Stigma Allure and White Antiracist Identity Management

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When can the prospect of being stigmatized become an alluring identity? I add to, and contest, the dominant research on race and stigma by demonstrating how privileged actors repeatedly construct a broken and stigmatized white and antiracist identity in which the management of one identity re-establishes the stigmatization of the other. White antiracism, as an unconventional identity practice, can often involve a presentation of self that unsettles established habit and expected modes of interaction. I empirically delineate how a group of white antiracist activists not only accept a “spoiled” identity (whiteness-as-racist and antiracism-as-too-radical), but embrace that stigma as markings of moral commitment and political authenticity. This dynamic—what I call “stigma allure”—illuminates how stigma, rather than an essentialized and static status to be shunned or entirely overcome, can become a desired component of identity formation that drives and orders human behavior toward utilitarian, symbolic, and self-creative goals.

INTRODUCTION

Michael sat near a window in the headquarters for the white antiracist organization I call “Whites for Racial Justice.” A thirty-six year-old banker by profession, he accrued nearly five years in the organization by October 2006. Leaned back in his chair on a chilly autumn day, he took a deep breath and stated, “White people, we’re … we’re conditioned to see the world in racist ways, as though we’re the natural owners and administrators of the planet. That weighs on me constantly, you know?” As he settled his gaze through the window he continued with an uncomfortable laugh. “Ha! I sometimes wonder if what we’re doing is pointless, because, you know, we’re just conditioned to feel superior. But,
then again, what’s the alternative? Give up? It’s a struggle to figure it all out. But if that’s the worst of my worries, then so be it” (Michael interview, 10/06).

BACKGROUND

Emerging from their prior mainstream and synonymous relationship with the neutral, natural, and unmarked (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2010; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Feagin 2009), white racial identities are increasingly variable and debated (e.g., Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll 2009; McDermott and Samson 2005; Twine and Steinbugler 2006). Despite such discourse and new forms of overt white racial activism, “whiteness and antiracism sometimes are spoken of, or written about, as if they were antithetical” (Eichstedt 2001: 446). Given the hyper-racialized makeup of the US, it is important to study when and how beneficiaries of the racial order both accept and resist that arrangement. Hence, the intersection of whiteness and antiracist activism emerges as a key site for the examination of actors’ perceptions of their racial and activist identities as simultaneously privileged and “stigmatized” (Goffman 1961, 1963). And it is an unanticipated result when white antiracists engage in the enthusiastic adoption of a self-conception of both whiteness and activism as broken, deficient, disgraced, and otherwise stigmatized categories.

Managing a spoiled or stigmatized identity (Goffman 1961, 1963) is an “ongoing accomplishment” (Garfinkel 1967) in that people “create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1348). Despite this general direction, I find four ways to refine the concept of “stigma.”
First, the majority of research on stigma centers on the marginalized: mental patients (Goffman 1961; Kroska and Harkness 2006), street-corner hangouts and the homeless (Liebow 1967), LGBT activists (Gamson 1995), hate crime victims (Lyons 2006), impoverished neighborhoods (Sampson and Raudenbush 2011), the overweight (Carr and Friedman 2006), and nonwhite racial groups (Hawlow 2003). While stigma is often assumed the exclusive province of the low-statused (Leary and Schreindorfer 1998; Link and Phelan 2001; Major and Eccleston 2004), I argue that dominant and privileged groups may also navigate differing types of stigma.

A second area for theoretical refinement of stigma exists in a focal shift from outlying, individual actors that deviate from normative group contexts, to collectively stigmatized identities (Link and Phelan 2001:366, 371). While Goffman (1963:3) suggested a need for “a language of relationships, not attributes,” the dominant approaches to stigma center on individual characteristics (Cf. Fine and Asch 1988). For example, the majority of research centers on how individuals in any given context, might deviate from norms in ways the majority finds distasteful, strange, or dangerously deviant, for example: someone who “double-dips a chip” (the act of re-dipping a previously bitten out of chip in collectively shared dip [made famous by the 1993 Seinfeld episode “the implant”]), a person who faces the “wrong way” (away from the door) in an elevator, or an individual who openly identifies as lesbian or gay in a hetero-normative regime. Research on stigma needs to focus on less on outlying individuals and more on groups that are stigmatized between, within, and across groups. That research would focus on stigma as meaningful social ties that bind actors together.
Third, depending on situational context, stigma may serve as an integral mechanism for either utilitarian task performance or advantageous identity formations and interactions. In the former, the social scientific production of knowledge about stigma generally hails from theories uninformed by the lived experience of the stigmatized (Cf. Link and Phelan 2001). Research geared toward participatory examination and group understanding could well illuminate how stigma enables (rather than solely constrains) goal attainment. In the latter, once task impairment is no longer assumed *a priori*, researchers could address how stigma may help win sympathy or legitimacy from peers and thus propel the stigmatized group trajectory within a particular “moral career” (Goffman 1963).


Drawing from these four directions, I add to the research on stigma by examining how a socially privileged group (whites, largely white men) both consciously and unconsciously embrace, rather than shun, a stigmatized identity as a sign of their authenticity and moral commitment to a shared cause—in this case “antiracist” activism. I show that some actors do not simply desire to “pass into normal” but require a
simultaneous process of stigmatization and salvation in order to experience themselves as causal agents in their environment.

WHITENESS AND WHITE IDENTITIES

Early sociological examinations of whiteness found that whites possess a lower degree of self-awareness about their racial identity than members of other racial groups, as well as a relative inability to recognize their own racial privilege and racist attitudes (Du Bois 1920). Yet, under certain conditions, whites are extremely aware of their racial identity. Gallagher (1995) found that some whites exhibit a high degree of racial consciousness when they are the racial minority or feel threatened. At times this white racial consciousness takes the forms of white nationalist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, while at other times to manifests in white antiracist groups like S.H.A.R.P. (Skin Heads Against Racial Prejudice) or A.W.A.R.E. (Alliance of White Anti Racists Everywhere) (Eichstedt 2001; Hughey 2007, 2006).

Given these diverse forms of whiteness, what it means to be white in today’s day and age is a confusing thing. Sociologist Howard Winant (2004:5-6) thus argues:

… whites, now experience a division in their racial identities. On the one hand, whites inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit. But on the other hand, they are subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance. … As a result, white identities have been displaced and refigured: they are now contradictory, as well as confused and anxiety ridden, to an unprecedented extent. It is this situation which can be described as white racial dualism.
In examining whites that chose “antiracist” lives, such white racial dualism is apparent. Twine and Steinbugler (2006:345) remark that, white antiracists are “outsiders within,” due to their simultaneous position as beneficiaries and resisters of racial inequality.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In May 2006 I gained access to the headquartered chapter of a nationwide white antiracist organization I call “Whites for Racial Justice” (hereafter WRJ). The headquarters for WRJ was located in a mid-Atlantic city I call “Fairview.” Founded in the 1970s, WRJ slowly grew into a national organization of over twenty chapters with a reported membership, at its height, of nearly 800. WRJ generates publications, sponsors workshops and conferences, and promotes media events about what white people can do to fight racism. Members believe that by coming together just as whites, they take responsibility to oppose racism within the “white community” and to create a “safe space” for whites to contest racism and prejudice in their own lives.

From May 2006 to June 2007, my ethnographic study of WRJ was composed of fieldwork (I attended their meetings \( n = 27 \) and day to day informal observations; semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members \( n = 21 \), and; content analysis inclusive of newsletter issues \( n = 4 \), flyers \( n = 10 \) and textual information such as electronic correspondence and office memos \( n = 165 \). My focus was the observation of identity-management strategies—namely, I wanted to know more about the relationship between (1) how these actors made ongoing meaning of race and (anti)racism and (2) their identity-management strategies.

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1 In order to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, all potentially identifying information regarding the white antiracists in this study were changed and replaced with pseudonyms.
Identity-management strategies are not always directly observable, but they have
empirical manifestations in the discursive and affective framing of social situations
(Rashotte 2002). Frames are “relatively bounded sets of arguments organized around a
specific diagnosis or solution to some social problem” (Ellingson 1995:107). Three
defining characteristics identify collectively held frames. Frames involve a cast of
characters involved in the action (Polletta 2006). Second, they require clear demarcation
between the actors that possess “self-efficacy” and those acted upon (Gecas and
Schwalbe 1983:79). Third, frames involve plot structures that connect events through
causal imputation (Goffman 1983). For WRJ, the relevant characters are the members’
identities in relation to the perceived stigma of whiteness and activism. This framing
emerged when the (1) cast of characters were (2) clearly identified as active and/or
passive in (3) implicit or explicit causal relationships in empirically-repeated patterns.

STIGMA ALLURE:
THE APPROPRIATION OF STIGMA AND REPRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

Akin to dominant understandings of race and politics, the white antiracists in this study
constructed understandings of “whiteness” and “antiracism” as essentially adversative.
Yet, they were attracted to understandings and performances that, ironically, continually
salvaged and re-stigmatized each aspect of their identity. I found that the adequate
management of one (i.e.: white racial identity) created the need to manage the stigma of
the other (i.e.: antiracist identity) (see Figure 1). This dynamic illuminates how stigma
(when both internally perceived and socially shared) may be appropriated and embraced
(rather than a status one shuns or attempts to definitively overcome) in ways that
reproduce racial and activist identity.
THE PERCEIVED STIGMA OF “BEING WHITE”

The respondents in this study perceived their whiteness as inherently stigmatized due to their participation in racial segregation, their possession of racial stereotypes, and their lack of serious political and social unification with people of color.

**Figure 1: The Process of Stigma Allure**

*The Stigma of Segregation*

Most of the white antiracist members in this study lived in segregated and overwhelmingly white neighborhoods with access to an array of health, education, and employment resources. Such a reality was a bitter pill to swallow for many members of WRJ. As Wayne expressed one day while we walked through his neighborhood:
Most white people don’t realize that “diversity” is a far different cry from that thing we might call “true integration.” Yeah, I live here, there’s an Asian couple there and a few African American families down there [gesturing toward specific houses as he spoke], but we’re not really that close. … we don’t talk about “hot button” issues. Religion, politics, race [emphasizing the latter] are not really brought up. … I might talk about the weather or what crab grass is killing my yard … nothing tangible. … it sucks; I know I’m a part of the problem. It’s not enough to simply live here. Living beside people who look different is not “real antiracism,” that’s an excuse for those that want to feel better about their lives without doing anything. … Most other racially conscious whites might think just living here is enough. And most whites, overall, live only among themselves (Wayne interview, 06/06).

The knowledge of Wayne’s own lack of intimate racial contact, alongside that of many other whites’ racial segregation, came to represent a significant personal and racialized in terms of practicing both “true integration” and “real antiracism.”

*The Stigma of Stereotypes*

The collective identification of members’ stereotypes and prejudices in group meetings and informal interactions re-emphasized the stigma of their whiteness. My ethnographic fieldnotes and recording from one WRJ meeting exemplify this identity work:


[Malcolm] led 10 min intro on import of recognizing white prejudice/stereotypes.
Made clear ongoing process—never-ending. White prejudice = no cure. Tone—
moral duty to fight against own prejudice even if losing battle.

Audio: Malcolm: “So, to begin, it might be good if we go around the room and
just admit, first, you know, to yourself and, well, of course to the others here,
what prejudices we each hold. … It’s good to purge these from our psyche.”

Frederick: “Yes yes, but of course, it’s not really purging, right? I mean, you all
know what I’m saying, yeah,? It’s more like admitting they’re there because, it’s,
it’s not like we get rid of them ever [said with an uncomfortable laugh in which
others joined]. I mean, it’s a lifelong fight.”

Andre: “That’s the thing right, it’s part of the task we have to carry out, once we
recognize it, that we have to fight it. If not, it’s going to be worse, and you know,
well, it would be worse for people of color and our friends and folks that have to
deal with us on a daily basis.”

Sherrill: “Yeah, it all starts there. Recognition, yeah? We have to admit the
problem and live with that. … That’s the uncomfortable place we have to live, so
to speak” (Fieldnotes and Audio, 03/07).

A three-part process structured the accomplishment of a stigmatized white racial
identity via belief in their inherent possession of racist stereotypes. First, members
identified the prejudices and stereotypes they held. Second, they attempted “rational”
discussions that centered on deconstructing the assumptions and myths upon which those
stereotypes were built. Third, they admitted that one never purges oneself of stereotypes
and prejudices. Hence, their work was constantly reconstructed as vital but paradoxically
impossible to accomplish. Members thus embraced a stigmatized white racial identity as a lifelong burden.

*The Stigma of Disunity*

The third observed theme was the shared racial stigma brought about by a collectively-perceived lack of solidarity with people of color. As Simon told me, “[WRJ] is doing what it has to do. I support it and its goals. … still, we are failing miserably as a group, and really as white people, as truly antiracist white folks, in connecting to people of color. … we do not have enough solidarity with them and their struggles” (Simon interview, 08/06). These members perceived their white racial identity as a stigmatized marker that curtailed trust afforded to them by people of color and as a significant identity that prevented them from learning how to honestly and equally interact and unify with people of color. Yet, these members often embraced this stigma as somewhat evitable, which in turn necessitated several management strategies.

**MANAGING A PERCEIVED STIGMATIZED WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY**

The respondents in this study invoked three specific identity-management strategies to contend with specific aspects of “being white” they perceived to be stigmatic: segregation, stereotypes, and disunity.

*Racial Objectification*

Most WRJ members do not work to develop historical or sociological understandings of segregation. Rather, management of their stigmatized racial selves are often accomplished by an emphasis on one’s moral conviction to resist the effects of segregation. As Jerry stated, “… if we can’t change the system, at least we can be better
people and help others along the way” (Jerry interview, 06/06). Such beliefs are not without complication. Many of the moral imperatives through which their identity management strategies are enacted, are tied to rather essentialist and reactionary understandings of racial identity. Given members’ aggravation with their own “spoiled identities,” they labor to redeem their segregated white selves by objectifying people of color as objects capable of conferring redemption. Such objectification is used as evidence of slight, but symbolically important, antiracist actions that counterbalance their essentialized white racist self. For example, one WRJ member named Andre stated: “I have two black neighbors on either side of my house … We’re an Oreo cookie! [he said with a hearty laugh]. I guess I can’t say I live in a segregated neighborhood anymore” (Andre interview, 03/07).

Such identity management strategies—as deeply meaningful social psychological incentives—reproduce the racial objectified and tokenized worldviews and social relations that these actors actively seek to displace through their activism. As antiracists, they do not dismiss their segregated status, but manage the stigma of their white identities qua segregation by objectifying, essentializing, and tokenizing racial “otherness” so they do not appear as racist. These members’ identity work garners consent to the very race relations that create the need for their white antiracist identities in the first place.

Reduction of Racism

In managing the stigma of supposedly inherent mental stereotypes and psychologically conditioned racism, these antiracists often re-frame their mental maladies as either harmless thoughts or as lesser evils in comparison to “overt” racial actions. During my
fieldwork, a WRJ member hosted a monthly card game. Inviting me along with fellow WRJ members, I witnessed members construct a managed identity in relation to the stigma of their stereotypes. One member stated that his stereotypes made “no real difference in the world” because he had them “under control.” “I know when I’m thinking racist things,” another member remarked. He continued, “It’s really not a big deal. It’s not like I’m acting on them and hurting anyone” (Interview, 12/06). Another attendee stated, “…at the end of the day, thoughts are thoughts. Their harmless unless you put them into action” (Interview, 11/06. Such reduction of prejudice was not limited to after-hours socializing, but was present in WRJ meetings as well. Horace told me directly. “Yes, we’re all racist. But, come on, you know us. We’re different. … We’re simply dealing with our racism and admitting it. That’s more than most white people do. … It’s not like we’re going to hurt anyone. That’s discrimination, not prejudice. … We don’t act on our irrationality” (Horace interview, 01/07).

WRJ meetings, seminars, and educational sessions seem well-intentioned (akin to a twelve step program where the first step is “admitting” and the twelfth step enables the functionalist re-entry of the “healthy” actor into the status quo). Yet, WRJ’s activism is more a form of identity management in which the members dance between dwelling on their stigmatized selves and management through a kind of religiously-inspired “white confessionalism.” While such a “feedback loop” (in the Meadian sense) seems foolhardy from a utilitarian perspective, these strategies manifest because they are meaningful scripts by which to constantly manage a white racial identity perceived problematic and spoiled.
False Equivalencies

The identity-management strategies enacted to cope with the stigma of disunity are multifaceted, but coalesce around attempts to demonstrate inherent and philosophical similarities between white antiracist activism and people of color’s everyday lives. Pointing out this correspondence temporarily repairs the feelings of stigma. In addition, it simultaneously reproduces a worldview that equates white antiracist activism as a form of victimhood similar to that of nonwhite recipients of racism. Such strategies call attention to WRJs stigma and, moreover, invite pity for their supposedly victimized status.

In an interview with Duncan, it was apparent that he felt WRJ members were stigmatized because of their choice to organize:

Being in WRJ is a commitment that I love. I get a lot out of it, but you know … at the same time it gets old real quick. Whenever I bring up how I feel [about racial issues] it seems that I’m attacked. I mean [long sigh] it just doesn’t just seem that way, I am attacked [said with emphasis]. Being white with these beliefs puts me on center stage, right in the line of fire. People of color think I’m crazy and wonder what my ulterior motives are and other white people, well they think I’m crazy too and that I’m a communist or something or other. … It’s like being white with these beliefs, like I said, makes you a target just like black people [my emphasis] (Duncan interview, 12/06).

Citing their whiteness as an essential blockade between themselves and people of color’s worldviews and everyday struggles with discrimination, these actors construct a sense of interracial unity by insinuating similarity in terms of racial discrimination.
THE PERCEIVED STIGMA OF “BEING ANTIRACIST”

So far I have concentrated on how WRJ members perceive a stigma based on their racial identities. Yet, these actors also voice stigmatism via (1) their deviation from color-blind or racially neutral behaviors and ideas associated with whites, and (2) through their identification as “white antiracists.”

The Stigma of Counter-Hegemonic Whiteness

Members consistently report stories in which their commitment to antiracist ideals translates into a potent form of social stigma that in turn alienated them from friends, family, and new acquaintances. Dedication to antiracist ethics places them at odds with the dominant and shared expectations of what a proper and authentic white person is or should be—conceptualized as “hegemonic whiteness” (Lewis 2004; Hughey 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Because identities do not reside in acultural or ahistorical vacuums, they retain a “loose coupling” (Goffman 1983: 11) with social “nets of accountability” (Schwalbe, et al. 2000). For example, Cassandra told me:

I think we, as overt antiracists, throw a lot of people off-guard. We’re not what white people are supposed to do [said with emphasis]. We’re not taking a neutral or laissez faire stance in relation to race. We’re jumping into the fray. … I think that upsets some other whites, who then see us as either strange and crazy radicals or even as, as like, some association of race traitors. … We’re unexpected

(Cassandra interview, 05/07).

Cassandra’s rendering that white antiracists are “unexpected” is apt. Given that whiteness and antiracism are often framed as antonyms, white engagement with issues generally
deemed “nonwhite business,” engages in unconventional presentations of self and unexpected modes of interaction.

*The Stigma of Racial Activism*

Behavioral commitment to antiracist principles is not the only cause of stigma. WRJ members explain that rather normal behaviors committed under the label of “antiracism” are perceived as dishonorable or shameful. For example, on one early Saturday morning, several older WRJ members traveled to a farmer’s market where they set up a booth that highlighted information on their national organization, local activities in which they were involved, and steps for how to join. Sitting there with them, one middle-aged, white, male market-goer approached me and said, “You’re not with those crazy hippies are you?” Catching me off-guard, I replied, “Uh, well, I sort of am.” The man quickly replied, “You look too normal to be some ideologue. I guess tame appearances are deceiving. How’d you get involved with that crap?” Before I could respond, the man interjected: “You know what? Just never mind, if you’re one of those antiracists, I’m not going to believe anything you say anyhow” (Fieldnotes, 06/07). This interaction is telling. Besides echoing members’ accounts, my markedly different appearance (although “normal” and “tame”) was instantly reinterpreted as housing a deceitful and biased character.

**MANAGING A STIGMATIZED ANTIRACIST IDENTITY**

WRJ members use two specific identity-management techniques to navigate the stigma of antiracist activism: claiming a courageous and morally committed identity and asserting their authenticity as political activists.

*The White Badge of Courage*
While members tell heartbreaking stories of stigmatizing encounters that left families ruptured and friendships ruined, I was repeatedly surprised by their commitment to withstand ridicule for their dedication to antiracist principles. In addition to their stories, I was privy to numerous instances in which WRJ members withstood rude behavior from strangers and acquaintances both. While such hostility certainly took a toll, members regularly transform their stigma into meaningful markers of courageous valor. As Tristan told me in a series of in-depth interviews:

I guess you can say that the hate I get, you know, when folks I know, and actually care what they think about me, are like, gossiping about me and saying that I’m *too caught up in race* [said in mocking tone], then I don’t appreciate it. … yeah, I get sad about it, and really I get angry that my reputation is being ruined, because, I know that they’re saying more than just stuff about my activism, so, you know, it’s just really hateful. But [sighs], it’s really what keeps me going. … I feel really proud that I’m able to cause such a reaction just because of my beliefs. … I certainly feel like when they see me, that’s all they see. … If it scars me, then I’ll gladly wear that supposed fault that my [WRJ] membership brings with pride (Tristan interview, 03/07).

Tristan’s description certainly evokes Goffman’s (1963: 4) tri-fold rendering of stigma as abominations of the body (the “scar”), blemishes of character (“supposed fault”), and tribal stigmata (“my membership”). While certainly metaphorical, here stigma is not the “discredit” that Goffman emphasizes (1963: 4), but the badge by which credit and tribute is attained. Stigma *qua* status, then, manifests as three distinct types: the
“personal” (identity that make us unique), the “social” (identity by which others understand us), and the “ego” (how one comes to think of oneself) (Goffman 1963: 57).

**Activism Authenticity**

Members seem to require stigma to validate their activism and to make distinctions between authentic and faux antiracists. Claims to authenticity are often tenuous and established contra “normals” (Cf. Handler 1986: 2). Accordingly, WRJ members manage their stigmatic label of “antiracist” through deploying it as a mark of *bona fide* activism contra normal whites that refrain from racial activism or other antiracist activists thought amateurish. For example, one internal WRJ email communication stated:

> Let me put it this way: I’ve known a couple other white antiracists and there [sic] good people, don’t get me wrong. However, they don’t live their activism. They really weren’t that into it because, I believe for them, it was little more than a hobby. Hobby maybe too strong a word, but it certainly was something they did on the side of the lives, if you will. … I doubted it was something they really believed. … Put it this way: I would be shocked if they moved into a black neighborhood or dated outside of white people. … If they were really challenged, they would stop. I wouldn’t bet a lot that they would put up with a string of harsh judgments or difficulties (WRJ email, 04/07).

In this rendering, other white antiracists do not “live their activism,” but treat it near to a “hobby” or a “side” rather than the preferred central and defining label of their lives. In asking Colin follow-up questions about the other white antiracists outside of WRJ, he
said matter-of-factly “… they’re just not real. That’s why I stick close to my friends [in WRJ]” (Colin interview, 08/06).

**DISCUSSION**

This article outlines how white antiracists both manage and embrace their identities through “stigma allure”—a process that appropriates claims to stigma that paradoxically reproduces rather privileged identities. The illumination of this process contributes to stigma and race literature in four key ways. First, prior research on stigma concentrates on the relationship between stigma and actors in the lower-strata. The findings herein beg scholars to temper such correlations. Second, stigma does not essentially deviation from group norms. Rather, the marking of stigma can become normative for group dynamics—whether through enabling social solidarity through struggle against it, or co-opting it and internalizing it as an integral marker of group identity. Third, stigma does not automatically lead to either “stereotype threat” (Steele and Aronson 1995) or “impaired task performance” (Hogg 2006: 490). Fourth, stigma management should not be conflated with stigma reduction.

**REFERENCES**


**AUTHOR BIO**

Matthew W. Hughey is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Mississippi State University. His research examines racial identity formation, racialized associations and organizations, and the production, distribution, and reception of mass-mediated racial representations. His most recent book is entitled *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race* (Stanford University Press, 2012).