

Jennifer L. Pierce, *Racing for Innocence: Whiteness, Gender, and the Backlash of Affirmative Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Affirmative action, a policy designed to combat racial and gender discrimination in employment and education, came under fierce attack during the late 1980s and early 1990s, leading to California's Proposition 209. Heretofore it has been assumed that antipathy to the policy generated largely from working class white men, facing competition from members of minority groups and white women for jobs which became more scarce thanks to the deindustrialization of the 1970s. The popular imagination held that college educated white male elites were color-blind and generally in favor of the policy. Not so, points out Jennifer Pierce in this provocative, insightful, well-researched, and timely book. White male elites harbored intense resentment against the women and minority job applicants whom they viewed as undeserving of "special treatment."

White male elites used the news media to gin up anti-affirmative action sentiment by focusing on the stories of those who felt (usually without evidence) that they had been wronged by the policy—that a less-qualified black or woman applicant had "stolen" their job or spot in an elite college or graduate program. Again and again, journalists would allow full explications of the positions of those who opposed the policy without challenging their basic assumptions; at the same time, those who favored the policy barely rated a mention. Also During this era, Hollywood produced numerous race films in the vein of "To Kill a Mockingbird"—films based on the trope of the white elite hero (a lawyer like Matthew McConaughey's Jake Brigance in *A Time to Kill*) saving the helpless black victim from working-class white racism, thus reinforcing the notion that so-called "colorblind" post-civil rights white elites were innocent of racism, and implying that it was counterproductive to the cause of racial progress to "harm" these elite whites with affirmative action.

Pierce backs up her argument with solid original research at one California law firm, where she conducted interviews in 1989 and again in 1999, speaking with white male lawyers, black lawyers, and woman lawyers on their work histories and their feelings about affirmative action. The firm had been the subject of an anti-discrimination lawsuit in the early 1970s and subsequent affirmative action court order. Her results clearly demonstrate a continuing history of institutional racism, the result largely of white male lawyers who consider themselves color-blind while for the most part harboring deep-seated race and gender prejudices. As a result, token women and minority hires at the firm are given inappropriate assignments and not allowed to develop intra-office support like their white male colleagues, resulting in disparate treatment. All had left the firm in the decade between the two interviews.

Senior attorneys resent the restrictions on their ability to hire the best-qualified lawyers, which Pierce labels the neo-liberal argument against affirmative action, while lamenting that they can no-longer tell sexist or racist jokes (which I presume is what Pierce means by the neo-conservative argument against affirmative action, although the definition for this is somewhat unclear in the book). Pierce correctly categorizes these feelings as the myth of "white male innocence and injury." This myth posits that in the post-civil rights

era, elite white males are innocent of racism because they personally oppose overt discrimination. They are then injured by affirmative action, which they see as denying white males appropriate job opportunities to make up for racist acts that either occurred in the past or lies, as they see it, in the province of the racist non-elites. Ultimately because they cannot consider themselves racist as individuals, and because our society (especially in legal circles) predicates blame on individual responsibility, they cannot see how they contribute to institutional racism.

The book is formatted logically. The first chapter analyzes affirmative action reportage in print media, and the second Hollywood race films. The third and fourth cover the interviews at the law firm (where for some reason the interviewees are all identified by name while the firm is rendered anonymous with initials): Chapter Three covers race while Chapter Four covers gender.

In a striking (and welcome) departure from the strictly analytical, Pierce includes in Chapter Five a short story, "Small Talk," where she presents her findings through a fictional encounter between a black woman applicant for a job at a law firm and two white interlocutors, one a well-heeled Ivy League graduate, the other a white ethnic son of the working class. While the white ethnic seemingly keeps bringing the topic of conversation back to the issue of race, overcompensating in a desire to prove that he is not a racist and a sexist (asking the protagonist her opinions about Michael Jordan and Ward Connerly, for instance, and calling her, behind her back, "a real ball-breaker"), it is the more polite Ivy League graduate who harbors the deeper prejudices, despite his greater ability to behave "appropriately." He is the managing director, and it is he who desperately wants to hire her to meet a quota but will, consciously or not, place numerous unnecessary obstacles in her path to partner. I expect other reviewers may take issue with the inclusion of the short story in a scholarly book, but I would disagree. After all, what is a conclusion if not a summation of what the author has learned from the research? The short story, in this case, simply uses a fictional situation to accomplish the same goal. Pierce never pretends that the story is in any sense a recount of actual events; it is, therefore, merely the presentation of scholarly results in another medium.

In sum, *Racing for Innocence* is an important addition to the literature on race, gender, and equal opportunity and expands our knowledge as we contemplate the roots of the backlash against affirmative action.