NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Although racism has plagued the American justice system since the nation's colonial beginnings, private White Americans are taking matters into their own hands. From racist 911 calls and hoaxes to grassroots voter suppression and vigilante "self-defense," concerted efforts are made every day by private citizens to exclude Black Americans from schools, neighborhoods, and positions of power. *Neighborhood Watch* examines the specific ways people police America's color line to protect "White spaces." The book charts how these actions too often result in harassment, arrest, injury, or death, yet typically go unchecked. Instead, these actions are promoted and encouraged by legislatures looking to expand racially discriminatory laws, a police system designed to respond with force to any frivolous report of Black "mischief," and a Supreme Court that has abdicated its role in rejecting police abuse. To combat these realities, *Neighborhood Watch* offers preliminary recommendations for reform, including changes to the "maximum policing" state, increased accountability for civilians who abuse emergency response systems, and proposals to demilitarize the color line.

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Neighborhood Watch

POLICING WHITE SPACES IN AMERICA

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108840064
DOI: 10.1017/9781108878661

First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-84006-4 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-79350-6 Paperback

For Noël
The love of my life

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Acknowledgments

This book has been a labor of love many years in the making, and it simply would not exist without the support and encouragement of countless individuals and institutions. There are too many selfless, wonderful people in my life to thank for making this book a reality, but a few deserve special mention here. My research assistant, MaryAnne Hamilton, who worked tirelessly on this project and prodded me gently to the finish line. My editor, Matt Gallaway, a man with clarity of vision and who appears to never sleep. Institutional support from Campbell Law School, and from Deans Rich Leonard and Sarah Ludington, who gave this junior faculty member room to run. Professor Roger Manus, whose decades of work on behalf of civil rights and racial justice continue to inspire me. The dozens and dozens of people who have offered wisdom and guidance along the way, including Tuneen Chisolm, Bobbi Jo Boyd, Tony Ghiotto, Marcus Gadson, Lucas Osborn, Arleen Myers, Sara Acosta, Tracey Maclin, Ken Simons, Don Dripps, Jordan Barry, Dov Fox, Mila Sohoni, Joseph Blocher, and participants in the SEALS New Scholar Panels, including Mitch Crusto, Missy Lonegrass, Cynthia Alkon, Pat Metze, and Raff Donelson. My wife, coparent, partner, and confidante, Noël Harlow, whose patience, love, and support made this book possible. My children, Jordan and Sage, who inspire me to be my best self. My parents, Roger and Brenda Fields, who have always believed in me, no matter what.

A Note on Language

Any discussion on race is fraught with questions about labels, language, and word choice. Common discussions in newsrooms across the country in the wake of 2020's "Summer of Racial Reckoning" centered around whether to capitalize "black" and "white" as racial designations, when and whether to use the terms "people of color" or "African Americans" in lieu of another designation, and what objectives are promoted or frustrated in doing so. For purposes of this book, I have chosen to capitalize both "Black" and "White" and, with rare exception as dictated by context, to use the terms "Black" and "White" rather than "person of color," "African American," "Caucasian American," or any other label. Several considerations drive these decisions.

First, capitalizing "Black" and "White" recognizes a form of collective ownership of these artificially created groupings. Race is a social construct, and the terms "black" and "white" to refer to skin color obviously refer not to facts of color or characteristics of biology, but to historically significant and highly artificial sorting. In other words, "racial identities were not discovered but created, and the capital letter conferred to these designations" helps to highlight "the artificiality of race."[1] In one sense, then, the capital letter forces society to "take responsibility" for these artificial, dangerous, and absurd designations – to do otherwise would allow "black" and "white" to "disguise themselves as common nouns and adjectives."[2]

Another reason, and perhaps the one most important to this book, is that "Black" and "White" people are perceived as such by others, must respond to those perceptions and reactions accordingly, and thus have some collective shared experience not just as a person but as a "Black" or "White" person. Here, it makes sense to deal with each designation separately. As New York University Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah observes, "a good reason to capitalize the racial designation 'black' is precisely that black is not a natural category, but a social one – a collective

[1] Sally Haslanger, *A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race*, in Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age 56–57 (2008).

[2] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black*, The Atlantic (June 18, 2020), https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.

identity – with a particular history."[3] While the "Black experience" is not monolithic and generalizing to any degree creates certain risks, the particular experience of Black people as *Black people* in this country, and to some degree the world, justifies this capital designation.

What is that collective identity, that shared experience? For the purpose of this book, I speak narrowly about the shared experience in America of Black people being perceived primarily – if not only – as "Black" by those around them and being forced to respond to those often negative, dismissive, fearful, and violent perceptions. The capital letter then refers to the collective primacy of "race" and "Black" as the dominant perceived feature driving much of the interaction between "Black America" and "White America." As detailed in these pages, when a neighbor spots an unfamiliar Black person walking down a residential neighborhood at night or a police officer pulls over a Black driver, they do not see *a person* – they see a *Black person*. The overriding importance of that socially and historically constructed racial designation, shared collectively by millions in this country, justifies the capital "B."

It is for this reason that I do not use the term "African American," which refers most accurately to Black citizens of the United States of America. While it may be important to refer specifically to this group in some contexts, "African American" is underinclusive in the racial fear context. For the racially fearful, it does not matter whether the Black person they see is from California, Canada, or Cameroon. All that matters is skin color. Indeed, "the NYPD officers who shot Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant, did not care whether their victim's foods, languages, music, and religious traditions were similar to those of most African Americans," and neither did they care about his citizenship status. All that mattered was that he was Black.

I also largely avoid the term "people of color," because that term tends either to be overinclusive or at least overly generalizes the unique experiences of different marginalized groups in this nation's history. This book explores the specific fear-based prejudice faced by Black people in America as a result of a uniquely Black, centuries-long history of pernicious mythmaking. For four centuries, Black people in this country have been derisively and inaccurately labeled as inherently violent, "bestial," and prone to criminality, and have endured unique horrors that shaped and perpetuated these stereotypes. Slavery, Jim Crow, convict leasing, segregation, redlining, and mass incarceration all affected solely or primarily Black individuals, and the implicit biases driving today's racially fearful policing of the "White space" spring from this unique experience. In contrast, the horrors inflicted on Native American communities, while no less deserving of recognition or reprobation, have not lent themselves to the same sort of contemporary response in Native American-White interactions. Likewise, Latinx and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities have borne the brunt of their own unique experiences with racism

[3] *Id.*

and continue to suffer the indignities, insecurities, and physical violence that is the product of these histories. But those histories also are unique and different from the historical and contemporary experience of Black people, which is the focus of this book.

That leaves perhaps the most controversial choice made in this book: to capitalize "White." Some who view capitalizing "Black" as a reclaiming of power and dignity stripped away over centuries view capitalizing "White" as an unjust and undeserved conferral of equality that "should be awarded only after white supremacy has been rolled back."[4] I find more problematic another common justification for not capitalizing "white": that Black people describe and think of themselves as Black but "people in the white majority don't think of themselves in that way."[5]

Whether that is true or not – a dubious proposition – this "white majority" argument encapsulates so much of the problem driving this book. To those in dominant, powerful societal demographic groups – White people, men, etc. – they are afforded the luxury of not thinking of themselves as a particular identity different from others. Indeed, to not capitalize "white" in some ways strikes me as a supremacist act in that it casts Whiteness as normal, neutral, standard, and thus non-Whiteness as different, abnormal, out of place. It is this sense that Black people in America are different and out of place – physically, metaphorically, psychologically – that allows so much of the implicit racial fear discussed in these pages to flourish. Thus, at least in this book, it is important to discuss the relationships between and the actions of "White" people as White people towards "Black" people as Black people. Both view each other through this prism and behave accordingly, even if one group may have the greater luxury not to be reminded of their own skin color and its marginalized place in America.

[4] *Id.*; *see also* Anne Price, *Spell it with a Capital "B"*, Insight Center for Community Economic Development (October 1, 2019), https://insightcced.medium.com/spell-it-with-a-capital-b-9eab112d759a.

[5] Luke Visconti, *Why Capitalizing the "B" in Black Still Matters for Cultural Competence and Accurate Representation*, DiversityInc. (August 18, 2020), https://www.diversityinc.com/why-the-b-in-black-is-capitalized-at-diversityinc/.