Covert Racism, subtle in application, often appears hidden beneath/by norms of association, affiliation, group membership and/or identity. As such, covert racism is often excused or confused with mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, ritual and ceremony, acceptance and rejection. Covert racism operates as a boundary keeping mechanism whose primary purpose is to maintain social distance between racial elite and racial non-elite. Such boundary mechanisms work best when they are assumed natural, legitimate, and normal. These boundary mechanisms are typically taught sub-consciously or even unconsciously as part of the dominant socialization processes operant within society/institutions and/or social groups. Consequently, covert racism often undetected, is often inherently inculcated with each generation of new members of any given social situation. The process, operating within both racial elite and non-elite groups, represents a kind of closed feedback loop.

At the heart of covert racism one finds a deliberate policy of denial, omission, and obfuscation of black, brown, red, tan and yellow issues/persons/groups. In this pseudo-color blind universe, race appears nullified under the veneer of ‘benign neglect’. Thus, ‘anything but race’ becomes the clarion call to justify differences in outcomes as ‘race declines’ in significance. And when this does not work, then we simply define race out of existence, make it seemingly insignificant as in ‘the social construction of race’, or reduce its’ effect as in the ‘culture of poverty’, or ‘cultural competency’.

In terms of action, covert racism may actually masquerade as racial liberalism, by misdirecting attention to the symbols of racism, but avoiding the structures of such. Thus, there may be obtained a strong call for the abolition of the N word, or allowing a Marian Anderson to sing on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, but no support for abolishing racially exclusionary tests/clubs or removing the barriers to a Marian Anderson to obtain a degree.
Dyson (2006) recently has observed:

…it should also be clear that although one may not have racial intent, one's actions may nonetheless have racial consequences,…Active malice and passive indifference are but flip sides of the same racial coin, different modalities of racial menace that flare according to the contexts and purposes at hand…In a sense, if one conceives of racism as a cell phone, the active malice is the ring tone at its highest volume, while passive indifference is the ring tone on vibrate. In either case, whether loudly or silently, the consequence is the same: a call is transmitted, a racial meaning is communicated. (pp. 20–21)

I am also reminded of Charles Mills’ observations:

…the requirements of ‘objective’ cognition, factual and moral, in a racial polity are in a sense more demanding in that officially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality…one has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to see the world wrongly, BUT with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by White epistemic authority…Thus, in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and social functional), producing the ironic outcome that Whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made… (1997: p. 18)

It would seem that we could specify a typology which would capture some of the dimensions of covert racism. At the very least, it would appear that covert racism can operate at both the individual and the group level, and given these levels we could further specify that it can be both formal and informal. Now while these can be grouped categorically as types, it should be understood that they reflect more of a continuum. Thus, we would suggest that a particular covert act is more or less at the individual or group level, and it is more or less formal or informal. To the extent that covert racial acts are repeated over an extended time, then we can speak of specific patterns. The patterning of covert racial acts, finally, suggests the operation of not only intentionality, but also norms, mechanisms, and at the most developed stage – institutions, structures, and systems. By implication, covert racism is both historically and societally specific. Systemically, for example, covert racism operates across several societal institutions, structures. Given this, a provisional typology for covert racism may be represented as: