Lecture 1: Racial Stereotypes

1. These lectures are an analytical reflection on the socioeconomic disadvantage of African Americans, what I will refer to here as the problem of racial inequality in the US. Over the course of the next three afternoons, I will offer social-theoretic and social-philosophic argumentation.

   a. The former consists of descriptive-causal accounts, the latter of normative judgments. In undertaking this analysis, I rely upon but am not confined by my background in economic theory. I will paint with broad strokes, offering an overview of my current thinking, and attempting no formal or technical argument, as befits this presentation to a general audience. Where relevant, I cite the empirical literatures in economics, sociology, political science and history. I present no new evidence although, with due modesty, I advance what I believe to be a novel conceptual framework for assimilating the evidence at hand.

   b. This framework will be conveyed through models – i.e., stylized "stories" depicting hypothetical but plausible causal mechanisms. These models bid to clarify how the social phenomenon we call “race” operates in economic life so as to generate the disparate outcomes we observe. Models of this kind, by isolating a small number of causal relations and exploring them intensively, can deepen our understanding of the interaction between policies and institutions, on the one hand, and the behaviors of individuals, on the other.

2. The enterprise I am about to undertake is grounded in three interrelated axioms about "race" and inequality in the U.S. that I now state:

   a. Axiom 1: In regard to the ontological status of race, I am a constructivist. I.e., I hold that the use of perceived physical markers to divide the field of human subjects into subgroups popularly designated as "races" is a choice human beings make – a social convention, if you will – for which no deeper biological
justification is to be had. Furthermore, within a given society this race-making is an historical product, often the consequence (perhaps unintended) of contention between interested parties. "Race" is better seen on this view as a socio-political than a biological phenomenon. (Obviously, this thing called “race” need be no less "real" for that.)

b. **Axiom 2**: In regard to the ultimate sources of racial inequality, I am an anti-essentialist. I.e., I hold that widespread, durable, large scale disparity in the social experience of different racial groups within the same society is itself a social product, not the result of systematically unequal innate human capacities as between members of the racial groups.

c. **Axiom 3**: The racial “other-ness” of blacks is imbedded in American social consciousness, primarily as a result of the historical fact of chattel slavery. This inherited stigma even today exerts an inhibiting effect on the extent to which black Americans can realize their full human potential.

d. I might add with respect to Axiom 3 that astute external observers of race relations in America have often stressed just this. E.g., in the early 19th century, Tocqueville remarked in *Democracy in America* on how "the prejudice which repels the Negroes causes inequality to be sanctioned by the manners while it is effaced from the laws of the country." In the mid-20th century, Myrdal noted in *The American Dilemma* how powerful was what he called a “vicious circle” of cumulative causation, in which the failure of blacks to advance justified for whites the prejudicial attitudes that, when reflected in social and political action, served to ensure that blacks would not advance. I will argue that subtle social processes of this kind are at work among us, even today. I take it as my responsibility to analyze such tragic, self-perpetuating processes, so as to lay bare the underlying, structural causes of racial disparity. This is the descriptive-causal aspect of my ambition here.

3. Concerning my normative analysis, I will assess the public morality of the American social order in regard to race-related matters. I.e., I will talk about racial justice. My approach here is also theoretical and conceptual, seeking to clarify the criteria that should
be consulted in such ethical reflections. This leads me into the fields of social and political philosophy, where such considerations have a long history. I will sound a note of skepticism about the ability of liberal political theory, the ruling orthodoxy on such matters, to cope with the large, enduring and historically rooted racial disparity in life chances characteristic of the American situation.

4. In view of these ambitions, I have given to this series of lectures the title, “The Economics and the Ethics of Racial Classification.” Under this general rubric, I propose over the next three afternoons to address successively the topics: Racial Stereotypes, Racial Stigma, and Racial Justice. I offer now an overview of the ground to be covered.

   a. The “stereotype” theme, to which I will turn upon completion of these introductory remarks, is concerned with information, incentives and collective reputations. This is the most strictly economics-based of the three topics. My treatment takes as a point of departure research results I published in the early 90’s in collaboration with Stephen Coate of Cornell University. These ideas, which can be conveyed without the burden of any technical apparatus, provide an indispensable analytic foundation for the argument that follows. The key concepts are:

   (i) rational statistical inference in the presence of limited information (an employer, for example, wants to know how reliably and skillfully a prospective employee will work, if hired);

   (ii) feedback effects on the behavior of individuals resulting from their anticipation that such inferences will be made about them (a worker, for example, decides whether or not to acquire certain skills based, in part, upon what this worker thinks that employers will think about him when he seeks work; and

   (iii) the resultant “equilibrium” pattern of mutually confirming beliefs and behaviors that emerges from this interaction.

For my purposes then a “stereotype” is simply a self-confirming statistical generalization about a class of persons regarding what is taken with reason to be true about them as a class, but cannot be readily determined as true or false for a
given individual in the class. A “racial stereotype,” involves a generalization of this kind about a class defined, in part or altogether, on the basis of perceived racial identity. The rationality, durability, efficiency and fairness of racial stereotypes is to be discussed. I will return to this momentarily, after giving a preview of coming attractions.

b. My second topic, “stigma,” is of course a sociological notion, one at some remove from my home discipline. Nevertheless, by the end of these lectures you will see that racial stigma is central to my thinking. If I succeed, then what I have to say about stigma will be the most original contribution to the scholarly discourse on racial inequality that I will make here. My approach is deeply influenced by the work of sociologist Erving Goffman whose little book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, which appeared in 1963, has a profound impact on me when I first encountered it some twenty years ago. I have always thought that applying Goffman’s insights could illuminate the economic study of racial discrimination, though I am aware of no serious attempt in this vein. I will expand on this subject tomorrow afternoon, but it suffices now to state the main idea. Goffman’s key concept is that of “virtual social identity.” This is the identity imputed to one, instinctively as it were, by those others in society who, because they are not privy to extensive idiosyncratic information, must infer a person’s deeper qualities on the basis of the such easily observable indicators as may lie at hand. This imputed identity is “virtual” because it may diverge from the subject’s actual identity; and, it is “social” because the imputation occurs within the context of the social encounter, and is structured by the social relations obtaining between the subject and the observer. (One sees immediately that there is a connection between this notion of “stigma” and the concept of “stereotype” as just defined. I want to suggest, however, that there are subtle and important differences between these two ideas. I argue that “stigma,” while it involves stereotyping is, for the study of the racial inequality problem, the deeper idea. But, this gets us ahead of our story.)

c. Now, let the virtual identity imputed to a subject be negative, because the indicators at hand are associated by the observer with a dishonorable or
undignified conception of the subject. Then that person’s social existence is in some essential way despoiled and it can rightly be said that the person is “stigmatized.” (So, you see, “stigma” involves not only the productive attributes of a person, but also his presumed worthiness, or, though the language is somewhat hyperbolic, the extent to which he is thought to be fully human. In this sense, "stigma" entails more than simply a negative stereotype.) Now, “race” is by definition an observable mark carried by individuals that has been invested with social meaning. The cultural and political history of our society involves widespread racial subordination. (Recall my third axiom. More on this tomorrow.) These facts combine to make the notion of “stigma” an appealing one, useful perhaps to extend available theoretical accounts of racial inequality. I will pursue this idea in tomorrow afternoon’s talk.

d. The concluding lectures in this series addresses “racial justice.” I want at the outset to dispel any misconception that, by using the words “race” and “justice” in the same sentence I must of necessity be engaged in a rear-guard defense of affirmative action. Such a defense can be offered, and I am not reluctant to do so, but that is not my principal purpose. I am after bigger fish here. Nothing reveals more clearly the intellectual shallowness of the discourse on racial inequality in contemporary American society than the tendency among academics and journalists alike to equate a critical analysis of race and social equity with the advocacy of racial preferences. Visit to any courthouse, public hospital emergency room, or welfare office in any large American city. You will find there compelling evidence to confirm that, now some seven generations after the end of slavery, American society is still marred by the social disadvantage of African Americans. When one decries this fact, one increasingly encounters this retort: ``So what? Why should a concern about social deprivation take any notice of race, if no one is being victimized by racial discrimination?" Of course, that’s a big “if.” But, setting that to one side, the now commonplace claim that discrimination must be the cause of racial inequality before questions of racial justice may be raised is in my view both wrong and dangerous. My talk on Thursday afternoon will be aimed at refuting this claim.
Let me now say a word about my central organizing theme for these lectures – “racial classification.” This is a term of art in the legal literature – with the Supreme Court pronouncing often on the conditions under which the use of racial classifications by governmental agents can be found consistent with the equal protection requirement of the 14th Amendment. I will have essentially nothing to say here about this crucially important, technical point of constitutional law. Rather, as befits an economist, I invoke the term “classification” in the decision-theoretic sense: An agent takes an action affecting others based on what he can observe about those toward whom the action is directed. (An employer hires, a banker lends, a landlord rents, or not, and so on.) As a purely cognitive matter, the agent surveys the field of human subjects and endeavors to discern relevant distinctions among individuals in that field for the purpose of refining his actions so as better to serve the purposes on behalf of which he acts. The imposition of such distinctions is an act of “classification” in the sense in which I intend that term here. Two things should be obvious: (i) Classifying human subjects in this general way is a universal practice, one that lies at the root of all social-cognitive behavior. There can only be the question of how, not whether, human agents will classify those subject to their actions. (ii) Understood at this level of generality, the normative status of even a race-based classification cannot be definitively assessed absent an inquiry into the purposes on behalf of which the classifying act has been undertaken. Both the racist employer, and the diligent public servant bent on enforcing the anti-discrimination laws, will be “guilty” of classifying the field of human subjects in terms of race in order to carry their respective, diametrically opposed, projects forward. Racial classification, in the sense in which I intend it here, is neither a good nor a bad thing in itself. Normative judgment must await an analysis of the goals of classifying agents.

By focusing here is on “racial classification,” I pose the question in a manner that contrasts with the more traditional focus on “racial discrimination.” In doing so I do not intend to imply that racial discrimination has become obsolete; that there are no longer any problems of racism or race-based unfairness in US society. (On the contrary. Though the extent of overt racial discrimination against blacks has obviously declined over the last half-century, I hold it to be equally obvious that racial injustice in US social, economic and political life persists, though less transparently so, and in ways that are
more difficult to root-out. More on this in due course.) My preference for a focus on "classification" over "discrimination" is motivated by two considerations: generality (classification is the more general concept) and utility (thinking in terms "classification" yields greater insight into the racial inequality problem today than thinking in terms of "discrimination.") That "classification" is the more general notion is easily seen when one considers that discerning a difference is logically prior to acting on one. That it is a more useful notion will, I trust, be clear when I have concluded these lectures.

7. I turn now to the matter of racial stereotypes. There has been much discussion of late about the ontological status of "race" -- are there any things in the world that may be taken as corresponding to the word "race," etc. People have taken to putting that word in quotation marks, by way of emphasizing its problematic scientific and philosophical status. Their claim is that no objective criteria are available -- biological, cultural or genealogical -- through use of which the set of human beings can be consistently partitioned into a relatively small number of mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive subsets that may be taken as "races." Belief in the existence of races, on this view, is rather like belief in the existence of witches -- mischievous superstition, nothing more. I do not dispute the core claim here (indeed, it is consistent with my first axiom), but neither do I find this exercise in linguistic philosophy to be of much interest. As a social scientist, I am impressed by the fact that so many behaviors have come to be organized around the "race" category, despite its evident lack of an objective basis in human biology. This, it seems to me, is what needs to be explained. *Objective* rules of racial taxonomy are not required to study, as I do here, the *subjective* use of racial classifications. It is sufficient that influential observers (policemen, employers, bankers, and passersby on the street) have classificatory schemes, and act on those schemes. They need not make the schemes explicit. Their classificatory methods may well be mutually inconsistent. They are unlikely to be able to give cogent reasons for adopting these methods; but then, they are also unlikely to be asked to do so. Still, if a person is aware that others in society are classifying him by reference to certain markers, and if this classification, in turn, constitutes the basis of differential actions affecting his welfare, then these markers will become important to him. He will attend to them, become conscious (and self-conscious) in regard to them. He will, at some level, understand and
identify himself as "raced." This will be a rational cognitive stance on his part, not a belief in magic of some kind, and definitely not a moral error.

8. Let us consider, then, the creation and social reproduction of the cognizance of "race," to be thought of now as a cluster of physical markers that serve as an index around which human agents organize (a) their expectations, and (b) their notions of identity. Both of these considerations -- expectations and beliefs, on the one hand and notions of identity and belonging, on the other -- are important. I will be talking today mainly about expectations and tomorrow mainly about identity. Expectations involve estimating unobserved but payoff-relevant traits. Identity involves, as is to be explained tomorrow, social meanings. Objectively arbitrary markers can nevertheless come to be invested by human agents with a deeper, inchoate significance. (Thus, stop on "red" and go on "green" is a coordinating convention that works just as well the other way around, but in time "red" may come for meaning-hungry human agents to convey a sense of prohibition and "green" a sense of license. Once this has become so, it will be very difficult to use those symbols in any other way, despite the objective arbitrariness of the initial designation. So to, I suggest, with the symbol we call "race.")

9. Now, in regard to expectations, my approach is information-theoretic. "Race" is to be thought of as the equilibrium outcome of decision-making agents who interact with imperfect information. Physical traits matter because they are informative. They matter, in effect, because observers correctly anticipate that they will matter. Observers then act on that anticipation so as to create incentives that vary for differently "raced" agents. Anticipating the varying incentives these "raced" agents adapt accordingly, which is to say, they adapt differently, depending on how they anticipate that they will be perceived. "Race" thereby emerges as a by-product of the accident of observable morphological variability in human populations. People take note of it "in equilibrium" (as economists would say) as a consequence of the dynamics of self-confirming feedbacks. At this level of generality, a "race" can be constructed around any payoff irrelevant index that varies in a population, that is easy to observe reliably, and hard to misrepresent. This leads to a partitioning of the field of human subjects into subsets. For each such subset, observers can form conditional estimates of hard to observe but payoff-relevant traits. By forming these race-contingent conditionals, and acting on them, observers engender a differential
pattern of incentives for persons based on their "race," in such a way that their resultant race-varying behaviors in reaction to these different incentives serve to confirm the initial supposition that the race-index would be informative.

10. We are obviously in need of some examples at this point. Suppose employers have an a priori belief that blacks are more likely to be low effort trainees than are whites. Then, they will set a lower threshold for blacks on the number of mistakes needed to trigger dismissal, since they will be quicker to infer that black workers have not tried hard enough to learn the job. But knowing that they are more likely to be fired for making a few mistakes, more black employees may elect not to exert high effort during the training period in the first place, thus confirming the employers' initial beliefs. Or, suppose only a few taxi drivers will pick up young black men after a certain hour. Given that behavior by taxi drivers as a class, it is plausible through a process of adverse selection that the "types" of young black men who will attempt to hail taxis during those hours contain an especially large fraction of potential robbers. (After all, knowing that a taxi will be difficult to catch, many of those simply trying to get home at night may make provisions for other means of transportation.) Yet, if most drivers willingly picked up young black men, this behavior by drivers would probably induce a less threatening set of black males to select taxi transportation after dark, confirming the rationality of the drivers' more tolerant behavior. Or, suppose car dealers believe that black buyers have higher reservation prices than whites (that is, prices above which they will simply walk out of the showroom rather than haggle further). On this belief, most dealers will be tougher when bargaining with blacks. Given this experience of tough bargaining, however, a black buyer anticipates less favorable alternative opportunities and higher search costs than a white buyer, and so may rationally agree to a higher price, rather than continue the search at another dealership. This behavior confirms the dealers' initial presumption that "race" predicts bargaining power. The key to all of these examples is their self-reinforcing nature: they begin with racially distinct beliefs that then bring about their own statistical confirmation.

11. So, there we have some examples where it is rational for observing agents to classify subjects according to payoff irrelevant (racial) markers, in the service of formulating their
expectations about payoff-relevant traits. At this point, a listener may be asking some questions, such as:

a. If the racial markers are truly arbitrary, then why are the blacks always on the short end of this process? (I'll call this good question #1.)

b. If the association between payoff irrelevant markers and payoff relevant traits is not intrinsic, but is engendered by the nature of agent interaction, then shouldn't somebody learn what is going on and intervene to short-circuit the feedback loop producing this inequality? (Good question #2.)

c. If knowing about unobserved traits is really so important, why don't observing agents invest in identifying other, non-racial, markers that may be equally or more informative, but less racially invidious? (Good question #3.)

d. Doesn't this kind of classificatory behavior, however reasonable or even necessary in certain circumstances, have very different effects on people who may share the same physical markers, but otherwise be dissimilar. (Good question #4.)

12. These questions go to the heart of the matter, and dealing with them leads naturally into the subject of tomorrow's lecture, "racial stigma." Let me observe, before going further, that I do not see the feedback mechanism just described as the be-all and end-all of race-based behavior in society. As intimated above, I think people attend to racial markers in the main because these markers convey social meanings not just personal information. Still, I hold that the study of this "equilibrium stereotyping" is an empirically relevant and analytically useful exercise. It provides one source of insight into how racially disparate outcomes can be understood without recourse to any assumption about innate racial difference. It shows how acquired differences in objective capabilities as between the members of different racial groups, due to blocked access to the resources that are critical to human development, e.g., can be magnified into far larger racial differences in social outcomes. It clarifies why "the data bear me out when I say that some people are really less productive" is no good answer to the complaint that widely disparate group outcomes should be a cause of concern for anyone interested in social justice. It at the very least hints at how great the cost may be, for members of a socially marked group and for society as a whole, when widely held negative beliefs about a visibly marked subset of the population are allowed to persist indefinitely. And, it shows why a broad-based and
system-wide intervention might be the only way to break into the causal chain that perpetuates racial inequality over time.

13. But, what about those good questions? Let me remind you:
   a. Why are the blacks always on the short end of this process?
   b. Shouldn't somebody learn what is going on and intervene?
   c. Why don't observing agents identify effective non-racial, markers?
   d. Aren't people sharing physical markers but little else effected differently?

14. The process I described through a series of examples treated each instance in isolation from the others. It made no mention of history. It did not speak at all about prejudice or about misinformation. It did not allow for any interaction between information-based distinction, on the one hand, and the mal-treatment of persons based on old-fashioned, irrational racial antipathy. It did not ask whether persons subject to such marker-based discrimination would have their ideas about their own worth, or that of others with whom they share the same markers, affected in any way. Clearly, all of these are counterfactual omissions. Taking such factors into account would go some way toward answering that first good question.

15. The question about learning is really at the core of my concerns in these lectures, so I would like to take it up at some length. To aid in this reflection, consider yet another example, motivated by the problem of racial profiling. Let there be two alternative possible states of affairs for a racially marked sub-population. 1) the group is homogeneous, with each member engaging in a criminal activity on any given occasion with probability 1/10, say; and 2) the group is heterogeneous with 10 percent bad guys who engage in criminal activity on every occasion, and 90 percent good guys who never do. These are extreme, bracketing assumptions about the degree of heterogeneity characteristic of a sub-population that, in the aggregate, offends against some criminal stricture at a 10 per cent rate. Suppose further that, in actual fact, situation 2 obtains, but that a law enforcement agent erroneously belief situation 1 is the correct model. That is, the agent thinks that "if they look alike they act alike," when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Let this enforcement agent observe the behavior of a randomly chosen individual from the population, and also be informed about the aggregate rate of criminal offending. Notice that, no matter what this agent observes for any single
individual with whom he has contact, he never changes his beliefs, either about the aggregate offending rate for the group, nor about the extent to which this behavior is generalized within the group. He can only learn that his specification of the groups degree of homogeneity is wildly off if he invests in tracking the experience over a period of time of particular individuals, identifying them in some way and retaining historical evidence about the frequency distribution of offenses in the sub-population. But, and this is crucial, given his initial presumption about the group, he would think it a waste of time and resources to retain idiosyncratic data. He doesn't anticipate any gain from tracking individuals because he has presumed them all to be alike. And yet, unless he tracks he can't learn that he's dead wrong in this presumption. If he is not force him to track individuals, then, short of a coincidental sequence of fortuitous encounters, he is likely to persist in his erroneous belief, and act accordingly. That is, he doesn't learn because he doesn't think learning will pay. This judgment is firmly rooted, however, in his ignorance. Unless he is willing to experiment, to test the limits of his prior generalization as a matter of principle, he will retain his false belief.

16. Now, a rationalistic account well might be given in which this agent experiments even if that does not appear to pay, given current beliefs, because he thinks those beliefs could be wrong and realizes that experimentation could uncover the error. This is one way that scientific communities function to advance the frontiers of knowledge. However, such experimentation generally requires encountering anomalous events that shake one's confidence in some previously taken-for-granted presumption. And, whereas the incentives facing the members of a scientific community are structured precisely to encourage this "anomaly hunting," it is something of an understatement to observe that the incentives facing a law enforcement community are not so structured. My point here is that observing agents may not learn about the structure generating their observations, or come to understand how it produces unnecessary racial inequality, when racial disparity does not strike them as odd, anomalous, in need of further investigation. One could call this behavior "racism" without violence to the language, but I think also, if one were to leave it there, without producing much insight. What is at work here, I suggest, is something subtle, having to do with what I will call "social cognition." I mean with this terminology to emphasize the cognitive as distinct from normative dimension of the
problem. History, culture, social conditioning, the background construction and transmission of narrative -- all of these things, I am suggesting (and now, I'm really out on a limb, at some remove from my home discipline, and wondering if there can be anyway back!) -- will shape cognitive processes of observing actors who take the marker of "race" as an guide to navigate their ways through the social fog. They will "create facts" about race as they do so, and be blinded to the consequences of their handiwork!

17. I want to pursue this point just a bit further, because it bears on the question of the rationality of race-based action. Permit me to distinguish between what I will call "competitive" and "monopolistic" observing situations. A competitive situation is one where there are a large number of observers, each encountering subjects from an even larger, common population, each taking actions in relation to these subjects, but knowing, because of their relatively insignificant size, that no action they take can affect the population's characteristics. A monopolistic situation is one in which a single observer (or a quite small number of them) is acting over against a large population of subjects. In the monopolistic situation the observer, upon reflection, might be expected to become aware of how his actions (the use, e.g., of race-based markers to formulate differential estimates of individuals' hard-to-observe traits) could feedback onto the behavior of these individuals. Now, in a competitive situation (the low wage labor market of a big city, say, where many small employers hire workers and use race and an indicator of worker reliability), even if an individual employer were to learn (or be told) about feedback effects, there would be nothing to be done. Internalizing the incentive effects sketched earlier so as to improve the equity and the efficiency of labor market operations would not be possible for a single competitive observer. However, this is not the case in a monopolistic situation (the low wage labor market in a small city where one or a few big employers dominate the hiring; or, a huge bureaucracy like the military). Now the force of good question #2 remains: why does the monopolistic observer not learn and intervene? To venture an answer, suppose this observer can credit two alternative causal accounts of what is producing his observations. The first is the story I have told, in which "race" predicts behavior only because, thinking it will, he uses the marker to discriminate, thereby inducing the statistical association between payoff-irrelevant but easily observable marker and payoff-relevant but unobservable trait. The second account
poses that the marker itself is intrinsically payoff-relevant. That is, the other account credits (to some degree) the essentialist assumption, which I denied in my second Axiom. Now, should the monopolist believe mainly the first account (which I am committed to), he will find it in his own self-interest to experiment so as to learn about the structure generating his observations. He may be led in this way be to eliminate the use of the racial marker, and simultaneously, to unmake the factual circumstance that justified its use. However, if he credits mainly the second, essentialist account, he will not have any incentive to engage in experimentation. (Notice that we need not assume here that he wholly believes either one story or the other. He might think either possible. My argument will still work so long as the weight he gives to the essentialist account is sufficiently great.) Like the racially profiling law enforcement officer of the preceding example, this monopolistic observer will find that his experience confirms him in his belief. "Those people just don't make good workers," he will conclude, and he will continue to treat them with the skepticism they evidently so richly deserve, looking down upon their feeble and ineffective strivings, to paraphrase DuBois, "with amused contempt and pity." The point here, clearly, is the same as before. Cognition, at the point of learning to discard an erroneously specified causal account, is impeded because the racially disparate results do not appear disturbing or anomalous to the observer.

18. Finally, I would like to conclude today's lecture by considering good questions #3 and #4. Why don't observers search for non-racial markers to solve their inference problems, and what happens when the category constructed through aggregation on the basis of a common marker consists of objectively very different persons. It should be obvious how these two questions are related. Looking for non-racial markers is merely another way of experimenting with one's specification of the causal processes generating one's data. It is, in the colloquialism made famous by Elijah Anderson, to become "streetwise."

19. Recall Anderson's account, in his 1990 book of the same name. Adapting the framework first elaborated in Erving Goffman's classic The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Anderson uses the streets of the racially mixed West Philadelphia neighborhoods near the campus of the University of Pennsylvania as a laboratory. He studies the problem of "decoding" which all social actors must solve when meeting others in public. One cannot be entirely certain of the character or intent of "the other"; it is necessary to process such
information as may be gleaned from an examination of the external self-presentation of those being encountered. The context of the meeting--time of day, physical setting, whether the individual is alone or in a group, etc.--will affect how these external clues are read. As an encounter unfolds communication between the parties, ranging from a meeting of eyes (or the avoidance of same) to an exchange of greetings, permits further inferences to be drawn. As I have been suggesting here, race--an easily and instantly ascertainable characteristic--may be expected to play a large role in this game of inference. Social class--as conveyed by dress, manner, occupation, speech--will also be important. An individual's experience of the social environment will be governed by how he and those he encounters in public negotiate these meetings. Anderson describes in elegant detail the rules of public etiquette, norms of mutual expectation, conventions of deference, methods of self-protection, strategies of turf-claiming, signals of intention, deciphering of cues, mistakes, biases, bluffs, threats, and self-fulfilling prophecies which are implicit in the interactions he observes. He identifies social roles, public routines and behavioral devices common to the encounters he chronicles. And he suggests compelling explanations for many puzzling features of life in the communities he has studied. His core concept in this work is the notion of becoming "streetwise," meaning, adept at subtly decoding the markers presented to one in the streets. At the crudest level, a resident uses race, or possibly race combined with class, as a key indicator of danger (or opportunity, depending on what one is looking out for!) But, streetwise persons on Anderson's account advance beyond this crude level, become thereby much more adept at navigating the streets, and enable themselves to sustain deeper and more meaningful relationships across the racial divide. A streetwise observer becomes that way by experimenting with non-racial markers, or perhaps more accurately, by supplementing racial markers with an array of non-racial ones that refine the discriminatory practice, and permit more nuance in the treatment of those bearing a negative racial marker.

20. This behavior -- acquiring street wisdom -- is to be commended, I should think. We might all hope (and pray?) that those authorized to use deadly force on inner city streets might soon acquire greater wisdom in this regard. But, notice one thing. The softening of stereotype-driven behavior on the part of observers, through use of a more refined set of markers to guide their discrimination, encourages the production of these very
differentiating markers by those members of the negatively marked group who have the greatest interest in distinguishing themselves from the masses. I do not say here that this is necessarily a bad thing, though I can easily imagine circumstances in which it would be. Affectations of speech, whistling Vivaldi as one walks along the mean streets, adopting styles of dress and self-presentation all of which aim to communicate "I'm not one of THEM," can be a way of undermining the pernicious equilibrium in which the gross use of an irrelevant trait has become institutionalized. But, they can also be a way to undermine solidarity in the subject population, to encourage the selective out-migration (through subtle forms of partial "passing") of the most talented, and to promote a fracture ego, a form of insiders' own-group antipathy ("if only THEY would get their acts together, people like ME wouldn't have such a problem") that is anything but pretty. When this process results in social mobility among the "marked" via the lightening of skins over the generations, or in an obsessive preening over the minute symbols of relative status that come to be acquired by those marginally more successful within the marked group (such as E. Franklin Frazier described nearly a half-century ago in Black Bourgeoisie), one can more clearly see the nature of the problem. Don't misunderstand. I'm not against "passing" as such. Nor do I see it as an immoral act of betrayal. But, neither can I blithely celebrate it as an exercise in individual liberty, or as a mechanism for subverting an otherwise oppressive racial order. To the contrary, the tragedy of the selective out-migration of a relative few from the marked population through partial passing is that it places the burden of reforming a racially stereotypic order on those who have the least leverage to reform the underlying social structures (it let's our monopolistic observers off the hook.) And, perhaps more importantly, though certainly more speculatively, it promotes an ideology of individualistic achievement that reinforces, rather than challenges an order where the scourge of racial stigma can flourish. Thank you.