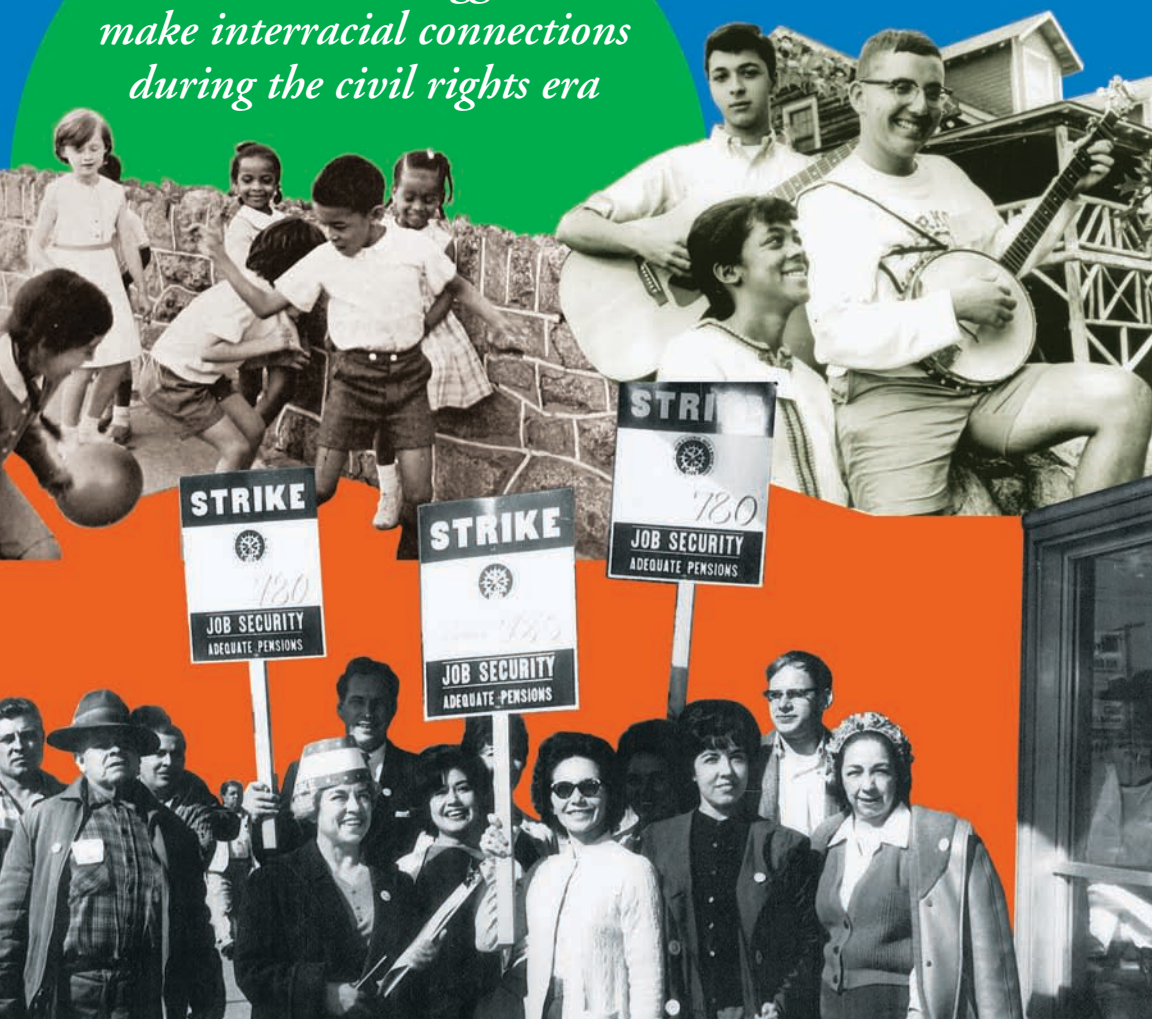


# LIVING AS EQUALS

Phyllis Palmer

*How three white  
communities struggled to  
make interracial connections  
during the civil rights era*



# **Living as Equals**



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*How Three White Communities  
Struggled to Make  
Interracial Connections  
During the Civil Rights Era*

**Phyllis Palmer**

**Vanderbilt University Press**

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*To Elizabeth Johnson  
and, in memoriam,  
to Marcus Falkner Cunliffe,  
Ruth Barnes Marynick,  
and Joe Lee Stubblefield*



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# **Living as Equals**



# Introduction

I grew up in a postwar America devoted to church attendance, house pride, and celebration of the nation's generosity. All these came together each Sunday, first at the neighborhood Methodist church, and then at a lavish midday meal. We dressed carefully in fresh clothes for Sunday school and worship service, where the minister led us in thanks for America's blessings. Afterward we drove home to a big Sunday supper of fried chicken, biscuits, cream gravy, green beans, and mashed potatoes, proofs of the nation's prosperity and the modest comforts of my middle-class neighborhood.

We white Methodists took up a special collection on World Mission Sunday, and we children brought the dimes and nickels and pennies we had saved to help other little children. In Sunday school class, we enthusiastically sang:

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.  
Red or yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Following Jesus' example, we sent our child-size savings out to the needy places of Asia and Africa, learning also a lesson of white responsibility for less fortunate children whose parents couldn't provide nice homes and good food to eat.

Caring at a distance was familiar. At home, in Dallas, Texas, I learned benevolence for worthwhile inferiors who lived around us, even as I gained a sense of why those people, as a group, were not quite up to the standards of my people. The Indians my family had known in Oklahoma; the Negroes, in polite parlance, who worked for us; the Mexicans, whatever their citizenship status, we saw when we visited the Rio Grande Valley—all these fit into a mental constellation with white Americans at its center.

Simultaneously, I learned a fear of racial others, transmitted indirectly through casual admonitions or unexplained warnings. “Chinese restaurants catch stray cats and pass the meat off as chicken.” “It’s not safe for a girl”—implicitly, a *white* girl—“to be out at night with all these colored men around.” Jesus might love dark-skinned people who lived far away and expect us to help them. Closer to home we whites still needed to maintain the separation that asserted white competence and authority over the Indians, Mexicans, Negroes, and Chinese who lived on the margins of white life and bounded white consciousness.

In the postwar era, the white majority in the United States enforced racial segregation; accepted racial discrimination in jobs, housing, and schooling; and applauded a popular culture starring admirable whites. We took the preeminence of white people so much for granted that, except when enacting segregation practices, we didn’t identify our families, our neighbors, and ourselves as white.<sup>1</sup> In Texas, the segregation signs on the local streetcars, placing my family in the “White” section and our housekeeper in the “Colored,” seemed only a benign sorting device, an affirmation, almost, of personal preferences. I did not think of my family and neighborhood as “white,” as segregationist, and as upholders of a three-centuries-old system of white supremacy.

At eighteen, in 1962, I left Texas for college in Ohio and discovered many black people whose intelligence, ambition, talent, energy, and moral concern equaled my own. At Oberlin, an institution that advertised its historic position as the first U.S. college to admit black students and women students (adding them to the assumed student population of white men), I found classmates I had not imagined in my racially segregated upbringing. Down the hall lived an African American classical pianist from Chicago, and across the hall, the bookish daughter of African American librarians in Ohio. The sophisticated, widely traveled African diplomat’s son majoring in chemistry tore apart my mental picture of rural, underdeveloped Africa. Africans and African Americans, once remote, were now friends, classmates, dance partners, and smoking chums at the campus hangout. “Negro,” in polite early 1960s speech, no longer evoked servant or shadowy threat but an interesting peer.

The disruption of my childhood complacency led to an adolescent rejection of my family’s “racism,” a new term for me, and hostility to my white Southern roots. But the North quickly showed that racism was not a Southern monopoly. Some black students were townies, and they

alerted the campus's budding civil rights activists to discrimination in the town of Oberlin itself, which had a substantial black population from its nineteenth-century days as a haven for escaping slaves. Leading employers followed racial codes designed for white comfort that banished black employees to janitorial and cleaning jobs behind the scenes. Northern protocol enforced segregation and white authority as effectively as did Southern law. Oberlin College students responded by picketing the recalcitrant local telephone company, urging it to hire black women as operators and black men as installers. We picketed in front of the snobbish local drugstore, demanding it give black workers some of the salesclerk jobs in the front of the store.

I threw myself into these activities to end racism, drawing on a well-established tradition of white women's aiding the downtrodden and needy. I felt courageous in debates with my Texas family, even though I shared few of the risks of my classmates, black and white, who joined voter registration drives in the Deep South, or the hardships of visiting South African students, black and white, forced into exile by hardening apartheid policies. With classmates, I raised money for civil rights workers and South African antiapartheid campaigners.

During the next decade the civil rights movement sparked racial power assertions and a women's liberation movement. From these, I learned to search for the institutions and political patterns that sustained racial separation and inequality—to see racism as not just personal antipathy but as an entire social order in need of change. Simultaneously, I began to examine the ways my white girlhood had trained me in racial confidence and female self-constriction. The nicer books, pleasanter surroundings, and better-outfitted science laboratories of the white schools in Dallas's segregated system gave me confidence in my intellectual superiority and ability to achieve. The oppressive Southern disapproval of smart girls—loud-mouthed tomboys all—drove me to find a college outside the South. By the early 1970s, the social movements of the 1960s seemed to me to be making some headway in breaking down the old structures that enforced social distance, unequal opportunities, and gender and race conformity. As a white woman, I knew that my personal well-being required changing the institutions and policies that enforced systematic inequalities, and one step was making interracial connections in graduate school, at work, and in everyday life.



## The White Response to Civil Rights

As an adult and a professor of history, I came to understand that the civil rights movement and its attractive promise of interracial connection had emerged from large changes in the postwar nation. Nazi racial practices had discredited race-based laws; the Cold War had emphasized U.S. commitments to pluralism and equality; and African American activists had modeled a world free from deference to white authority. Fortuitously, my personal life had intersected a moment of great national change, and I had embraced its possibilities.

My confidence that many white Americans of my generation had responded with the same joyous hope for racial interconnection was shaken in the early 1990s. In 1992, an all-white jury excused police officers who had pulled a black man, Rodney King, from his car and beaten him, sparking violent unrest in Los Angeles; in 1995, a racially mixed jury found the black former athlete O. J. Simpson innocent of killing his white wife, setting off hostile comments from white citizens. The national print and broadcast media revived a public discourse of “natural” racial animosities. Even though survey numbers after both events showed that a substantial minority of white Americans held opinions similar to those of black Americans, the media reported on a nation divided along racial, specifically white and black, lines.<sup>2</sup> Why, thirty years after the passage of the landmark civil rights legislation, was it so easy for journalists to depict a nation characterized by little cross-race understanding?

The media’s use of polarizing racial language raised questions I had rarely considered since the late 1960s: How did white Americans change during the civil rights era? How did some white Americans learn to see race’s effects in ways not too dissimilar from how black Americans perceived them? And how did other white Americans give up formal segregation and discrimination, yet remain suspicious of black and other people of color as a problem for the country? Why did the media go on assuming natural racial disagreements outside any historical context? The question about media depictions was one for social scientists. The question about how white Americans created new conceptions of race in response to civil rights demands for full human equality was one for a historian.

The parameters of white people’s reactions were easy to draw: Some white Southerners and Northerners vehemently, and sometimes violently, opposed any loss of white power; another and much smaller group of

white Americans dedicated their lives to the movement for racial justice. On the one side, some Southern political authorities mounted massive resistance to school desegregation and unleashed police dogs on black residents who were demanding voting rights, while some Northerners fire-bombed black home buyers moving into white areas, rioted over forced school busing for integration, and litigated against mixing urban schools with nonwhite majorities with suburban ones with white majorities.<sup>3</sup> On the other side, heroic white activists marched alongside black civil rights demonstrators, raised funds to finance the movement, and brought publicity to long-hidden Southern violence, while sympathetic officials used governmental power to force unsympathetic whites to accept new rules.<sup>4</sup>

Between these poles lay the stories of the great majority of white Americans, who joined neither mobs nor the movement for equality. Many hoped to ride out the social change without losing, or changing, much. Some white Southerners acquiesced to the necessity of giving up official segregation, and a few even described the end of the system as “liberation” for themselves. They did not become supporters of integration or interracial connections, but they felt freed from the compulsions of a system that overrode individual judgment and enforced behaviors both monstrous and prosaic.<sup>5</sup>

Many other white Americans eluded responsibility for racial change through a couple of distinctive, though related, strategies. Postsegregationist white Southerners moved to new suburbs but kept intact much of the apparatus of white racial advantage as they supported private, religious-oriented schools and opposed government action to improve public education, support affordable housing, offer job training, or perform any other public service that might benefit those impoverished by Jim Crow. These white Southerners and suburban white families in other regions of the country presented their beliefs as antigovernment political conservatism instead of antiblack or anti-Mexican American racial discrimination.<sup>6</sup> White ethnics, born into families from southern and eastern Europe who had joined the great immigration at the start of the twentieth century, formed an overlapping group that aligned with the antigovernment, individualistic ethos that left peoples of color to fend for themselves. Although Italians, Poles, Slavs, and especially Russian Jews had backed interracial labor unions since the New Deal era, the civil rights gains for racial equality coincided with the loss of labor union influence and the replacement of class interests by ethnic consciousness. By the early 1970s,

white ethnic members of the working class, instead of lamenting lost union bargaining power, asserted claims to public attention and power through a revival of ethnic identity and heritage—disguised expressions of white pride.

The working class of southern and eastern European immigrants who had moved into the middle class with unionized wages, GI Bill education, and suburban homes after World War II claimed in the 1970s to stand as the representative hard-working, self-made white Americans—now, because of their recent arrival, exempt from responsibility for the racial past of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>7</sup> The intertwined white reactions of acceptance of desegregation and withdrawal from racial debate laid the basis for 1980s conservatism's professions of racial fairness and its complete disinterest in persistent inequalities.

The focus of this book is white Americans who responded hopefully to the civil rights era's promise of a freer and more equitable nation. They were inspired by the movement to cross old racial boundaries and to place themselves in settings where they had to consider their responsibilities as Americans who had enjoyed benefits from being white.<sup>8</sup> Initially, during the 1950s, many embraced the idea of a nation liberated from racial barriers and social norms that violated ideals of individual worth and reduced freedom of association. Generally middle class, often affiliated with labor unions and other organizations associated with New Deal principles, inspired by religious affiliations, and trained in social science theories of human relations, these white Americans sought ways to break down segregation and suspicion. Following the lead of Gunnar Myrdal's wartime classic *American Dilemma* (1944), these optimistic white Americans sought to reduce prejudice through personal, though organized, connections with nonwhite Americans. If enough white Americans came to know their non-white neighbors, then the animosity of ignorance would metamorphose into the recognition of human sameness under the skin. Unwittingly, and sometimes arrogantly, well-intentioned advocates assumed that integration meant white people's welcoming previously marginalized peoples of color into normative white America, unaware that African Americans, Mexican Americans, or Asian Americans might have their own ideas about American ideals.

By the mid-1960s, racial power movements (black power, Chicano power, red power, third world power) claimed cultural and political representation for their communities' distinct viewpoints and challenged white

Americans to understand that personal friendliness was not sufficient to overcome centuries-old systems of white advantage. White Americans who wanted to build a genuinely egalitarian nation needed to confront the images and structures that assigned Americans to set racial categories, distributed opportunities according to racial assignments, explained away inequalities with mythologies of racial natures, and maintained whiteness as the nation's preferred and normative identity; they had to transform their behavior to withdraw their support from the institutional authority of white persons over those labeled, by contrast, nonwhite. Humans might all be the same under the skin, but the histories, circumstances, social positions, and cultural valences attached to different skin colors were not. To care for each other as equal humans required organizing political systems that enabled participants to explain and to negotiate these differences.

To study these hopeful, welcoming white responders, I asked, how did some white Americans set out to seize the moment of racial disruption for connections across the boundaries of race? In what ways, in the words of psychologist Paul L. Wachtel, did some white Americans create interracial connections that required them to ask, "Is this someone I should care about?" and then allowed them to answer yes.<sup>9</sup> In what ways did some white Americans change themselves, their gender expectations, and their social institutions to erode white privilege and embrace egalitarian interracial connection?

### Three Interracial Communities

Interracial connections necessarily took place in specific times and spaces. What follows are stories of three physical and organizational locations where white Americans sought out interracial connection—distinct sites of interracialism: teen summer camps, a residential neighborhood, and a city. The diversity of sites allows me to consider how racial existence was organized at the scale of the individual, the neighborhood, and the municipal polity and to probe more closely the quality of individual and institutional resistance to interracialism.

In a time and place accustomed to segregation and social distance, bringing together people defined as racially different required conscious organization. The stories I uncovered revolve around three kinds of communities—a human relations group; a neighborhood group in a desegre-

gating city; and a citywide community-organizing group—each of which had significant religious connections. Each of these sympathized with civil rights goals, but none was directly involved in the movement. In the first instance, a longtime human relations organization, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), recruited a racially diverse group of teenagers to attend summer camps in the New York City and Los Angeles regions. In the second, a neighborhood group, Neighbors Inc. (NI), formed to solidify a middle-class urban neighborhood in Washington, D.C., that could offer white home buyers an interracial alternative to the highly publicized and subsidized white suburbs. In the third, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) trained organizers to work with Mexican American citizens in San Antonio to claim participation in governance and then aided the organizing of Anglo citizens willing to join a cross-racial alliance to break up the white monopoly of city government.

The book investigates a spectrum of encounters to examine how white Americans came to understand different instruments of white racial privilege—social distance, segregated housing, and undemocratic definitions of the “public.” In the camps, young people questioned social distance and its implicit ideals of superior white worth. In the neighborhood, adult homeowners refused residential segregation and its ostensible guarantee of real estate security and superior schools. In San Antonio, adult citizens confronted white political dominance and its assumptions of beneficent white competence. In each instance, playing, living, or working across color lines in unprecedented closeness eroded ideas of exclusively white intelligence, material comfort, and political authority, some of what Peggy McIntosh has called the “invisible package of unearned assets” that white Americans take for granted.<sup>10</sup>

These stories also allow consideration of a variety of racial identifications beyond the black and white designations that still limit much writing about race. Though the Washington, D.C., housing market did segregate by black and white, at the summer camps, Asian and Mexican American teens joined white and black peers. In San Antonio, the Anglo demographic minority worried much more about the Mexican American majority’s voting than about the much smaller African American community, whose largest turnout would still have minimal impact.

Finally, the three stories extend the typical chronology for assessing the racial reordering stimulated by the civil rights revolution into the early 1980s. As in many recent histories, I conceive the racial power movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s not as an unfortunate diversion

of civil rights activism, but as an integral unfolding of the civil rights effort. Moreover, since the 1965 Voting Rights Act was extended to protect Mexican Americans in the Southwest only in 1975, civil rights successes for Mexican Americans in the Southwest came later than black civil rights gains in other regions.<sup>11</sup>

### *Brotherhood (and Sisterhood) Camps*

Chapters 1 and 2 tell the story of the National Conference of Christians and Jews' (NCCJ) Brotherhood Camps from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Inspired by Protestant Christian ideals of the equal value of God's children, NCCJ camp leaders put a multiracial and multireligious mix of high school students in an environment that afforded every young person protection and praise. Chapter 1 examines the integration years from the late 1950s to 1967. During this era, the directors and counselors organized daily living to bring young people into friendly association—sharing cabins, meals, intense discussions, dancing, singing, and hand-holding—that defied patterns of racial social distance outside the camps' realm.

Chapter 2 moves to the years from 1968 through the mid-1970s, when African American, Mexican American, American Indian, and various groups of Asian American campers more forcefully asserted the importance of their particular racial histories within the larger American story. Now the camps began each morning with race group meetings, where young people examined the situations of African Americans, Mexican Americans, or Asian Americans before reconvening to present their conclusions to the whole camp.

### *Neighbors Inc.*

Chapters 3 and 4 are about one Washington, D.C., group that countered the residential segregation that institutionalized social distance. In 1958, Neighbors Inc., as a set of white families and black families named their group, vowed to stake out ground that would not succumb to the emerging pattern of residential segregation: white families spreading out to exclusive new suburbs and black families confined in older center cities.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the group advanced a vision of living in a “democratic,” necessarily heterogeneous neighborhood.

Chapter 3 describes the organization's work in the euphoric years between 1958 and 1965, when it saw neighborliness as fulfilling the newly

expressed national commitment to racial desegregation. By choosing integrated housing, the NI white families gave up the white privilege of ignoring the racial inequities created by segregated housing markets; they experienced what could happen in black neighborhoods: city agencies cutting services and public schools declining. NI presumed its families would not sacrifice middle-class benefits and created a family-oriented, politically adept neighborhood to counter the allure of suburban homogeneity.

By 1965, the Neighbors Inc. area had a black majority, raising questions for its white families about what integrated living meant. These families learned about living as a minority, even if they retained some of the privileges of whiteness, especially the option to move out. Chapter 4 focuses on some of the reasons white families stayed and how organizational anchors for some families, white and black, helped them share space and negotiate disagreements—a Conservative Jewish synagogue whose members voted not to leave the city, and nearby Howard University, the premier African American establishment of higher education. Maintaining an interracial neighborhood now required facing some unpleasant, hard issues: first, recruiting white families, who had lots of housing options, and not black families, who had few; and second, moving their children into private schools and abandoning the public schools essential to the well-being of working-class and poor black families.

### *Multiracial Community Organizing*

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the political struggle by Mexican Americans to gain inclusion as full citizens and legitimate participants in the city government of San Antonio, Texas. After World War II, Mexican American and African American political groups tried to crack Anglo political domination, stimulating the local business leadership to reassert its control over city governance.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 5 focuses on the limited interracialism of the city's Roman Catholic diocese during the 1950s and 1960s, when Archbishop Robert Lucey and his young activist white priests advocated for government funds to improve housing, job training, and wages for their poor Mexican American parishioners. Church-supported protests to gain poverty program funds, to register voters, to aid farmworkers through a state minimum wage, and to back labor union organizing of low-wage workers made only minimal gains by the late 1960s. Among the small number of middle-

class Mexican Americans who had seen assimilation as the path to racial equality, white obstinacy turned many toward racial power politics.

Chapter 6 opens with the battle of the local Chicano movement for political power for the Mexican American demographic majority.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1970s the Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), affiliated with Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, presented a new kind of group to assert the interests of its long-ignored constituents—neighborhood and Catholic parish based, Mexican American identified, and bilingual, with strong women's leadership. The Metropolitan Congregational Alliance, a group of predominantly Anglo church congregations, collaborated with COPS to put human development on the city's agenda. Anglos who participated in an interracial political alliance learned to argue and work in appreciative relationships to build a coalition that made clear that public goods were an interracial goal.<sup>15</sup>

## Emotional Learning

Each of the book's three stories has a foundation in the usual historical sources of organizational archives, newspaper reports, public documents, and related scholarship. These, however, often provide little information about processes of personal change, the shifts in feeling and emotion that encourage a person to risk new relationships and behaviors. To investigate how some white Americans put themselves in new situations that might reveal white privilege and provoke new responses, I relied heavily on oral interviews. Each of the almost one hundred interviews asked for a racial autobiography: where the person grew up; what family, teachers, neighbors, ministers, priests, or rabbis told him or her about race; when she or he first became aware of racial inequality; how she or he began to unlearn old, and to formulate new, understandings of race; how the camp, neighborhood, or political work affected perceptions of racial difference; what new behaviors followed; and how she or he thought about race today, at the turn of the twenty-first century. The questions probed differences among girls' expectations of boys, and women's of men, in terms of friendships, family roles, community responsibility, and leadership. Women's and men's changing racial behaviors were simultaneously upsetting gender norms, and these witnesses reflected on how interracial choices changed them and their environments.

Although the book focuses on the hard work required of white Ameri-



cans to give up white racial benefits, it also significantly depends on interviews with nonwhite campmates and camp leaders, neighbors, and political organizers. I used a similar protocol with these witnesses and found, of course, a very different set of racial autobiographies than those recounted by their white peers. Their stories gave me a good idea of what my white witnesses had heard when they put themselves into an interracial location. They also gave me new respect for the complex experiences of race in the United States—the rich specifics of Mexican American history, the profound depth and variety of African American presence, the American-enforced unity on diverse Asian immigrations, and the mix of many of these groups and of white Americans, too, in the neighborhoods of post-war cities on the eve of white flight. Multiracial urban life in the 1940s and 1950s offered an alternative to integration driven by a singular white norm, though it was an option more often recognized by nonwhite than by white Americans.

I located the first participants through fortuitous meetings, then asked for names and contacts for others they had known—at camps, in Neighbors Inc., and among San Antonio's rare interracial alliances. Starting with this snowball sample, I sought out people who emerged as centrally memorable or institutionally significant: NCCJ camp directors, for instance; Neighbors Inc., officers or oft-mentioned volunteers; Catholic Anglo priests identified with interracial projects and Anglo leaders in the COPS/Metro organization.

Since my primary goal is to tell not the institutional histories of these organizations but the stories of how the organizations enabled new moments of confrontation, caring, and change, I did not seek a random sample of participants. Rather, I examine processes of how some white Americans put themselves into new associations, developed new relationships, and underwent intellectual and emotional shifts.<sup>16</sup> Since each experience was unique, these descriptions might be infinite. Certainly, each person I talked with remains a distinct voice and character for me. But each person also came into the interracial setting with expectations and ideas developed from within a shared national history and culture. Following the lead of sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, I have analyzed a set of racial autobiographies "to map out and situate in sociocultural terms some patterns in . . . which whiteness [was] lived" and revised in the civil rights era; to explore sources of white people's aspirations for freer connections with nonwhites; and to identify the helps and hindrances to racially egalitarian relationships.<sup>17</sup>

## Whiteness

Unlike studies of race relations, which ask how white people changed their attitudes toward black people, Mexican people, or others perceived as not white while assuming that “white” remains unchanged, this book argues that civil rights inspired some white Americans to become new kinds of white people. I rely on the insights of the massive scholarship on the social construction of race produced during the past two decades. In this view, race is a system of categorizing humans and awarding resources accordingly. Race is not something a person has, in a biological sense; rather, race is a social location that a person inhabits as a consequence of the place assigned to a person’s birth family, skin color, or both. To make the relations of racial groups different, in this view, requires changing the systems that define racial groups as mutually exclusive, incommensurable entities and that allot and determine racial identities.

A significant element of the new racial scholarship has been devoted to investigating how white became the privileged race, holding cultural, economic, political, and social supremacy during the past five centuries or so. By the mid-twentieth century population geneticists and cultural anthropologists had concluded that race was neither genetically based nor culturally determined. Europeans, some scholars argued, had formulated the categories of African, Asian, Indian, and mestizo in order to justify white colonial and imperial authority by the presumed Asian deviance, African laziness, indigenous backwardness, and mestizo ineffectualness in contrast to European intelligence.<sup>18</sup> Instead of the social positions of various races being naturally derived, humans have constructed them through the application of substantial resources to create a rich cultural fabric of stories and pictures of racial differences and to enforce laws and social regulations that keep doubters in their assigned places.

To indicate the actions required to make race, many scholars use the neologism “racialize” to indicate that active choices (or benign inaction) make race. Philosopher K. Anthony Appiah defines “racializing” as an ongoing historical process that divided humanity “into a small number of groups, called ‘races,’ in such a way that members of these groups shared fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout this book, the term “racialize” indicates any behavior intended to define human groups as basically bounded and unlike in some significant elements. Racializing, then, is not the same as what

is usually called exhibiting racism—hostility to another group. It is both subtler and harsher. A racist may claim to value all racial groups equally and at the same time hold a person of a different race to be absolutely unlike himself, which precludes empathy and a shared hold on humanity.

Some scholars and activists object to the idea of social construction as implying that if race is created, then it's not real and so its consequences are minimal. Cultural studies thinkers, such as Stuart Hall, have responded that just because something is a cultural creation and constituted through language, historical images, and cultural definitions doesn't mean that it doesn't also have "real" social, economic, and political conditions of existence and "real" material and symbolic effects."<sup>20</sup> Philosopher Judith Butler adds that just because race is constructed does not mean that "it is artificial." Especially for groups fighting against the fictions of white superiority and seeking political mass, "it is a mobilizing fiction" for unified assertion.<sup>21</sup>

By the mid-1970s, feminist theorists applied a social construction approach to gender and posited that reproductive organs, like skin color, had been used to categorize fundamentally similar humans as having mutually exclusive natures (popularly expressed by the concept of "the opposite sex").<sup>22</sup> Feminists of color then pointed out that a combination of race and gender had programmed quite different lives across the panoply of racialized women.<sup>23</sup> Divisions into female and male tracked across racial distinctions and determined appropriate roles and relationships, within any racial group and across racial groups. Like those of race, the constructions of gender historically worked to create and to rationalize systems of male power and authority, proliferated through the hierarchies of race. Humanly designed and enforced systems racialized and gendered people simultaneously and did so in similar relational ways. If one was male, one could not be female; if one was white or Anglo, one could not be black or Mexican American.

One example reveals the relational quality of gendered racializing as I experienced it in 1950s Texas. As a youngster, I visited my aunt and uncle in the Rio Grande Valley and loved Maria, the young woman who cooked and cleaned for my relatives, and from the evidence of an old photo, hugged and fussed over me. Maria was a Mexican national who crossed the border illegally (without the requisite visa) to earn money to care for her children, lived in my aunt's garage during the week, and snuck across the border on weekends to see her family. As a child, I considered my aunt

kind and generous for fixing up the garage bedroom and my uncle clever for helping Maria come and go in defiance of the border patrol.

Only while doing the research for this book did I learn how U.S. immigration law had been designed to control Mexican labor for the benefit of U.S. employers. In the early twentieth century, when U.S. agriculture needed a pliable labor force, the United States began requiring visas for the movement of workers across the southern border. The federal government issued hundreds of thousands of visas to low-wage Mexican workers, and it also ignored thousands more workers who crossed the border without papers, leaving them legally unprotected and easy for U.S. employers to hire or fire. This immigrant workforce displaced long-settled Mexican American families as workers and encouraged a “migratory agricultural workforce” that historian Mae Ngai calls “the central element in the . . . process of modern Mexican racial formation in the United States.”<sup>24</sup> This system of border regulation produced racialized/gendered persons. It enabled my uncle to show off a white man’s earning power. It allowed my aunt to employ Maria for basic housework and at the same time appear benevolent for paying her wages she could not earn in Mexico. And it required Maria to fulfill the stereotype of a Mexican domestic in the United States: one who accepts a domestic’s job, stifles her anger at the border guards and her employers, and leaves her own children behind in Reynosa—proof that she was a less civilized woman than my aunt—in order to earn money to feed them.

Disrupting the social divisions of race upset gender norms and vice-versa. White girls had been trained to accept white women’s responsibility to maintain the social distance that prevented casual cross-race friendship from leading to race mixing and miscegenation. White boys had been taught to be protectors of females, though usually only of *white* girls. In the utopian setting of NCCJ camps, young people experienced the excitement of pursuing newly allowed adolescent curiosity, competition, and affection, even as they negotiated sexual attractions in the shadow of longtime racial divides that had protected white women’s purity through threats of violence to nonwhite men and debasement of nonwhite women. In the Cold War setting of the 1950s and 1960s, white women’s domesticity in new suburbs, supported by white men’s hard and disciplined work, epitomized U.S. prosperity and freedom. When white husbands and wives chose instead to live in cities, they transformed the white family from one with rigid gender roles into one closer in character to the black and inter-

racial families they found as allies: wives who contributed to the family income and shared adult responsibilities for the whole community's well-being.

The white priests and nuns who applied Roman Catholic concern to public issues in San Antonio and the white women and men who joined Metro Alliance upset different kinds of racialized gender. Priests moved from paternal protectiveness to assisting organizers, and nuns asserted interest in social injustice as well as social work. The white men who joined Metro Alliance gave up reliance on their professional authority, and the white women, on their civic expertise; each group learned about realities of power that had been invisible in the cocoon of white, middle-class comfort.

To be a different sort of white person inevitably required being a different kind of man or woman. In the last two decades, scholars in the field of whiteness studies have written rich explanations of how white Europeans and their offspring came to dominate the rest of the world and to perpetuate institutions that sustained white power in a postcolonial era.<sup>25</sup> This scholarship equates whiteness with dominance and oppression. A question for this book was how to conceive a white person's ability to transform herself as a means to transform the institutions of whiteness. What could a white person do to rectify an inheritance of privilege and dominance and to reduce its ongoing consequences? Was the solution to abolish whiteness, as the nation abolished slavery?<sup>26</sup> How could a white person appreciate her ancestors and celebrate her childhood, yet not perpetuate many of the historical stories, cultural images, and social advantages that came along with that history and location?

The stories in this book show white people who entered new interracial relationships based on mutual respect and care, daily neighborliness, and constructive bargaining in scenarios that revealed new possibilities for white existence. These race-mixing communities upset the expected patterns of everyday life where, historian Thomas C. Holt argues, "racist ideas and practices are naturalized, made self-evident, and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge."<sup>27</sup> Only as they interacted in new ways with African Americans, Mexican Americans, Filipinos, and Asian Americans could they enact different relationships of race that undermined and negated white as authoritative and dominant.

Even with good intentions, however, many found it difficult to give up the unreflective benefits and comfort of whiteness. One of the most insidious elements of post-civil rights whiteness was its assumption of white in-

nocence. If a particular white person did not behave in overtly hostile, violent, derogatory ways toward nonwhites, then he could assume the mantle of nonracism, affecting friendly impartiality while evading any recognition of or responsibility for the persistence of white advantage. Some manifested innocence by moving to middle-class suburbs and embracing an ideology of class segregation that disguised inherent racial inequality, as Matthew Lassiter describes.<sup>28</sup> Others, even so bold an antiracist as writer Wendell Berry, might apologize for past racism even while overlooking its persistent effects—a hazard, theorist Debián Marty argues, of seeing ourselves according to “our antiracist ideals” and not “as others know us.” Her remedy—“caring about our interracial relationships more than we care for our antiracist self-image”—became a possibility in the three communities in this book, but it was not always and never easily achieved.<sup>29</sup>

## Inspiration for Change

What ideas inspired white people to cross old lines? What institutions supported them as they put themselves into places to develop new relationships? The left-liberal tradition in U.S. culture and politics sees positive social gains as resulting from conflict between the powerless and the powerful. Social change occurs through contests with winners and losers, hard power struggles, and so scholars search for the roots of anger. Processes of changing hearts, by contrast, look soft, defy easy measurement, and sound sappy. This book presumes, by contrast with the conflict model, that cultivating new kinds of relationships can transform people and the way they live everyday forms of race and gender sufficiently to bring substantial change. To move from existences firmly defined by the gendered, racialized practices of the past and the comfortable habits of privilege required what theorist Avery Gordon calls “utopian” inspiration: not an “ideal future world,” but a new “standpoint for comprehending and living in the here and now.”<sup>30</sup> For many of my witnesses, the motivation to take risks came out of the three predominant U.S. faiths—Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholic Christianity, and the Conservative and Reform branches of American Judaism—and from a secular-based professional rethinking of approaches to building better human relations.

For religious groups and for the visionaries who changed older ideas of human relations into the new field of group dynamics, empowerment was a liberatory process of coming into a fuller expression of being, stretching

out of old roles, and living in relationships without either fearfully holding onto dominance or resentfully abasing oneself. Religious groups invoked God, while human relations professionals did not, but both emphasized social change as a process of developing into the mutual care and reconciliation that provided security and freedom for each person's full human expression. Conflict was inevitable as people argued through diverse interests, but it was enfolded by a commitment to existing within a mutually respectful relationship.

The professional study of group processes and the development of the field of human relations in the immediate postwar era owed much to German émigré psychologist Kurt Lewin, who arrived in the United States in 1934 fleeing Nazi hostility. Lewin and others theorized about the effects on human feeling and relationships of consciously organizing central social groups—families, classrooms, schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods—in democratic patterns.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps because of Lewin's untimely death in 1947, or perhaps because of the difficulties historians face in documenting the evanescent human interactions of groups, the phenomenon of training in group dynamics has rarely been linked with civil rights activities.

Historians have certainly credited religion as a central element in black civil rights struggles.<sup>32</sup> Fewer studies have focused on religion's role in challenging and encouraging white Americans to seek new kinds of racial existence, perhaps because many of the most prominent whites in the movement came out of secular, though Jewish-identified, left-liberal politics. Religious Judaism and Roman Catholic social justice impulses have often been overlooked, and Roman Catholicism has been implicated in white opposition to civil rights, as upwardly mobile communities of Italian and Polish Catholics opposed residential integration.<sup>33</sup> Despite its early twentieth-century social gospel imperative to reform the world, white Protestant Christianity split on the issue of supporting civil rights. Studies of white Protestantism's institutional support of civil rights focus on national federations, such as the National Council of Churches or the Christian Student Movement, and not on the kinds of congregation-level, neighborhood commitments that black Protestant churches nurtured.<sup>34</sup>

My interviews reveal that convictions of human connectedness, taught by local ministers and rabbis in a variety of community-based institutions, inspired a sense of possibility and responsibility and, at the same time, provided communal support for risk taking. Similar to the white people whose Protestant and Jewish faith carried them into civil rights activism, many of the white people in this book, including Roman Catholics,

attribute their impetus to seek out interracial relationships to religious teachings, often learned when they were young.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, white suburban churches that backed civil rights lost members by the tens of thousands to evangelical churches that valued personal piety over social activism.

Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, the quasi-official religious affiliations of the postwar United States, drew on different traditions and different positions in U.S. society. Mainstream white Christian churches, with very few exceptions, had refused nonwhite members into the 1930s. By the late 1940s, however, worldwide protest against Christian involvement with colonialism and local demands for desegregation of all-white urban congregations forced U.S. Christians to confront the hypocrisy of preaching brotherhood while practicing racial separation. Although segregation seemed more understandable in a faith grounded in ancestry and not conversion, Jewish congregations still had to decide what position to take in a civil rights struggle against racist social injustice.

Among white Protestants who responded to the civil rights challenge, the predominant vision was an expansive beloved community of love and justice uniting all peoples. In theological and practical terms, Protestants interpreted “beloved community” in two distinct ways. For those schooled in a nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism bent on the inevitable improvement of the world, ending racial segregation and injustice was a significant natural step to human perfectibility and progress. In the more pessimistic strain of Protestantism that continued to stress human sinfulness, though often modernized or intellectualized as alienation from God’s purpose for human community, civil rights challenged believers to struggle but to prepare to receive a divine gift of human reconciliation across the rift of racism.<sup>36</sup> Held within the magnetic field of these powerful impulses for racial change, Protestant ministers and staff leading the National Conference of Christians and Jews, ministers in Washington, D.C., and advocates for Metro Alliance in San Antonio had an image of a just world—integrated and just—that they could, and should, help bring into being.

Roman Catholicism had no similar traditions of perfectionism or of individual salvation. By the 1950s, however, an American Catholicism that had primarily served the needs of blue-collar immigrants began to feel the effects of its parishioners’ upward mobility and of the Church’s rapidly evolving human rights orientation. The Church had earlier advocated some social interventions, beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s 1893 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, which approved labor union organizing to balance the