This volume is the culmination of more than a decade of shared inquiry involving dozens of scholars investigating the origins, evolution, and consequences of racial colorblindness as a metaphor for social relations across the academic disciplines. Its genealogy, however, reaches beyond the academy both to the Civil Rights Movement, which briefly shook the foundations of American social life, and to the demobilizing campaigns within the legal and political arena to restabilize the American social order in its aftermath. Anchoring the slowed pace of race reform in the 1980s, and the dismantling of the civil rights infrastructure throughout the 1990s, colorblind rhetoric crossed over into popular culture to provide ideological cover for ballot initiatives and other efforts to neutralize affirmative action and other antisu- primization measures.

Despite its solidly conservative deployment in the post–civil rights era, colorblindness received an unexpected rebranding in 2008 as the ideological standard-bearer for the country’s postracial future. This was a remarkable ride for a concept that defied definition, measurement, or theorization. Indeed, the work that colorblindness does across so many sectors and issues is stunning given the utter lack of consensus as to what it really is. Unanswered questions about whether it is a social theory, a moral imperative, or merely a rhetorical prophylactic have not significantly undermined its uptake by institutions and pundits ranging from liberals who hold it as a transcendent ideal to organizations whose assault on university policy marches under this banner. Descriptive questions about whether human beings can actually choose to be colorblind or whether it is a cognitive impossibility only complicate the more fundamental question about whether it can produce a more just and legitimate social world. The feeble justification for colorblindness seems
incongruous with its ubiquitous presence in public discourse pertaining to race and the social world.

This anomalous reality formed the centerpiece of a research initiative that moved from the affirmative action battlefields of California, Michigan, and Washington to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CSRE) at Stanford. The African American Policy Forum (AAPF) had been involved in campaigns in multiple states to preserve race-conscious policies, working together with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other organizations to bring cross-disciplinary research to bear on the enduring nature of racial inequality in American society. The dominance of colorblindness as the embodiment of racial justice underscored the need for a powerful counternarrative that could convey an alternative vision of racial equity, one tied to the historical and contemporary ways that race actually worked as opposed to the fantasies of racial transcendence peddled by critics such as Ward Connerly and organizations like the Center for Individual Rights. The idea that the commonsense appeal of colorblindness could not be directly countered to defeat popular initiatives to undermine equal opportunity policies was underscored by the conventional messaging experts who encouraged a version of a “mend it, don’t end it” approach. Campaign messaging in defense of affirmative action largely sidestepped racial matters to foreground the presumably more palatable case of gender equity.

With the exception of Colorado, the campaigns designed to defend racial justice and affirmative action without acknowledging racial injustice went down to withering defeat. Without a powerful counternarrative, the easily inflated rhetoric of colorblindness proved to be a trap for liberals. For critics of civil rights, colorblindness served as a battle-tested Trojan horse, one that could deliver easy reversals of the painstaking victories that courageous Americans had risked everything to secure. Under the magic of the colorblind trope, historically marginalized communities were reframed as illegitimate beneficiaries of reverse discrimination while those who inherited the advantages of a society built, as Justice Harlan approvingly observed in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, on the superiority of whites were lifted up as victims. As Luke Charles Harris notes, through this classic misdirection the diminished overrepresentation of whites became the critical civil rights issue of the post–civil rights era.¹

The yawning losses sustained by civil rights constituencies and the troubling future that lay ahead prompted the editors of this collection, both individually and collectively, to mobilize knowledge to reveal the contemporary workings of
racial power. Daniel Martinez HoSang’s *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California*, for example, uncovered the connections between California’s anti–affirmative action and anti-immigrant campaigns and midcentury efforts to use popular initiatives to reverse civil rights victories. HoSang reveals how California’s long history of subjecting minoritized racial groups has long been rationalized by appeals to race-neutral values like “freedom” and “choice.” George Lipsitz’s work interrogating power and resistance stretched across sociology, history, and Black Studies. Luke Charles Harris’s trenchant critiques of both constitutional jurisprudence and political science revealed the otherworldly dimensions of a constitutional and political theory of equality that failed to center white supremacy as its starting proposition. And Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s work as a founder of Critical Race Theory took up the ways that the racial revolt against white supremacy had been depoliticized and tamed by liberal legalism. The common denominator in all of these projects was their focused interrogation of the profound contradiction between abstract American ideals of equality divorced from social reality and the messier story of how racial power is constituted and reproduced through colorblind tropes and stealth performances.

These projects, like so many others pursued across the academy, set forth powerful frameworks that revealed the illegitimate hold of colorblindness as either a descriptive prism or a normative analytic. Yet a powerful counternarrative to colorblindness had yet to emerge. Thus, the Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines project grew out of an effort to aggregate knowledge about our racial past to illuminate how the legacy of white supremacy continued to shape contemporary racial disparities.

Although information gaps between researchers and advocates were not new, the more surprising but equally important chasm between academics dedicated to race scholarship across disciplines had yet to be addressed. Indeed, even as the need for cross-institutional collaboration between academics and policy advocates was frequently acknowledged in the efforts to defend civil rights, opportunities for the collective targeting of the colorblind gloss on racial hierarchies across academic disciplines were rare. Disciplinary boundaries and research practices threatened to deepen rather than disrupt the tenacious hold of colorblind ideology. Evidence that revealed the unwarranted prominence of colorblind discourse remained in disaggregated disarray across the academic disciplines.

A particularly powerful illustration of the way that colorblindness remained uncontested absent intentional cross-disciplinary efforts lies in the
interface between social psychology and law. Claude Steele, the leading researcher in the discovery of stereotype threat, brought a new and compelling viewpoint into AAPF’s summits and interventions on affirmative action. His breakthrough work on stereotype threat revealed the demonstrable instability of the baselines on which so much of the constitutional debate about “preferential treatment” and “reverse discrimination” was predicated. As Justice Powell had observed in the 1978 decision *Regents of University of California v. Bakke*: “Racial Classifications in admissions conceivably could serve [another] purpose, one which petitioner does not articulate: fair appraisal of each individual’s academic promise in light of some cultural bias in grading or testing procedures” (438 U.S. 265, fn. 43).

Steele’s work seemed to provide direct evidence that could, if taken up by legal theorists and judges, disrupt the meritocratic baseline on which the constitutional presumption against affirmative action was predicated. Of course, the fact that disruption was possible did not automatically reshape the contours of legal doctrine. What it did do, however, was reveal that doctrinal rules that framed colorblindness as the constitutional embodiment of race neutrality were nothing but a policy choice of judges that could just as convincingly go a different way.

This critical race encounter between law and social psychology prompted important insights that eventually come together as central themes of the Countering Colorblindness project. First among them was the recognition that a comprehensive understanding of colorblindness’s many implications required multiple opportunities for participants to understand the history and methods of the disciplines and how developments in one discipline bear implications for another. Notwithstanding the promise of an interdisciplinary approach to colorblindness, it is clear that targeted opportunities for scholars to engage these questions of colorblindness across disciplines were rare. AAPF then convened short working-group meetings around the world, including in the United States, India, Italy, and Brazil. Yet there were no fully sustainable opportunities to stage a multilayered exchange among scholars who were in some way engaging colorblindness.

The Countering Colorblindness project finally came to fruition in 2008 when a critical mass of thinkers met together at Stanford for a yearlong effort to build a sustainable initiative around colorblindness and its consequences. Luke Charles Harris and George Lipsitz, along with Kimberlé Crenshaw (a fellow at CASBS) and director Claude Steele, formed the initial group, which several CASBS scholars subsequently joined.
The working group set about to challenge colorblind ideology and to bring disciplinary knowledge to bear against the unchecked growth of this framework in all discourses pertaining to race. As we framed the missions at the time, the goal was to

examine how the idea of colorblindness influences the dominant sensibilities of an array of academic disciplines, shaping knowledge production and other institutional practices. Here our goal will be not only to create an interdisciplinary genealogy of colorblindness as an idea. More provocatively, we will seek to understand colorblindness as an institutional practice that reproduces its own appeal by limiting the means by which countervailing information is legitimately produced.

These were not simply academic questions but were central to our effort to build a stronger research-based foundation for racial justice advocacy in the civil and political sectors.

On paper, the plan was a good one. In reality, the early stages of dialogue proved tough going. While the interrogation of colorblindness across the disciplines bore the illusion of a common point of departure, the constraints of disciplinary allegiances, distinct terminologies, and analytic conventions made it difficult to agree on a clear agenda or language. Still, we labored on with our hit-or-miss experiments in framing what we would interrogate and how.

Eventually, we would learn just how significant disciplinary barriers can be, and how the agnosticism that helped to facilitate meaningful exchange among some of us was discomforting to others. We learned as well that disciplinary methods could contain useful avenues into various ways of conceiving and managing information and that there was, to paraphrase an adage, “a method to the disciplinary madness.” Specifically, there were insights that might be drawn from our respective paradigms notwithstanding their sometimes troubling histories.

Those who navigated a space between unmitigated endorsement and utter abandonment of their disciplinary paradigms seem to be most suited for our exchange. Claude Steele, in his characteristically succinct display of conceptual profundity, described how the project attracted three kinds of scholar. The first (and largest) group were the “true believers,” those who consider the norms and commitments of their discipline to be sacred and beyond reproach. A second group, the “heretics,” remain deeply suspicious and skeptical of disciplinary norms, logics, and knowledge, often altogether
fleeing the disciplines in which they were originally trained. Only the last group—“those that pray to their disciplinary gods with one eye open”—contributed to and gained the most from this transdisciplinary encounter. We were all, by that time, focused on bringing our tool set to the common problematic: colorblindness. But we did so with an agnosticism about what was workable.

The scholars who have contributed to this volume and who have otherwise supported this project understand and can utilize the conventions, methodological norms, and theoretical commitments that structure our respective disciplines. But we also deploy them to challenge, rather than simply enforce, ways of producing officially recognized knowledge. We seek to subvert, redeploy, and marshal the particular insights of disciplinary formations to address the structural dimensions of racial domination.

Across the year at Stanford, during weekly dialogues, we taught ourselves to become “transdisciplinary,” a product of listening and dialogue to understand how academic disciplines contributed to the contemporary legitimacy of racial hierarchies. Guided by the convening strategies out of which the Critical Race Theory movement emerged, we were intentional about establishing a practice across disciplines that would allow us to better grasp the contours of colorblindness and to peel away its ability to mask illegitimate racial power. We catalogued particular institutional practices and beliefs that suppress intellectual projects that challenge such hierarchies and explored why exclusionary practices in knowledge-building institutions escaped the kinds of critiques and reforms deemed appropriate for other realms of society. In stepping out of comfort zones, we uncovered insights we hadn’t known we were looking for. Our meanderings produced surprising insights derived from sustained dialogues; yet once identified, they were foundational to our work moving ahead.

Eventually, participants began to see race and colorblindness through a polysynthetic gaze forged from our multiple prisms. Colorblindness, after all, constitutes a core orientation and presumption in most academic disciplines, shaping research methodologies and channeling resources in a way that marginalizes and sometimes entirely precludes critical work on race-related topics. To counter it is to confront many of the most enduring shibboleths of the academic disciplines, particularly constructions of research objectivity, neutrality, and authority. In so doing, we acquired an inventory of exemplary interdisciplinary works, methods, and theories, along with the tropes intended
to disguise race, such as merit, market, and choice. We learned to recognize
affinities between the role of precedent in law and history; the stance of neu-
trality in science and musicology; and the tendencies toward disaggregation in
epidemiology, education, and sociology. We sought to identify critical inter-
sections wherein studying race from more than one disciplinary perspective
might illuminate previously taken for granted aspects of a problem. For exam-
ple, in the law the idea of the “intent” to discriminate has become the primary
touchstone of a constitutional claim for racial discrimination, attenuating
more nuanced possibilities of understanding racial power. These developments
reflect and parallel trends in social psychology in which, in the 1950s and '60s,
racism was often conceptualized as an intentional phenomenon and associated
with particular personality types. Similarly, in sociology, institutional and
structural accounts of racism and political economy are often displaced by a
race relations paradigm that trivializes attention to the material distribution
of resources and power across disparate sectors of society. Philosophy, history,
literary studies, and other fields in the humanities have often foreclosed an
understanding of the ways in which race, as an optic of power and a mode of
social formation, has served as a structuring force within these disciplines.

The exchanges and conversations helped us to open up the radical contesta-
tions that emerge within particular disciplines that sometimes shape and
inform practices and critiques in other fields. For instance, legal scholars have
been able to be better prepared to assess the colorblind scholarship of social
science when it is used in legal cases to indemnify racist laws. At the same time,
scholars in the social sciences can be more conversant in the ways in which a
colorblind constitutionalism travels outside the law. Legal thinkers and social
scientists can learn about the nature of textualization, narrative, and argument
from humanists, while scholars of expressive culture in the humanities can
learn from social scientists and legal scholars about the ways in which cultural
texts emerge from and speak to social and historical contexts.

We also developed a heightened awareness of the migration of concepts
across academic disciplines into the realms of journalism, philanthropy, pub-
lic policy, and popular culture. These questions matter not just to the acad-
emy but also to the broader arena of public policy in which colorblindness
functions as a laissez-faire intervention against the redistribution of resources
and reform efforts.

Our initial group met weekly for eight months, culminating in a weeklong
seminar at Stanford in which we doubled our number by recruiting colleagues
who were similarly “one eye open.” Together we represented scholars from diverse disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, economics, philosophy, law, political science, comparative literature, English, history, and musicology. The success of this first weeklong seminar propelled the project forward in a number of directions. We have since convened multiple Countering Colorblindness seminars and meetings, and have collectively offered several undergraduate and graduate courses. Many of the essays in this volume were first presented at a weeklong seminar in 2015 at the University of Oregon organized by Daniel Martinez HoSang.

Countering Colorblindness is predicated on the fact that knowledge production in the academy is intimately linked to policy development in civil society. Academics, teachers, and researchers possess substantial resources that can be better mobilized to advance socially just policies and practices. Moreover, within each discipline there have been efforts for antiracist thought and practice that have faced resistance and suppression. A nuanced understanding of disciplinary norms, methodologies, and registers is essential if we are not only to identify what happened to suppress those currents but also to comprehend the ways that considerations of race have been excluded at the broadest levels of epistemic investigations within the traditional disciplines.

Having turned our critical lens onto the academy itself to understand how colorblind paradigms shape the production of knowledge, the faculty seminars, workshops, and research that have unfolded within the first decade of the Countering Colorblindness project have culminated in this volume. The implications of these pieces, however, constitute the case for disciplinary practices that go beyond the superficial appeal of diversity.

The historical conditions of conquest, slavery, Indigenous dispossession, apartheid, and attempted genocide from which every traditional academic discipline emerged require a thorough vetting of these legacies. For these established disciplines to be revitalized, we must reckon with these histories. One cannot simply diversify the existing disciplines without such a reckoning. And while we believe the disciplines possess modes of analysis and methods of inquiry that can allow us to understand and mobilize against racial subordination and hierarchy, we know that the university is once again becoming a central site of social and political struggle. Conservative forces have renewed their attacks on the academy in ways that undermine critical work and widen the gap between conventional race management and the deeper interrogation that Countering Colorblindness represents. A path
forward, we hope, will come by garnering the strength to fight back with tools to enhance our own capacity, and through projects that keep the university from being a silent partner in—and a promoter of—social injustice rather than an institution that interrogates the most challenging questions about racial equity.

Almost all of the essays in this volume were authored or coauthored by participants in the Countering Colorblindness project. The inaugural seminar at Stanford in 2009 was convened by CASBS fellow Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and sponsored by the African American Policy Forum. CASBS director Claude Steele and CSRE director Dorothy Steele provided support for cofacilitators George Lipsitz and Luke Charles Harris. Glenn Adams and Alfredo Artiles rounded out the CASBS planning team. Subsequent convenings were hosted in 2013 at the UCLA School of Law in partnership with Devon Carbado, Cheryl Harris, and the Critical Race Studies program, and in 2015 at the University of Oregon, organized by Daniel Martinez HoSang and the Department of Ethnic Studies with funding provided by the College of Arts and Sciences, the Office of Academic Affairs, and the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics, led by Margaret Hallock.


Following the 2015 seminar, Daniel Martinez HoSang coordinated the effort with coeditors and contributors to bring this volume to fruition. Many more people whose work does not appear in this volume contributed to its formation. Their ideas and scholarship shaped the contours and content of this volume in myriad ways. Various staff affiliated with CASBS, the University of Oregon, the UCLA School of Law, CSRE, and AAPF provided important assistance in the planning and hosting of these seminars. The efforts of AAPF’s Camila Morse were vital in this respect for the
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Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw
Luke Charles Harris
Daniel Martinez HoSang
George Lipsitz

NOTE