven yet fully linked concrete practices and processes. The racial order gets made and remade every day. We all have meaningful work to do, and as the lyrics of the venerable gospel song “May the Work I’ve Done” instruct, in this world, it is the work you do that speaks for you.