Introduction

Comme Il Faut

In *Racial Culture*, the legal scholar Richard Ford asks his readers to imagine what would happen to a female tango dancer who refused her gendered role in the dance.[1] She would be sanctioned by her dance instructor, he suggests, who would "correct" her "mistake." She would be sanctioned by the other female dancers, who would let her know, whether subtly or not so subtly, that she ought to behave more appropriately. She would be sanctioned by the male dancers, as well (the "leads"), who would, in Ford's words, "silently punish her by refusing to ask her to dance."[2] If the dancer wants approval, if she wants acceptance, if she wants the rewards distributed through this particular social practice, she will conform to the gendered expectations of the tango.

I was struck by this example when I first read Ford's book because at that time I was in the middle of what would prove an ill-fated attempt to learn to dance Argentine tango. Ford's characterization of the dance rang true. The tango *is* a strongly gendered dance in which the man leads while the woman follows. His characterization of why the woman follows rang true, as well. I, for one, followed, not because I endorsed an identity story according to which women are graceful, but never strong and assertive, according to which following male leads is "what women do," but instead because the practice of tango dancing incentivized me to follow.

Or at least that is one important part of why I followed. I also followed because of my Comme Il Fauts.

[1] Richard Thompson Ford, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 62–4.
[2] Ibid., 63.

What are Comme Il Fauts? The phrase, of course, means "proper." It means "according to accepted standards or conventions." But Comme Il Faut is also the brand name for top-of-the-line Argentine tango shoes, which are handmade exclusively in Buenos Aires. One online retailer describes Comme Il Fauts as "ultra chic," "outrageously sexy, and superbly crafted with … a very distinctive stiletto heel."[3] My tango shoes conformed to gendered expectations of how a woman's footwear should look.

But that is not all they did. The ad continues: "Don't let the heel scare you – it is designed specifically for walking backwards and is perfectly positioned to provide incredible stability."[4] The shoes did help me walk backward. They helped me pivot on the ball of my foot. They tilted the axis of my body forward toward my (forward-walking, dance-floor-navigating, male) partner, heightening both my capacity and my disposition to read and to respond to the moves that he led. My shoes, in short, together with the rules and the standards that govern the practice of dancing Argentine tango, prompted me to perform my gendered role well.

In this book, the principal question I ask is: "How do people produce and reproduce identities?" My central case is, not gender identity, but racial identity in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century United States. My starting point is theories of the narrative construction of identity. Although storytelling is one important part of how people *produce* identities, I argue in the pages that follow, it is not the only, and it is not the most significant way they *reproduce* them. People reproduce identities, not just by telling and retelling the stories from which they were constructed, but also by *institutionalizing* those stories: by building them into norms, laws, and other institutions (such as the rules and the standards that govern Argentine tango dancing) that give social actors incentives to perform their identities well. People reproduce identities, in addition, by *objectifying* identity stories: by quite literally building them into material forms (like Comme Il Faut tango shoes) that social actors experience with their bodies as they engage in practical activity.

I advance this argument through historical analysis of the development of racial identities and racialized spaces in the twentieth-century United States, and also through the interpretation of life narratives that I collected from people who live in racialized American urban and suburban spaces. As is well known, early twentieth-century racial narratives were

[3] http://www.malevashoes.com/aboutcommeilfaut.html. Accessed December 27, 2012.
[4] Ibid.

scientifically discredited by the end of the 1940s. After World War II, they were widely regarded to be normatively illegitimate. Yet many, even most, Americans continued to use racial identities, long after repudiating the narratives from which they were constructed.

Why? (Why, for that matter, did I "use" my gender identity as I danced the Argentine tango, even though I reject the narrative from which that identity was constructed?) The institutionalization of identity narratives, my central claim is, along with their objectification, enables their practical reproduction. It lends them resilience in the face of challenge and critique.

My argument begins, in Chapter 1, with what has been called "the narrative identity thesis": the idea that "who we are," both as unique individuals and as members of social collectivities, is largely a function of narrative construction.[5] I am not unsympathetic to this view. Identification, I argue, has at least four key characteristics that render it amenable to construction in specifically narrative form. Identification is unavoidably selective, exegetical, productive, and evaluative. Narrative as a discursive form captures and mirrors these qualities. Nevertheless, people do not *only* learn their identities in narrative form. They learn them practically, as well, as they navigate institutional settings structured by identitarian norms and expectations, and as they experience corporeally the material forms in which those norms and expectations are objectified. The narrative production of identity, I argue, is compatible with the reproduction of identities that, when (or if) spelled out as narratives, take the form of "bad stories": stories that violate people's beliefs about the world as it is and as it ought to be and/or that include important internal inconsistencies.

An example is dominant early twentieth-century American racial stories, to which I turn my attention in Chapter 2. Starting around the time of the "Great Migration" of Southern blacks to Northern and Midwestern cities, narratives of racial identity and difference began to highlight an alleged black/white racial divide, to interpret black racial identity in particular as the cause of unfitness for home ownership and admission to high-status residential neighborhoods, and to advocate and celebrate a strict (and, in most Northern cities, a *newly* strict) segregation of "the races."

[5] The phrase "narrative identity thesis" comes from James Phelan, "Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism," *Narrative* 13, 3 (October 2005): 205–10.

As noted earlier, these early twentieth-century stories were largely discredited by mid-century. However, before they were discredited, they were built into the American urban and suburban landscape. They were institutionalized in laws and in rules, such as the rules governing the Federal Housing Administration's mortgage insurance program. They were objectified in spatial forms, such as the new black ghettos that were constructed starting in the early decades of the century. The channeling of public and private investment toward white enclaves incentivized whites to perform their (in some cases, new) racial identities well. Meanwhile, systematic disinvestment from black ghettos localized there a host of collective problems, including joblessness, poverty, and social problems associated with concentrated poverty.

How do the institutionalization and objectification of old stories shape perception and action in the present? In the third chapter, I draw on the life narrative told by one of my interview respondents to make the case that the institutionalization and objectification of collective identity stories encourage the construction of what I call *ordinary* life stories. Ordinary stories of personal identity are stories in which collective identities function as narrative frames: as unthematized background assumptions that people rely on to sort the events of their narratives from nonevents.

Ordinary stories, my claim is, are depoliticizing in the sense in which Wendy Brown uses that term. They "remove … political phenomen[a] from comprehension of [their] *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour them."[6] Yet ordinary stories are the stories most social actors tell themselves (and others) most of the time. Hence their political import: these are among the tools most frequently used to translate lived experience into the narratives that shape our perception and direct our action.

Chapters 2 and 3 thus function as a pair: the second chapter traces the institutionalization and objectification of the early twentieth-century racial narrative, while the third considers its effect on ordinary stories. The fourth and fifth chapters have a parallel structure. In Chapter 4, I turn my attention to a second collective identity narrative that was institutionalized and objectified in the twentieth-century American metropolis: a story of white Americans as a home-owning people. This narrative, I argue, was self-consciously fashioned by a relatively small set of political actors – including, importantly, early twentieth-century "community

[6] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15, emphasis in original.

builders" – who stood to gain directly from its acceptance. According to this narrative, (white) Americans value, and they deserve, privately owned single-family detached suburban residences. Such "homes" (and this narrative worked to distinguish "homes" from mere "houses") are a critical component of the American Dream. Americans therefore ought to use their collective power (the power to create and enforce zoning laws, for example) and their collective resources (tax dollars) to support private, profit-driven housing development. Doing so serves the good of the American public.

This narrative of Americans as a home-owning people overlapped substantially with the racial identity narrative that is the focus of Chapter 2. It assumed, very often without explicitly making the case for, a normatively significant divide between "the black and white races," and it relied on that assumption to exclude (again, often implicitly) African Americans from "the public" whose good it claimed home ownership promotes.

It differed from the early racial narrative, however, in that, during the first decades of the last century, it was widely understood to be a bad story. The United States was not, at that time, a nation of home owners. What is more, the dominant view was that the government had *no* proper role in the private market in housing.

But the stock market crash of 1929 and the depression that followed produced a new coalition of actors who favored state intervention in the housing market, which they hoped would help create, not just homes, but also jobs. The Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration (agencies treated in Chapter 2 with a focus on their role in institutionalizing the dominant early twentieth-century racial narrative) institutionalized, as well, this narrative of (white) Americans as a home-owning people. Together with other New Deal programs and institutions, they fundamentally restructured the market for private home mortgages, expanding home finance credit to an unprecedented level and directing the capital they helped generate toward racially exclusive suburban developments.

The result was a late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American metropolis characterized by massive direct and indirect state support for private, profit-oriented residential development, which disproportionately served the wealthy and the racially privileged. In Chapter 5, I turn my attention to New Albany, Ohio, which was, until the late 1980s, a small, rural village on the outskirts of Columbus. When Leslie Wexner, the billionaire founder of The Limited, Inc., redeveloped New Albany into an upscale, Georgian-themed suburban enclave, he was able to leverage

considerable public resources to reduce his expenditure, and hence his investment risk. At the same time, Wexner was able to site his development in an incorporated suburban municipality with the power to engage in exclusionary zoning, to raise and spend taxes for services made available to residents only, and to decline to participate in a range of federal and state programs, from affordable housing to cross-jurisdictional school desegregation programs.

Wexner could leverage public resources and public powers to support and subsidize his development in large part because of the efforts of early housing industry elites, who had constructed, and then worked to institutionalize and objectify, a narrative of Americans as a home-owning people. Nevertheless, I argue, using a thought experiment centered on a hypothetical school I call "Exit Academy," even at the start of the twenty-first century, most Americans regard as *illegitimate* state-subsidized "exit" that benefits the wealthy and the racially privileged.

Most nevertheless accept state-subsidized exit to enclaves like Wexner's New Albany, because the institutionalization of the story fashioned by early twentieth-century community builders constructed an interest in home ownership in such enclaves. Most accept state-subsidized exit because the objectification of that narrative helped obscure the political actions and the collective choices that create and maintain such places. The institutionalized and objectified narrative of (white) Americans as a home-owning people serves as a frame to countless ordinary life stories. It enables the privileged to write their own privilege out of the stories of their lives.

In the conclusion to this book, I turn to the question of identitarian change. The telling of new identity stories, I underscore, is never sufficient. Change requires storytelling, to be sure, but storytelling of a particular kind: storytelling that targets both institutional redesign and the reconstruction of material forms.

The story I tell in the pages that follow begins in New Albany, Ohio, in the home of Steven Mullins (a pseudonym), who is telling me the story of his life. Throughout this book, I draw on similar life narratives, which I collected from residents of East Side Columbus and the "new" (post-Wexner) and "old" (pre-Wexner) New Albanies.[7]

[7] See the appendix for a detailed description of my interview respondents and a schedule of interview questions.

These narratives do not, of course, provide access to the *internal* narratives that people tell themselves inside their own minds, let alone to an unmediated social reality. Instead, they are versions of the stories that people construct when they present themselves to other people. But such stories, I hope to show, are well worth attending to, because they serve as important windows into the processes whereby people produce and reproduce identities.

1

Identities and Stories

Steven Mullins characterizes the story of his life as "the American story." He is an American, first and foremost, he tells me. He feels deeply tied to his nation and to its history. Mullins expresses great pride in his country (if he had to rank all the countries in the world, he says, the United States would be at, or at least very near to, the top of his list) and he articulates a ready willingness to sacrifice for it. "I'm proud to be an American," Mullins tells me, "[which] means that I understand why my ancestors came here." He elaborates:

> The Egans were Irish, you know. Ireland was terrible. Irish famines … it was a place where you didn't want to live. The French Huguenots, the Mullins side, we came out of Germany, came to America. Both families fought in the American Revolution… So … I would like to think that if I was alive then, the beginning of this country, would I be a Tory or a Patriot? I would have definitely been a Patriot. Would I be willing to die for my country? Yes.

As Mullins recalls his life, and as he recounts to me what he has learned about the lives of his ancestors, he gestures toward the barn that stands on the farm where he grew up, and where he now lives. His mother was raised on this same farm. His maternal great-great grandfather, one of the first settlers of what, in 1837, would become the village of New Albany, Ohio, purchased the land for the farm in 1828. "[O]n this farm," Mullins says, "is a beautiful barn, with a thirty-five star [Union] battle flag painted on [it]." "So, I grew up," he tells me, "under the flag."

1. Identity Thinking

As even these brief interview excerpts make clear, for Steven Mullins, American national identity – who "we," as an American people, are – is

deeply constitutive of personal identity. The American nation is not, by Mullins's view, merely an association he has elected to join. Nor is being American reducible to juridical citizen status. It is a matter of blood ties, he makes clear over the course of the interview. It is a matter of affective attachment to America's people, to its history, to the land that is the American territory. It is a matter of sharing (both of having internalized through socialization processes that begin in childhood, and also, as an adult, of reflectively endorsing) the values and principles Mullins regards as definitive of American identity.

What does it require for Steven Mullins to have an identity in this sense? More generally, what does it require for an individual to identify with a collectivity, membership in which she regards as constitutive of her personal identity? It requires, first and perhaps most basically, an understanding of the relevant identity category (in Mullins's case, an understanding of the category "American") as both meaningful and significant.

Such a subjective understanding does not necessarily follow from the objective fact of its possibility. Steven Mullins might, in principle, identify as "propertied." He might, in principle, understand who he is as a unique individual to be significantly shaped by "who we property owners are." Similarly, he might identify as "white," "able-bodied," or even "bespectacled." But he does not. He mentions none of these categories during the course of our approximately four-hour-long interview, not even when I prompt him to think about and to name his social identities.[1] Identity thinking – identifying oneself and others with particular delimited collectivities – requires dividing the social world into some conceivable groupings, but not others.

It requires, as well, holding a relatively clear and stable set of beliefs about, not only which actors, but also which actions and attributes fit particular groupings and lend them distinctiveness. Steven Mullins, during the course of our interview, emphasizes as distinctively American traits a strong work ethic, a willingness to contribute to communal life, and a commitment (in his words) to "stand up for what's right … whatever consequences it means." He stresses a willingness to learn and to use

[1] I prompt Mullins to think about and to name his identities as part of a semi-structured interview following his life history interview. In the semi-structured interview, Mullins tells me a number of ways he would complete the statement "My name is Steven Mullins, and I am _____." These include "American," "conservative," "Republican," "New Albany resident," and "Christian." He then answers a series of questions about the identity categories he lists. For a detailed schedule of interview questions, see the appendix.

the English language, singling out as "not American" "Mexicans who will not speak English."[2] Mullins claims, in addition, that a belief in racial equality is a distinctly American belief, and he asserts that Americans endorse and support civil liberties, especially freedom of conscience and freedom of speech.

Just as Steven Mullins might, in principle, identify with a different collectivity from the one with which he identifies, he might, in principle, highlight a different set of dispositions and/or a different set of traits as definitive of that collectivity. He might define acquisitiveness and consumerism as distinctly American traits, for example. He might underscore American individualism or American tolerance of economic inequality. He might stress a different set of constitutional principles from the set he stresses, what is more, or he might define as fundamental to American national identity a different interpretation of the particular principles he names. That it is objectively possible to understand particular actions and particular attributes as constitutive of a given social identity does not mean such an understanding necessarily obtains.

Nor is it necessarily the case that particular actions and attributes can be seen as constitutive of particular identities only if *all* persons assigned to the relevant identity categories perform those actions and exhibit those attributes. A case in point is Mullins's linguistic definition of American national identity. Some Americans, of course, do not speak English. Indeed, during the course of our interview, Mullins reveals he is consciously aware of this fact. Immediately after categorizing non-English speakers as not American (in fact, as "Mexican"), he shifts terms and refers to them as "minorities" within the American population. "I think we need to make sure that everybody realizes," he tells me, repeatedly pounding the table that sits between us with his fist, "English is the number one language in this country. It always has been, and we're going to keep it that way. We should not give in to the minorities to change it."

Mullins claims, in other words, that some American "minorities" do not speak English, asserting that they aim to alter the status of English as "the number one [American] language." Still, he insists that whether a person knows and uses English is an important indicator of whether or not that individual is (the implication being: a *real* or a *good* or a *true*)

[2] "For two hundred years," Mullins tells me, "there [have] been immigrants coming to this country … There [were] German newspapers, but the intent of that generation … the first ones over here, was to teach their children English … and I don't see that happening with the Mexican population that's coming to this country."