A Short History of White Supremacy and Anti-Black Racism in Iowa

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Iowans are nice—they can't be racist!

Racism and civil rights? That's all in the South.

Do these statements sound familiar? Each represents a powerful myth that learning about the history of white supremacy and anti-Black racism in Iowa can help burst.

Just a quick heads up as you start to read. There might be parts of this essay that make you say "What?!" as in "*I'm shocked! I had no idea!*" or "*No way. I totally disagree.*" When you have a "What?!" moment, lean into it. Use it as a jumping off point to engage with others, learn more, and unpack where some of your shock or discomfort comes from. This is not easy, but it is so important to do.

Maybe you have already had one of those moments. For instance, when I say "white supremacy in Iowa," did you think, "What? No. That's so extreme." For a lot of people, "white supremacy" refers to men in white hooded outfits burning crosses.[1] Sadly, that actually *is* part of our state's not-so-distant past.[2] In addition, "white supremacy" is much more than acts of flagrant domestic terrorism. It is the belief that white people are the baseline "norm" who have the power to set the terms of engagement and distribution of resources within institutions. Even in instances where they may be welcoming or generous with those resources, they are still the ones determining what is considered normal, good, or appropriate. What they identify as not white is considered foreign, wrong, dysfunctional, suspect, incomplete, etc. In other words, white supremacy represents the ways in which white people "develop structures to reproduce their systemic advantages" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p.22). White supremacy, in both its covert and overt forms, is *deeply* embedded within life in Iowa—and will continue to be unless we take active steps to dismantle and disrupt it.[3]

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[1] I purposefully use the term "white" and not "Caucasian" to describe the dominant racialized identity. "Caucasian" is a word from anthropologists' ranking of humans, a hierarchy that put "Mongoloid" and "Negroid" at the bottom (Perry, 2016). Race is, of course, a social construct with no biological basis. Over hundreds of years, however, this contested category of "white" has been used to accrue benefits, rights, and advantages to people who can claim that identity. In other words, race is not real but racism is. Another term you will notice that I avoid using is "minority." The word "minority" is not really useful to describe People of Color, especially in schools or communities where they make up the majority of people. The term "majority minority" should raise red flags—if a group is in the majority, then why still call it the minority? The term "minority" thus clearly carries connotations about value and worth, not just numerical size, which is why I do not use it as a synonym for People of Color.

[2] For example, some white people in Dubuque burned crosses in the 1990s to protest city officials' efforts to recruit more People of Color to live and work there (Chaichian, 2006).

[3] See the *Des Moines Register's* "Black Iowa: Still Unequal?" for statistics on current racial disparities, some of which are among the worst in the nation.

Another term to clarify is "anti-Black racism." As a form of oppression, racism is the "set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, and explanations … which function to systematically exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p.39). This is different than prejudice. Everyone has some kind of prejudice, but not everyone has the power to institutionalize those biases and preferences. While institutional efforts to restore or create equity means removing racial advantage for white people, that is not exploitation or oppression of white people. In other words, reverse racism is not a thing. Anti-Black racism, specifically, is racism targeted at people with a racialized identity of "Black," meaning people who have ancestry within the African diaspora.[4] Anti-Black racism is rooted in the history of enslavement (and all the dehumanization, family separation, kidnapping, stolen wages, rape, and other horrors that involved), which inevitably links it to classism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression.[5]

Learning Iowa's history of white supremacy and anti-Black racism is an important part of disrupting those traditions—especially in this specific historic moment of an international uprising protesting the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, our neighbor to the north (Kingcade, 2020). It's worth noting that the current protests against police brutality and the crackdown on the protests is nothing new in Iowa. As of July 2020, for example, it will have been 54 years since there was an uprising of Black youth in Des Moines' Good Park in response to police brutality (Fehn & Jefferson, 2010).

This essay is intended to give readers a glimpse into just how long and how pervasive this history is. We cannot stop something if we do not know it exists or do not understand how it operates. And let me be unequivocal: anti-Black racism and white supremacy *must be disrupted*. And for far too long, too many white people in Iowa have not known that it exists and/or do not understand how it operates. That has to end.

Myth #1: Iowans Are Nice - They Can't Be Racist!

This brings us to the first myth that Iowans cannot be racist because they are nice. A quick caveat before we unpack this myth: there have been and are people who openly promote racism within our state. This is not the only way to reproduce racism, however. For example, Joyce King (1991) names "dysconscious racism" as the "limited and distorted understandings [people] have

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[4] "Black" is a term to describe someone's racialized identity. People can be Black and not be African American. "African American" is a term to describe an ethnic and cultural identity. Often, but not always, these identities overlap.

[5] Of course, people with other racialized identities experience racism, too, including people who identify as Black, Brown, biracial, and multiracial (e.g., this includes many people who identify ethnically/nationally as Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, etc.). For the purposes of this essay, however, I focus on anti-Black racism. There are fewer formal historical resources about other minoritized groups in Iowa, though they do exist. For example, the Latinx experience in Iowa has a wonderful online archives in the Migration Is Beautiful exhibit at the University of Iowa (https://migration.lib.uiowa.edu/) and some scholars have started to publish work about activism within Latinx communities (e.g., Weaver, 2009; Valerio-Jiménez, 2016). Lance Foster (2009) wrote a very helpful book called *Indians of Iowa*. And ISU professor Noreen Naseem Rodríguez is collecting histories of Asians and Asian Americans in Iowa.

about inequity and cultural diversity" (p.134). Signs that someone is engaging in dysconscious racism include when they are unaware of inequities that exist (e.g., "I'm color blind! I don't see race!") or provide explanations that rely on deficit, debunked beliefs about oppressed people (e.g., "Black kids struggle in schools because their families don't care about education").

Similarly, Gaertner and Dovidio (2005) identify "aversive racism," when white people "sympathize with victims of past injustice, support the principle of racial equality, and regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but, at the same time, possess negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks, which may be unconscious" (p.618). Aversive racists avoid interracial interactions for fear of doing something "wrong" or being labeled as "racist," a strategy for preserving a non-prejudiced self-image at the cost of perpetuating discrimination and oppression against Black people. I can think of many examples of how dysconscious and aversive racism have played out in my life and I bet you can, too.

In majority white spaces like Iowa, "describing inequality as an effect of racism is seen as bad manners in the midst of well intended tolerance" (Schick & St.Denis, 2005, p.307). The belief that "Iowa Nice" inoculates people against perpetuating racism is a prime example of this. Journalism scholar Robert Gutsche (2012) describes "Iowa Nice" as a

> rhetorical tool in which conflict and controversy about anything we might be doing wrong that stifles public discussions about our problems. This mixture of kindness and passive aggressiveness, wide smiles and backroom grumbles deplete any actionable discourse to unveil and address racist, oppressive, or hateful actions tied to a particular person—or sets of people—who are "true Iowans," those "from here" (p.2).

People can be nice *and* perpetuate a racist system. Believing that Iowans are nice and therefore cannot be racist is a surefire way to suppress and obscure how racism still occurs.

Myth #2: Racism and civil rights? That's all in the South.

The idea that Iowans can't be racist because they're nice is problematic in all sorts of ways, including that it presumes "Iowans" to be white. An anecdote: when I first showed a photograph in my social studies methods class of a racially diverse group of students and their teacher in 1907 Buxton, Iowa, one of my white undergraduate students expressed disbelief that it could have been taken here.[6] "There were that many Black people in Iowa?" she asked, stunned. Given the lack of social studies education in the state,[7] the predominance of white-centered narratives in our history curriculum nationally (Vasquez Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012), and the hypersegregation of white people that keeps them from learning about or building relationships

[6] The history of Buxton is fascinating. Watch the IPTV documentary "Searching for Buxton" (http://www.iptv.org/searching-buxton/tagged-content) for a helpful primer on this coal mining town in southern Iowa that was an experiment in a community with much less discrimination and segregation than its historic counterparts. After the mine closed, the town died and is now an archaeological site.

[7] See the 2015 Iowa Department of Education report "A Call to Action" for a sobering account of social studies education within the state.

with People of Color (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002), her shock was perhaps unsurprising. The truth is, of course, that Black people have been part of Iowa since that territory became part of the United States.[8] The history of Black people in Iowa is one of incredible contributions coupled with creative solutions to the unrelenting challenges of racism.[9] The state provides what Leonardo (2004) calls a "portrait of white supremacy" (p.146) with examples (in *every* decade and in *every* region) of segregation and discrimination in housing, employment, and schools as well as legal and extralegal violence, anti-miscegenation laws, Jim Crow laws, labor union exclusion, environmental racism, and more.

One of the earliest examples comes from the state's Constitutional Convention. As a white child growing up in a suburb of Des Moines, I learned that we entered the Union as a free state, meaning we were one of the "good guys." The real story is more complicated. In fact, many of the political leaders at that time (all white men) did not support slavery but neither did they support racial equality. At the convention, Dubuque's delegate Edward Langworthy proposed that the new state government ban Black people out of fear of, as he put it, "all the broken-down negroes of Missouri overrunning us" (Cooper, 1986, p.118).[10] As a compromise, the legislature ended up adopting a series of "black codes" intended to disincentivize Black settlement in Iowa. This included ensuring that only white people (and, for the most part, white men) could hold elected office, serve in the military, serve as jurors, or attend public schools. Interracial marriage was banned and Black people had to prove they were legally free upon entering the state, pay a bond of several hundred dollars as a guarantee of good behavior, and have a white person vouch for their character. Coupled with racist land policies, it is little wonder that the numbers of Black people migrating to the state in its early days remained relatively small.[11] Even after many of these codes ended and the state legislature passed more progressive laws banning racial discrimination like the Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1884, the successful prosecution of white people who continued to racially discriminate in public accommodations would not happen until 1949 when Edna Griffin successfully sued Katz Drug Store for refusing her service.[12] Griffin (known as the "Rosa Parks of Iowa") and her allies only won after several lawsuits, public protests and boycotts, and interracial solidarity across multiple organizations (Lawrence, 2008). Sixty-five years is a long time for white people to learn who the criminal justice and legal system worked for (i.e., *them*). This is white supremacy in action.

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[8] Important to note is that a number of different Indigenous nations were on this land well before that and continue to exist within it today.

[9] For those interested in a more detailed overview of this history, see Silag, Koch-Bridgford, & Chase's (2001) book *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa (1838-2000)*. The African American History Museum of Iowa in Cedar Rapids and *The Annals of Iowa* are also invaluable resources.

[10] Though this proposal may seem farfetched to some readers, this actually happened further west. Just two years before Iowa became a state, whites banned Black people from "Oregon country" (Brown, 2017).

[11] For a thorough examination of this period in Iowa's history with a focus on race and racism, see University of Iowa professor Leslie Schwalm's (2009) book *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*.

[12] For a timeline of other related events, see the Iowa Civil Rights Toolkit published by the Iowa Civil Rights Commission.

Despite the early legislators' best efforts, Black settlers did come. For the most part, their numbers grew in urban centers like Des Moines and the Cedar Valley due to the camaraderie and safety in numbers as well as employment opportunities (though white practices and policies tended to limit these to menial, seasonal labor). River communities like Keokuk also had relatively large numbers of Black residents as white people would hire Black people for riverboat work on the Mississippi. Given the fact that cities and towns along the major rivers had the highest populations of Black people, it should strike keen observers as odd that Dubuque (a city on the Mississippi) has had such low numbers over so many generations. This is an example of "minoritization" or the ways in which racial hierarchies are produced and managed spatially to ensure that numbers of People of Color stay small (Laguerre, 1999). The recurrence of overtly racist violence and hostility in Dubuque explains why this community, despite its geographic and economic appeal, has not been an easy place for many Black families to call home (Chaichian, 2006).[13]

Other examples of white supremacy at work include white union members in the early 20th century demanding that racist employment practices be included in contracts (i.e., promises not to hire or promote Black workers) (Hewitt, 1989). "The fact is," said Armour packing plant representative Thomas Duke in 1905, "that the white men do not care to work with negroes and we respect their wishes" (p.174).[14] After a flood in Sioux City, historian William Hewitt (1989) notes that "white developers increased pressure on the city government to force the remaining black section of downtown to relocate to the West Seventh Street area [insisting that the mayor and police department] 'make room for respectable business enterprises'" (p.168).[15] Sioux City also reproduced white supremacy with its 1924 marketing materials.

> Sioux City is the metropolis of the northwest where the farmer, the rancher and the captain of industry join hands to make a market for the world's greatest agricultural region. The city has a population of 86,000, over 96 percent of whom are white. The foreign element, composed for the most part of Scandinavians and British subjects, form a stable class of citizens, hardworking and thrifty. Perhaps no other city the size of Sioux City has so few undesirables. (p.158)

Bragging about their "good" white immigrants (rather than those rumored anarchist Czechs or believed to be hot-tempered Irish), the city named as "undesirable" all of the Black residents who had built families and businesses there for generations. This is white supremacy.

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[13] In its early years, Dubuque was actually the proportionally strongest Black community in the state until a group of white men murdered without legal consequence one of the city's founders, Nat Morgan (Schwieder, 1996).

[14] This type of discrimination was especially hard on Black women who contended with racism and sexism. They did not take this abuse lying down. In late 1890s Cedar Rapids, for example, Emma Oliphant led others to produce racist hiring practices at a cereal box company (Swenson Arnold, 2015). In contrast with other openly racist unions, Waterloo's interracial United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 made racial justice part of their platform with Anna Mae Weems as one of their leaders (Fehn, 1995).

[15] Similar "urban renewal" projects in the 1950s and 1960s displaced Black residents and businesses in Des Moines' Center Street neighborhood (Fehn & Jefferson, 2010). Madison DeShay Duncan is currently producing a documentary about this called "The Center Street Story: An Urban Renewal Retrospective." Fort Madison learned from these efforts in Des Moines and managed to block them (Mollano, 2009).

So many other examples exist that would make this essay literally hundreds of pages long. Just know that in every domain you can imagine of social life (housing, banking, shopping, education, policing, athletics, worship, employment, etc.) there are documented patterns within Iowa of white people taking individual and/or institutional action to uphold their advantages and to hurt, marginalize, disadvantage, or exclude Black people.

Anti-Racist Examples

Alongside these examples of white supremacy in action, there are important stories to learn about the people and organizations who fought against it. Iowa has an important history in this regard. For generations, Iowans (and especially Black Iowans) have used a variety of tactics to reveal and disrupt white supremacy: lawsuits, protests, boycotts, the arts, education, and more. Any victories are due to their resilience, solidarity, organizational strategy, and courage—not the goodwill of white people in power. And not to be a negative Nancy, but these victories are *always* partial and fragile. Struggles against white supremacy and anti-Black racism have never unfolded in a linear, increasingly progressive way. There have been steps back and there have been consequences (individual and organizational) for those who have risked in order to disrupt.

Take, for example, the cost to Drake University after standing up against the racism of what became known as "the Bright incident" (Baker, 2013).[16] Johnny Bright, Drake University's halfback and Heisman favorite, was a record-setting phenom. In October of 1951, Bright took the field for an away game against Oklahoma A&M. As Baker (2013) recounts,

> On three successive plays in Drake's first drive, A&M lineman Wilbanks Smith leveled him with high, hard blows to the face long after the ball had moved down field. By the time Drake tallied its first touchdown, Bright's jaw was broken, sidelining him for the rest of the day and, as it happened, the entire season. (p.122)

This kind of violence by white players against Black ones (and other forms of discrimination) was not unusual. Often overlooked or condoned by complicit referees, coaches, and athletic directors, it was an open secret. When *Des Moines Register* photographers Don Ultang and John Robinson captured the attack in their Pulitzer Prize winning photographic series, however, those arguing for action against this racism found new support among horrified fans. After the offending player escaped any consequence from his university or the league, Drake exited the Missouri Valley Conference in protest. In the years that followed, attendance dropped off and Drake's football program shouldered a large operating deficit. Even after they returned to the league, their football program never recovered its previous success. And despite being drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles, Bright left the United States in protest against this racism for a record-setting career in the Canadian Football League. And now, Black football players in Iowa are yet again making the news for publicizing racism within the University of Iowa program and

[16] Baker's (2013) article thoughtfully examines the support from white college students and administrators for Drake's action across the state while, *at the same time*, endorsing racist policies that kept Black students from dining or living on campus.

asking fans to stand with them (Sallee, 2020). Echoing players more than fifty years ago, Hawkeye player Kaevon Merriweather (2020) tweeted,

> If you can not support us right now with this movement and with our team taking a knee during the national anthem, DO NOT support us during the football season. DO NOT watch our games on TV. DO NOT come up to us when you want photos. DO NOT ask us to give your kids autographs. DON'T COME TO US EXPECTING US TO DO FOR YOU WHEN YOU CAN'T SUPPORT THE BLACK ATHLETES ON THIS TEAM AND THE DECISIONS WE MAKE AS A TEAM. I would rather play in front of 1,000 fans who care about us as people outside of football and what we are standing for, than 70,000 fans who only care about us when we are in uniform and on the field entertaining them.

There are some special achievements that make Iowa's history important not just for those of us in the state to learn, but for anyone interested in U.S. history. For example, Iowa was among the earliest states in the country to extend suffrage to Black men through a popular vote (Brodnax, 2007).[17] This was thanks to the organizing of Black veterans of the Civil War who returned to Iowa frustrated by their service not corresponding with an extension of civil rights.[18] In 1868, Alexander Clark successfully sued the district of Muscatine to desegregate schools so that his daughter Susan could attend the all-white neighborhood school.[19] This court case would be used as precedent in the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board* (1954). Despite this victory, however, Iowa districts continue(d) to find ways to segregate students. For example, two Black Iowan women, Charlotta Smith and Mary Jane Dove, sued schools on behalf of their children in Keokuk in the 1840s and refused to pay the school tax until their children were admitted (Schwalm, 2009). Fifty years after the Clark case, the NAACP chapter in Des Moines published a "Desiderata" that demanded at least one African American teacher in schools with over 50% population of African American students and "the introduction of a course in Negro history" (Lufkin, 1980, p.460)—demands that Waterloo's East High students would make in 1968 (Schumaker, 2013)[20] and have surfaced yet again in recent years (Norvell, 2016).

This reminder of how many times and in so many ways that Black Iowans have had to demand justice is not to depress readers (though it might). It is to make clear how a commitment to

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[17] For a closer examination of this episode in Iowa history, see Dykstra & Hahn (1968).

[18] It is worth noting that Iowa's proud history of women's suffrage is connected to white supremacy. For example, Iowa native and League of Women Voters' founder Carrie Chapman Catt argued that "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened by women's suffrage" (Sanghani, 2015). ISU student concerns about the naming of Catt Hall are actually linked to the naming of Jack Trice Stadium, the only one so named in Division I sports for a Black player. Trice died in 1923 after sustaining injuries during a football game likely due to racially motivated attacks on the field. According to Schultz (2007), the commemoration of Trice in this way was a strategy for distracting national attention from the Catt controversy in the 1990s after decades of student protests that demanded Trice be honored.

[19] This history was preserved thanks to the work of Black women led by Aldeen Jones-Davis of Muscatine (Deshay-Duncan, 2019).

[20] I encourage readers to learn more about these students' protests as their story is a classic example of the pattern of white people in power refusing to listen to Black people's demands, only agreeing to consider them under a perceived threat of violence, then reconfiguring those demands to make them more palatable to white folks and ultimately maintaining the status quo.

anti-racism is a commitment to a long struggle. It is also to reiterate, for white readers in particular, that the systems, traditions, and practices they may trust to work for them have not worked (*often by design*) for communities of color. Any fatigue, distrust, and cynicism within communities of color is totally understandable. Anti-racist work for white people is first and foremost about acknowledging this history, situating demands for justice within it, and listening carefully to those demands so that any response does not reproduce white supremacy whether overtly, aversively, or dysconsciously.

Conclusion

If you are still reading this, it is my hope that you are willing to continue learning about what critical race scholar Zeus Leonardo (2004) calls a "critical pedagogy of white supremacy," a focus on the "direct processes that secure [racial] domination and the privileges associated with it" (p.137). This is different than learning about the contributions of People of Color (which is, of course, necessary) or even focusing on white privilege. As Leonardo explains, learning about white supremacy involves learning about the

> processes that students rarely appreciate because their textbooks reinforce the innocence of whiteness. As a result, the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites. It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color. … The discourse on [white] privilege comes with the unfortunate consequence of masking history, obfuscating agents of domination, and removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom. Instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that whites receive. It mistakes the symptoms for causes. … [Racial domination] does not form out of random acts of hatred, although these are condemnable, but rather out of a patterned and enduring treatment of social groups. (p.138-9)

There are so many more examples of these "patterns and enduring treatments" that simply could not fit within these pages. To continue learning about these forces and this history, please check out the reference list below and visit the African American History Museum of Iowa in Cedar Rapids. In addition, I offer a class through Iowa State University each summer that is free to the general public, available for licensure renewal credit for teachers, and available for university credit: EDUC 422/522 "Teaching and Learning Iowa History: Struggles Against Anti-Black Racism." Email me for more information (swalwell@iastate.edu). The next class will be offered in June 2021. I am also more than willing to share a 1-2 hour presentation (virtually or in-person) that provides an overview of this history with any proceeds going to organizations fighting for racial justice.

The history is there. The question is whether we want to learn it—and learn from it.

About the Author

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