



## Race and Racism: A Symposium

Tricia Rose; Andrew Ross; Robin D. G. Kelley; Joe Wood; Howard Winant; Jacquie Jones; Michael Eric Dyson; Phillip Brian Harper; Steven Gregory; Grant Farred; Gina Dent; David Roediger; Amiri Baraka; Stanley Aronowitz; Lewis R. Gordon; Kevin Gaines

*Social Text*, No. 42. (Spring, 1995), pp. 1-52.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0164-2472%28199521%290%3A42%3C1%3ARARAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

*Social Text* is currently published by Duke University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/duke.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

#### Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross: Introduction

Discussions of race and expressions of racism seem to be perpetual constituents of public opinion. Ever mutating into new forms, some modern, some regressive, they register a steady high on the scale of political significance. In the wake of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, highly public race talk no longer appeals to the concept of a politically homogeneous black community, and yet monolithic representations continue to fuel pathology-based attacks on African Americans. Given these new and uneven modes of racial address and response, it is unclear what will emerge from the much heralded postnationalist phase of race talk. In the current climate, what is the state of critical attention to these matters? We decided to attempt a review by asking some of the most active voices in the field to respond to the following questions:

(1) Despite the extensive intermingling of U.S. cultural groups, group identities continue to be narrowly racialized to the point where the dominant public image of an America divided into two nations—black and white—bears little relation to the actual experience of social and cultural life in this country for all groups. What, in your mind, are the primary reasons for this disparity, and the primary obstacles created by it?

(2) One of the reasons that race matters is that racism endures. Do you believe that modern appeals to *cultural* differences have helped to launch a new career for racism (i.e., a new kind of warning against the mixing of incompatible cultures, which Etienne Balibar has described as neo-racism) that is more flexible and resilient than older appeals to biological mythologies?

(3) Describe, in less than two hundred words, (i.e., by anecdote, pithy example, or brief sketch) a society in which race does *not* matter.

(4) Despite the recent history of attention to gender and sexual preference, discussions of race, ranging from black leadership to black popular culture, appear to be as heavily focused on heterosexual male contributions as ever. Do you agree? If you do, and assuming therefore that ordinary measures have failed, what *extraordinary* steps/arguments are required to remedy this situation?

Efforts to  
systematically  
ghettoize and  
exterminate Jews  
can be traced to  
Christianity itself,  
the same  
ideology that  
both suppressed  
early modern  
science (the site  
for future  
developments  
in racisms) and  
supported the  
antiracist  
arguments of  
twentieth-century  
Civil Rights  
activists.

A world where race doesn't matter? Why should this be a difficult thing to imagine? After all, didn't Franz Boas and others prove that race is just a myth? Besides, how many times have we seen members of studio audiences on TV talk shows preface remarks with "people are just people, be they black, white, green, or purple"? In the "real world" race doesn't matter. . . .

Yeah, right! We all know the reality. No one would feel the need to announce their race blindness if it didn't matter. Proof is all around us, in dramatic acts of violence, in presumably color-blind debates over social policy, in the work we do as educators, in the personals section of the *Village Voice*, even in the daily chatter of three-year-olds. As a historian, however, I can only imagine a different future by locating a different past when race did not matter.

In my ancestral West, what we now know as Europe, such a world has yet to be discovered. "Race" always lurked in the background. In ancient times, before race was a biological concept, skin color and physical variety mattered in terms of establishing hierarchies of civilization and explaining social differences. The Greeks, for example, not only defined their own cultural superiority against the Persians' supposed "barbarism," but only allowed property-owning adult Greek males the right to citizenship. Besides, we can't forget that Aristotle, as well as his predecessors and contemporaries (e.g., Pericles), argued quite forcefully that women and slaves were by nature unqualified to be human.

But the lesson here is not simply "race always mattered." Rather, it mattered differently in different times under different circumstances. The Enlightenment brought forth a profound shift in the meaning of race and the emergence of a distinctly modern (if I may use that term) racist culture. We know this from reading George Mosse and David Theo Goldberg, among others. We also know that before science buttressed the ideology of race, Christians were waging a *race* war on the Jews. Efforts to systematically ghettoize and exterminate Jews can be traced to Christianity itself, the same ideology that both suppressed early modern science (the site for future developments in racisms) and supported the antiracist arguments of twentieth-century Civil Rights activists. Global expansion and conquest, the slave trade, the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of "freedom" as an inalienable right also altered the specific ways in which race mattered.

What about my ancestral Africa, especially back in the days before it got its name? Did racism begin to "matter" with the coming of Europeans or dare I say the coming of the Arabs? Are there words that translate in precolonial African languages equivalent to "race"? What about my ancestral America, the place Columbus and his conquistadors called *the*

*Indies?* These people did not practice race or racism in the modern sense, but then again neither did the Europeans at all times in all places. Yet, many of these societies had quite familiar systems of domination and exploitation based on difference, either as victims or perpetrators. Difference—whether of sex, skin color, ethnic or clan designation, or class—served as a powerful justification for domination and conquest. And even if colonialism exacerbated conflicts and created new ones, the situation in Rwanda proves how devastating power struggles clothed in ethnic, cultural, or physical differences can be. The violence there is driven not by Christianity, science, or, contrary to popular belief, tribalism in the strict sense of the word. Perhaps it is a kind of nationalism rooted in ethnic distinctions and grafted onto class conflicts and struggles over patronage. Perhaps. What makes this a particularly poignant and troubling case, however, is the role of the state in orchestrating murder on a massive scale, and the role of technology in making it more efficient. It is what distinguishes Nazism from all previous acts of genocide against Jews. That's progress, Adorno style; not barbarism to civilization but the slingshot to the atomic bomb.

Rwanda has nothing to do with race, so I'm told. Discrimination against Koreans in Japan has nothing to do with race, so I'm told. The very long struggle of the Irish in Great Britain is not about race, so I'm told. Maybe. But when is racism ever about race, pure and simple; when is religious persecution ever simply about religion; when is patriotism ever about defending the nation-state; when is misogyny nothing more than an uncontrollable and inexplicable hatred of women; when is tribalism ever merely one tribe fighting another tribe because, well, they're another tribe?

The question, therefore, is not whether race matters but how it matters. How does it shape, sustain, and define systems of domination? How has it functioned in different times and places? How does it operate within different configurations of power and intellectual traditions? To imagine a world where race disappears is impossible. My four-year-old daughter has thoroughly convinced me that a color *blind* society we'll never be. Even if the world acknowledges race as the biggest hoax of the past millennia, it will still matter.

What I can imagine, however, is a world where *racism* doesn't exist. Not so much a "withering away" of racism, but a world where the state's role is to stamp out racism rather than perpetuate it. A world where the victims of racism not only obtain equal opportunities but are forcefully promoted to make up for past discriminations. A world where terms like "minority" are abolished so that we may see more clearly the overlapping and complicated nature of historic forms of domination and exploitation—by gender, by class, by age, by sexual preference, and so on. Unless these and other forms of oppression are fought as vigorously as racism, this imaginary world could not exist for more than a few weeks.

To some people this may sound like empty sloganeering. But given the incredibly limited vision of liberal and Afrocentric challenges to racism, it is imperative that we view the beast as part of a larger, complex system of domination and exploitation. The dominant narrative in antiracist discourse, for example, constructs heterosexual black men as endangered species. I certainly do not want to minimize the dire circumstances of black men, especially poor and working-class youth, but I do concur with the fourth question that the current discourse has rendered black women and gay black men invisible or less important (not to mention the obvious limits of biracialism). Of course, this isn't new; one finds the same tendencies in the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century and in the Black Power movement of the twentieth. But instead of discussing the many sources for persistence of a heterosexual, male-centered antiracism, I would like to use the remaining space to suggest just a couple of "extraordinary steps" that might broaden the national discussion beyond the plight of young black males:

1. Black women, along with gay black men, need to be added to the "endangered species list." Their plight—as victims of violence, incarceration, AIDS and other terminal diseases, and so on—needs to be publicized dramatically. Perhaps by adopting tactics like those of the "Guerilla Girls" (an anonymous group of women artists who expose sexism and racism in the art world by illegally pasting informational stickers and posters in public places), women and men can dramatize the fact that there are other endangered species in the African American community: black women, gays and lesbians, and the elderly.

2. If we are to successfully expand the "endangered species" list, we need to redefine what we mean by violence, generally, and racist violence in particular. We need a definition of violence that would not treat gay bashing, domestic violence, and rape separately from racist violence. Even when the assailants are black themselves, we must expose how racial biases in the criminal justice system and inequities in programs available for black battery and rape victims are not only manifestations of a racist culture but help perpetuate violence against women, children, and gay men.

At the very least, we must acknowledge the fact that black women and gay black men are also victims of state-sanctioned violence. In spite of the focus on black males as the victims of state violence, we cannot forget that over the past decade some of the most significant cases of police homicides or beatings have involved women: Eula Love, Eleanor Bumpurs, and Joanne Little. We must also understand that the particular modalities of violence are shaped by gender and sexuality. Whether it is sexual assault or gay bashing on the part of a police officer fighting his own homoerotic desire, state-sanctioned violence is never a uniform response

to a generic black body. Indeed, such an approach should make clear that violence directed at heterosexual boys and young men is also gendered.

Race certainly matters, but its particular meaning becomes less comprehensible once we isolate race from gender, class, sexuality, age, time, space, and place. Unless we understand this larger picture in all its historical complexity and specificity, we can never hope to build a world without racism. It would be akin to trying to kill a tree by cutting the branches. And, as Marx once wrote, to be truly radical is to go to the roots.

**Joe Wood**

Dear S:

I know I didn't answer your question last night; I blame my fingernails. I had just lifted my hand to your lips—an attempt to silence you, no doubt—when I saw how dirty they were. I turned my hand with the quickness, and curled the fingers close to the dry pink of my palms. I used my thumbs to close your eyes, then I raked back your thick black bangs; and as my fingers slipped like cats to the safety of your hair, you opened your eyes and asked me whether I saw a fetish.

My answer was a question, which I didn't ask out loud—had you noticed the dirt? The moment *I* did I thought of my fifth-grade friend Randall. He was the fat kid in our class, a joker, and filthy. His mother was a hippy model. She was too groovy to like bathwater—every time I see dirty fingernails, even on my own hands, I see Randall and his gray skin. Of course he was white. His hair was blonde and perfectly untouched by comb or brush and it fell past his shoulders and eyes. Once there was a lice scare and we all blamed him. Randall left early that day. At home my mother washed me and laughed about their stringy locks: Bugs, she said, love *them*.

On the second or third day of sixth grade Randall and I had a fight, and I never spoke to him again. We boys had been trying to get a game of ball going—certainly intended to play, but an argument started over who was going to be on which side; somehow things escalated and Randall and I ended up scraping. When the teacher separated us she checked my fingernails and not his. Even now somewhere deep in my heart I can locate the black boy she inspected: he still is very mad. It is not an exaggeration to say that he has blood in his eyes and a knife in his hand and he would slash that white woman today in a second: he is a familiar cliché. I never told Mom what the teacher did because I suspected that telling her would somehow take my life from my hands. I was too young to realize that silence is not a very good way of keeping things to yourself.

“Are you one of those people who like Indians?” you insisted.

Race certainly  
matters, but its  
particular mean-  
ing becomes less  
comprehensible  
once we isolate  
race from gender,  
class, sexuality,  
age, time, space,  
and place.

My fingernails—they were very dirty I think because I had been reading newsprint all day: the *New York Times* is a messy publication. To be perfectly honest, I think that some of my own skin might also have been under there: some dandruff or the loose dermis of an itchy extremity. Plus, you know how sloppy an eater I am—maybe some of my lunch was lodged there, too, along with the detritus ordinary to a day in New York: transit dirt, sweat collected from strange knobs, stains from a thousand forgotten collisions.

This description is as close to scientific fact as my memory will permit. I don't think I was carrying any disease—it was innocent dirt, and besides, I touched your eyelids and not your mouth. There was no danger of infection. But the truth is, the possibility never really entered my mind. I didn't calculate *that*, you see—the main reason I didn't touch your mouth is that your mouth is located underneath your eyes, and I was worried about what you would see.

Please remember the reason I stopped talking to Randall. Frozen in that mundane and dirty moment are three paradigms, or two, really—the teacher simply serves the white boy. The first one is the white boy with his perfectly harmless dirt, the second is the dirty black boy—it is the Black and the White. Which side of the story, I wondered, would S use to see me? Obviously, there are many other paradigms imaginable: there is, for example, the secretary named Benjamin whose fingers are dirty from reading the *New York Times*. Yet I sometimes find it difficult to see this man, myself, when I *myself* look at my own dirty fingernails. It isn't any wonder that I would worry whether you could, too.

But none of this answers your questions.

“Have you ever fucked an Indian?” you added, and now you wanted an answer. You knit your brows; you drew your lips straight—a horizontal streak of burgundy across a plane of brown as rich as my own skin. Your black eyes stuck out like fountain pens, S: you wrote a contract with them, asked me to sign *Yes* or *No*. My answer would determine the agreement, the concord, the bond . . . only *Yes* or *No* would not suffice. What should my sexual history prove to you, either way? I could be an Asianophile whether I have fucked fifty Indians or one. Your second question was more to the point—*are you one of those people?*—but even that was euphemistic. The real question was your first: *do I satisfy a fetish?*

I suppose I shouldn't delay any longer. The answer is No, certainly, but there is more to it—there is that small person deep in my heart with blood in his eyes. Let me give him a name: the Native. I have described him already as a stock character, a cliché, but I haven't explained why. He is the template handed to people born as I was, a black boy, and so he is called our realness. He is also America's realness. The Native fills a con-

spicuously American need for an angry voice in the basement; he reminds people that the American dream could be much farther away, that things could be much worse. Fellow citizens like that teacher-inspector have tried all my life to make me be him—how lucky I am to be a black boy! I am able to consult my own personal Native at any hour to determine the relative realness of any individual I encounter, especially the people I sleep with. The Native enjoys his authority; he loves to inspect fingernails. He even inspected yours.

I will remind you now that an erection is a very complicated thing, and that the cock responds not only to smells and shapes and touches but to the idea of these things, and their sources. I don't think that I can separate the idea of your thick black bangs, for example, from your being Indian, really, because your hair is an Indian's hair, and because your head is an Indian's head. Of course, this *Indian* probably contains some errant meanings that would be very embarrassing to admit. Mostly, I think they can be summed up in one word: immigrant. The Native has a problem with such people—he always wants to ask which side they are on: American reality or dream, slave or citizen, black or white. How do you read, he asks, the dirt in my fingernails—or the dirt in your own?

No, S, I do not fetishize you—my problem is that I want to place you and can't. I am not alone in this—much of America reads its arriving cultures this way, tries to fit them in either of the categories. Let me tell you something—when I looked down at *your* hands I saw dirt under one of your nails and I began to wonder what other positions, models, paradigms besides *fetish* or *black* or *white* you kept in your memory. I stayed quiet. Perhaps you contain a brand new language, and perhaps it will shatter the old ways of thinking—I brought your fingers to my mouth and caressed them with my tongue and I tasted nothing more exotic than salt and your skin and I remembered S, your humanity, and I trusted you, then.

### **Howard Winant**

Race remains a mysterious phenomenon, despite all the attention paid to it. Most work on race been based on relatively simple notions of racial identity, which view the meaning of race as in some sense obvious or natural (or at best, naturalized over historical time). In social science, racial categories are often treated as facts for the purpose of measurement (i.e., of segregation or stratification). Although racial identity is sometimes seen in more complex terms in the humanistic disciplines, it is still thought largely to correspond to highly problematic concepts of “difference.” In

the political realm, a wide variety of conflicts are framed on the basis of these supposedly obvious distinctions: from battles over inequality and migration to, in extreme instances, civil war and genocide.

At the experiential level, our concepts of race are equally inadequate. Our ideas about race clash continually with our personal experience, in which we must continually manage and overcome stereotypes of all sorts. Yet somehow this does not significantly undermine the salience of racial signifiers in everyday life.

What is peculiar in all this is not merely the construction and reconstruction of ideas about race and racial identity, which I have discussed at length elsewhere. Rather, it is the *persistence and depth* of racial categorization and racialized perception of self and society—a phenomenon that mere recognition of constructedness does not explain. Questions persist as to why society can remain so intensely racialized, and why racial identity is a determinant, not only of life-chances, but also of our concept of the self:

Why does race operate for those who are identified as racially “Other” as a master construct overriding (or threatening to override) alternative dimensions of identity? Indeed, to what extent is race “embodied” at all, that is, attached—however arbitrarily—to an indelible mark on the body, as opposed to being a set of roles or performative rules regarding language, action, sociocultural location, relation to power, and so on, which one enacts and by which one is therefore identified in racial terms?

How does racial “marking” vary by category, such that “blackness” is perhaps the most marked and “whiteness” the least, while intermediate varieties of racial identity (“brownness,” “yellowness”) occupy corresponding positions on the continuum? And how is this dynamic affected by such matters as the historical fate of nations?

How is the logic of race mapped onto the frequently overlapping codings assigned to economic status (or class) and to gender? Can we look to “material interest,” as many economists and rational choice theorists of all sorts have claimed, in order to understand the salience of race?

Why is it that, despite the wide variations in racial dynamics occurring across cultural, national, and geographic lines (comparing, for example, Brazilian racial categories with North American ones), these variations all seem to fall within a general pattern that problematizes “darkness,” the non-European, the “native,” and that normalizes “lightness,” the European, the “settler”?

Up to now, responding to such questions has necessarily required us to adopt one of two alternative explanatory strategies, which I am going to label, however inadequately, *historicist* and *interactive*. Though not fully incompatible, these two approaches rely on radically different logics in their efforts to explain the enduring significance of race.

From the historicist point of view, race is a kind of millennial accident, the outcome of a convergence of world-shaking events and proto-racial ideologies and experiences, which developed an elective affinity around half a millennium ago and “jes grew” from there. The dawning of a European seaborne empire and the conquest of the Americas, the Inquisition, the “turning of Africa into a warren for the hunting of black-skins,” and the previous availability of Jews and Muslims as problematic Others all played a part in launching or crystallizing racial (and racist) logics in more or less modern form. Subsequently, racial formation has been a series of conflict-driven modifications and adaptations of this scheme. I have written elsewhere of this account of the “big bang theory of race.”

From the interactive point of view, race is an artifact of culture, an effect of micro-level social structures which naturalize perceptions about human identity, and linguistic representations of these perceptions, in such a way that they are mutually confirmed and situated, and all other possibilities are excluded. Thus categorization and interpretation of the social is comprehensively colored, so to speak, by the rules which seamlessly (well, almost seamlessly) shape both institutions and experience, such that not only how people look but also how they act constantly reproduces and validates racial logics as “common sense.” This account has been developed, not only under the auspices of poststructuralist thought, but also by such sociological approaches as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

If these two broad explanatory frameworks define the parameters of racial theory, then several important generalizations can be made about where we are in rethinking matters as the century draws to its ignominious close. First, neither of these views offers the slightest possibility of “transcending” race in favor of a view which would comprehend its supposedly illusory character, and thus permit enlightened universalism to resume its forward march, at least on this front. Thus the various political currents which have denied the long-term salience of race, such as liberalism of the Schlesinger/Glazer variety, and many Marxist currents as well, are going to be disappointed.

Second, neither approach really speaks to the concerns of the other view. If race has to be theorized in particular contexts, if it is constantly being contested and modified under the pressures of political mobilization and knowledge (religious, scientific, and so on) why don't these changes ever seem to touch its fundamental continuity, its salience over historical time? Why doesn't our increasing awareness of the “constructedness” of race translate into a diminution of its importance in everyday life? Conversely, if race consists of “situated conduct” or of a series of discursive effects which only appear to be embodied (so to speak) in actual human subjects, how can large-scale sociopolitical change *ever* occur on racial

lines? How could, to pick just one example from a virtually infinite list, Dr. King mobilize 6,000 black children(!) to march against the dogs, firehouses, and truncheons of the Birmingham police one day in 1963? Weren't those children, and their parents, as "situated" as everyone else? That kind of "conduct" seems rather consciously *re*-situated in historical space and time. How could that sort of thing come to pass at all?

This brings me to my third and final point, which concerns the political tasks of racial theory. Despite the significant advances we have made in understanding race over the past few decades, we continue to lack an approach that would securely place politics at the center of the theoretical endeavor. Both the historicist and the interactionist viewpoints I have described fail this test. The historicist account fails because it necessarily assigns too much determination to the large-scale social structures of race. The interactionist account fails for the opposite but equivalent reasons, because it necessarily sees the micro-social dynamics of race as shaping human perception nearly in toto. If we are to harness our new understandings of race to the creation of greater social justice and more human equality, we must develop a racial theory that can find a way, once more, to recognize the potentials of human agency. Only in this fashion can we address the enduring significance of race.

**Jacque Jones**

Maybe it's me, but I would hardly call the black people-Korean merchant thing "extensive intermingling." For many of us, this notion of a nation divided, one black, one white—separate, hostile, unequal, the whole thing—is the way we experience the world. And for many more of us, race as black and white, and encounters with blackness, specifically, are the only shared calibration for what we have come to call reality.

I grew up in Memphis. Before I left there, I could count on one hand the number of people I encountered in a meaningful way who were not black or white. It was a place and, perhaps, a time, not much in sync with current ideas about multiculturalism or, to be sure, sexual preference. These were ideas I came to later. And, maybe, ideas I therefore came to with less immediacy than those about race and racism, ideas that spoke to me fundamentally about the way lives were lived.

I am too young to remember the Civil Rights movement, yet I am old enough to remember a time when black people stepped out of the way for white shoppers downtown. I remember the sight of cotton choppers and a bus that went "east" empty and came back with a cargo of mocha maids. I remember being taught to say *ma'am* to a white woman in the second grade. I feel now, today, the shivers of the *Jungle Book*. What that meant and still means for all of us. The only Latinos I knew were on television.

A Symposium on

The only Asians I had ever heard of were Mao Tse-tung and Charlie Chan. There was an “authentic” Indian village right outside of town. And I think we were being overly romantic to suggest that this was or is an uncommon way to experience this society. The culture you’re rooted in, or in my case the race, is obviously the variable.

Most people don’t live in New York or in the San Francisco Bay area. Most people live in communities that are overwhelmingly “single raced.” Contrary to what we might like to believe, direct experience is not the most meaningful form of encounter anyway. Most profound encounters with other cultures take place through popular media. And popular media is all about a narrow continuum, at one end of which is the sanctified, the ideal, the white; and, at the other end, the authentic, the black, the male, the most basic form of being.

One need only look at the shared, largely uncontested imaginary sphere of our society to see how cultural forms and practices that are accepted as oppositional and transgressive in fact reinforce every ideological parameter of racism. I do not mean that the complex negotiations in, say, rap music are reducible to a kind of primitivism. I mean that on both abstract and practical levels, critical practices that seek to legitimize and give voice and power to marginalized groups often reinforce their status as otherwise illegitimate and marginal. And aspects of these definitions, in fact, exist because of a specialized environment of racism.

In an obvious way, any discussion of black leadership or black popular culture seeks to legitimate blackness conceptually and to remove it from its immediate narrative relationship with what can only be called victimization. Similarly, theorizing blackness, deconstructing blackness, even problematizing blackness can only exist in a reactionary posture. And it assumes, first and foremost, whiteness: the structure in which, and on which, all mediations between cultures in this society are historically predicated. Otherwise, why would it be important to qualify “extensive intermingling of U.S. cultural groups”? Why not ask why we as a society don’t experience all “cultures” as “races” and how those distinctions may be understood as reductive?

Implicit in the questions being asked in this symposium are the following questions: Is it possible to do away with race as the currency with which we transact cultural exchange? Is racism still an ideologically valid way to understand the inequities of this society? And, most importantly, is it possible to transcend, to escape, race? These questions are always present in all cultural criticism and inquiry, as they are in daily life. Still, to consider them jeopardizes the only medium of solidarity we have in much the same way that abandoning externally imposed boundaries of blackness means, in essence, risking erasure. So, have modern appeals sanctioning cultural differences launched a new career for racism, one that is more malleable and resilient? Absolutely.

On both  
abstract and  
practical  
levels, any  
practice that  
seeks to legitimize  
and give voice  
and power  
to marginalized  
groups reinforces  
their status  
as otherwise  
illegitimate  
and marginal.

For the same reasons, questions concerning the efficacy of masculinity as an organizing principle for blackness often go unasked. And this point is made again and again in discussions about sexual preference and sexuality in general. As well, all of our intra-nationalisms, i.e., cultural or black, assume the primacy of maleness. To infer otherwise means dismantling the rules of blackness, doing away with the foregrounding of physicality, for example, which means really challenging the idea of gender difference and maybe giving up basketball or one's drag queen status as a legitimate cultural privilege. And, again, it means jeopardizing solidarity. And what would the alternative be?

The reason that race matters, at the risk of beating a passé horse, is that racism is institutionalized, i.e., well organized, and its assumptions are woven into every aspect of our most intimate transactions. It's a system which a whole lot of people—black, white, both, neither—get a whole lot out of. Simply put, we all get a framework, a way to understand why some people have money and some don't, why some people are pretty and some aren't. At this point, no amount of diversity is situated to challenge these basic assumptions about race, ideas that are, if nothing else, clear.

Still, what of the existence of an actual public sphere which so obviously extends beyond black and white, in which those distinctions may in fact be anecdotal?

I like this quote from Itabari Njeri, from the *Los Angeles Times*, on the Rodney King debacle: "One senses a pervasive intellectual gridlock stemming largely from our obsession with race, which obscures issues of class and culture. At the same time, while caught in the quagmire of race as our national code for worth and worthlessness, we officially deny that racism exists. The amalgam of racism and guilt produces distress that clouds our thinking about all manner of inter-ethnic relations."<sup>1</sup>

This is the way many of us experience the world.

**Michael Eric Dyson**

Race in America has often been treated with a curious division of labor. This habit of national survival is cataloged in de Tocqueville's survey of American democracy and in Myrdal's meticulous unveiling of the racism that is our national shame. When we can get away with it, Americans export the race business to other countries. That doesn't seem to stop the spray of abuse on outsiders who fail to mind their own business when it comes to local practices of race, but it does underscore our hypocrisy and moral schizophrenia. (Study us, certainly, but don't tell us what to make of what you discover.)

Americans take pride in shaping racial perception, fronting a house of pain with earnest conversation about how we can make things better by tinkering here and there. One result of this approach is that it makes clear that nothing is really settled. It is less apparent that such a contrivance masks the helpful transgressions of race across numerous boundaries. For radically different reasons, members of dominant and minority cultures believe that race obeys the rules of purity, that it is spared the very messiness it calls into being. From what I have learned about race in America, though, it is unruly and impure. Its complex meanings are as likely to upend the intentions of its vicious advocates as they are to find their fascist targets.

The notion that America has ever been *purely* anything—racial, sexual, religious, or otherwise—flies in the face of the edifying impurity that is the breadth of democracy. To say that America is composed of separate black and white nations is a useful political fiction cobbled together from the fragments of historic black resistance to invisibility. It is meant to combat the unchallenged power of elites to name the state of affairs along the color line, even as they exploit the belief that America is a largely realized dream; on this view, those who complain of its failure have only their recalcitrant black selves to blame. The appeal that blacks belong to two nations, or at least to a discrete black nation hedged by the relentless surge of utopian identity, is both a defensive and life-giving gesture.

For others, talk of two nations balloons past racial nationalism to the shaky land of liberal premise or, worse, to the bog of dispiriting conservatism. For many liberals, economic and social disparities between blacks and whites prove the existence of two worlds governed by the unequal distribution of finite resources. For many conservatives, these same disparities illumine *moral* differences between the races and justify all manner of assault on black communities.

For nationalists, liberals and conservatives alike, the political usefulness of racial duality obscures the cultural mixture among blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and so on. Equally important, the force of class, the function of gender, and the rise of gay sexuality to prominence in our culture chastens a strict adherence to race as the only lodestar of identity. These mixtures also challenge simple analyses of oppression that fail to grasp the creolized character of American identity.

In the meantime, racism appears to have outstripped its theorists; its evolution from simple to complex forms means that myths of biological determinism have been cast aside largely in favor of the grittier, more promising realm of cultural incompatibility. The old Manichaean ruse of “us” and “them” that used to divide blacks and whites *racially* is now updated in a *culturally* determined “we” and “they.” The bottom line is the same—to wit, no mixing or mingling—but the public relations cam-

The notion that  
America has ever  
been purely  
anything—  
racial, sexual,  
religious, or  
otherwise—  
flies in the face  
of the edifying  
impurity that is  
the breadth  
of democracy.

paigned to replace biology with culture as the seat of social chaos encourages the nastiest sort of hatreds both here and abroad.

In light of the current state of race, conscientious Americans ought to attack myths of racial or cultural purity when and where they are found, whether in rosy cheeks or blackface. It would be silly to suggest, however, that even the most innocuous black nationalists have the moral or ideological backing enjoyed by subtle advocates of white cultural superiority. Still, the fetish of skin or culture betokened in breezy or romantic gestures of purity must be exposed and confronted.

The same impulse against purity must be extended to important debates about identity within black communities. (The same is true, by the way, for Asians, Latinos, and other minorities.) Even as complex expressions of black genius have forced broad reconsideration of American identity, a defeating orthodoxy from within mocks the way black identity draws mightily from suppressed currents of sexual and gender difference. Without Hurston or Hughes, Baldwin or Bethune, how can we imagine black culture? Without the black gay passions of 1970s disco heated anew in gangsta funk, a vibrant moment in black popular culture would be lost to boring bravado. Simply put, it's time for black folk to 'fess up, to admit that the quest for pure black identities is a sad imitation of the scourge of stereotype aimed at us from outside our hybrid existences.

The point of all this is to achieve a society where race doesn't rule, where race makes no difference that is bound to a form of legitimacy which itself stigmatizes or punishes what falls outside its realm. The intent is not to erase race, but to nullify the harmful consequences grafted artificially to its expression. William James said that the difference that *makes* no difference *is* no difference. In the best of all possible worlds, race makes differences, but not ones that destroy the possibility of other differences.

**Phillip Brian Harper**

Nine or ten years ago, when I was still a student, a good friend of mine once entered the reserve reading room of the university library to look for me. Not succeeding, she asked someone in the room whether he had seen me, and, since he didn't know me by name, she described me to him. "Average height," she later told me she said, "medium build, brown-skinned black man with [at that point] somewhat curly black hair, wire-rimmed glasses."

"No, no, nope," he said; none of those rang a bell.

Finally, exasperated—she *knew* I had been there—she said, “he’s got three or four earrings in his ears.”

“Oh, *him*,” the guy said. “Yeah, he just left.”

When my friend recounted this story to me, we both got a good chuckle out of it, laughing as much at our shared expectation that her mention of my racial identity would clinch the other man’s recognition of me as at the fact that it hadn’t. Here is an instance in which race clearly did not “matter”—at least not to this particular person—however insignificant and fleeting it might have been; and I suspect that its not mattering had to do with the intensely absorbing, practically all-consuming, sometimes near-vacuum-like quality of the graduate school experience, whereby only the distracting glitter of a little gold can momentarily snare a person’s attention.

Real societies, generally speaking, do not operate by such hermeticism, by which I mean, primarily, that they have *histories*, diachronic variations that by definition implicate conditions of difference. While it is not necessary, I guess, that what we now call “race” constitute a *motivating* difference in the fluctuations of history—and I can arrive at no other description of what it means for something to “matter” in social terms—it is difficult for me to conceive of a society in which some difference was not interpellated to the function that race currently fulfills, along precisely the lines (for example) of what Balibar has detected with respect to “culture.” This merely testifies, no doubt, to my inability to imagine beyond the constraints of my own conditioning.

Given that inability, though—and granting legitimate worries about a burgeoning “neo-racism”—I *can* say that the trend Balibar discerns might indicate another, more heartening, development to which it is actually a reactionary response: specifically, the growing recognition of the societal complexity increasingly implied by “culture” in the U.S. context. It strikes me that the traditional conceptualization of U.S. society in binaristic black/white racial terms cannot bear up under the pressure of this development, the beauty of which fact lies not only in the expanded critical possibilities that will emerge in light of it, but also in the rescue from embarrassment that it promises for all of us who obviously still share in that conceptualization.

For it was a sense of embarrassment, I dare say, that generated my friend’s and my laughter at our position in the library scenario. After all, didn’t our expectation that my “blackness” should be supremely significant derive, at least in part, from our own adherence to a racial binarism whereby blackness, since it connotes all that is not “white,” depends exclusively on whiteness for its social meaning? Not that there aren’t good historical reasons for the great influence of this binarism; the machinery of

I think it is clear  
that the ongoing  
masculinism and  
heterosexism of  
U.S. society *in*  
*general* are  
primary factors  
in the constrained  
quality of discus-  
sions of race.

slavery, after all, relied on and furthered precisely this Manichaeic ethic. But slavery, for all its fundamental importance, is by no means the only factor in the social disposition that now characterizes the U.S.—a point that those of us who work specifically in African American studies would do well to remember.

Whatever other strides we make in refining our tools of critical analysis, insofar as we neglect slavery's imbrication with other significant elements in U.S. history, we will never fully succeed in escaping the binaristic logic that it implies. Indeed, I am convinced that the continuing influence of this logic partly accounts for the ongoing masculinism and heterosexism of most public discourse on African American culture and society, in that the oppositionalism that it incorporates militates against the serious consideration of differences that fall outside the black/white racial paradigm. Besides this, though, I think it is clear that the ongoing masculinism and heterosexism of U.S. society *in general* are primary factors in the constrained quality of discussions of race. Frankly, I feel more strongly than ever that the only remedy for this situation is the wholesale reconsideration of what counts as masculinity in this culture, since conceptions of the masculine still seem to determine what counts as legitimate politics and culture, a good twenty-five to thirty years after the rise of second-wave feminism challenged that very foundation. This latter challenge obviously still needs to continue, and on all fronts, but it must be undertaken together with a radical critique of masculine norms. These norms, I want loudly to proclaim, I see increasingly as more debilitating than not—personally, socially, culturally, and politically—precisely because they define and limit not only the parameters of these various categories, but even what constitutes “progressive” change with respect to each of them. This, as more and more of us are no doubt concluding, is really no progress at all.

**Steven Gregory**

In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties . . . or you would not have that other class which leads to progress, civilization and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and political government. . . . Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose.

—Senator James Haddon of South Carolina (1858)<sup>2</sup>

The Los Angeles uprising brought home the message that the race question in the United States is not reducible to a black-white dichotomy. Despite coverage by the media, which struggled to figure the uprising as a

release of “black rage” (witness the obsessive play given to the beating of Reginald Denny), television images and arrest records leaked a far more complex, rainbow image of participants. The lessons to be drawn from Los Angeles are familiar ones: the United States is a racist society, and race intersects with class, ethnicity, gender, and other axes of exclusion to produce multiple racial identities and modes of racial domination.

Although the black-white, public image of racism in the United States obscures the multiplicity of racial identities and racisms, it should not be repudiated as mere fiction or, more to my point, seen as a stumbling block to a more inclusive politics of difference. And though this dichotomy may bear slim relation to the experience of many groups (Native Americans, undocumented Mexican immigrants, or multiracial persons), I want to suggest that it is constitutive of those experiences in politically important ways.

To insist on the persistence of “blackness” as the dominant reference point for production and reproduction of racisms in the U.S. is not to disavow the heterogeneity of the racial order, its determinants and effects. Nor is it to lay claim to an a priori “hierarchy of oppression” among real populations—the subject of incessant harangues from both left and right. Rather, it is to underscore the enduring centrality of discourses on blackness in the ideological *and* material reproduction of American nationhood, and in the messy, day-to-day work of capitalist rule. For the lure of racism, even in its most reductive, binary manifestations, rests precisely on a promise of difference.

The relation between the public image of the “two nations” and the heterogeneous experience of populations in the U.S. is a complex one, better captured by the concept of articulation than disparity, which stresses split, dissimilarity, and contradiction. Racial identities and their constitutive experiences are not constructed *outside* of hegemonic discourses about race, however indefensible the latter are. (One could cite, for example, how Korean American identities have been mass-mediated as privileged subjects of black inner-city rage; or, how sex/gender identities à la Murphy Brown are refracted through the domestic pathology of the [black] welfare mother.)

To take such a position risks essentializing experience, by locating racial identities beyond power; replacing, as Laclau and Mouffe have pointed out, “an essentialism of the totality with an essentialism of the elements.”<sup>3</sup> Politically, this latter form of essentialism leads to a power-evasive politics of self-discovery, readily absorbed by the flexible micro-markets of post-Fordist production processes, and to neoliberal appropriations of difference which work to depoliticize the racial hierarchy by celebrating the dilemmas, ironies, and pitfalls of pursuing race-sensitive politics in a bewilderingly “multiracial” society. These practices of neoliberal

eral paradox production, currently focused on debates about revising the 2000 census, provide rhetorical ammunition for all-too-familiar attacks on race-targeted social policies (“If that’s the case, why shouldn’t we hire a white *woman*?”), and modes of identity-based political organizing which are said to be “divisive,” “polarizing,” or “separatist.”

Such celebrations of difference, whether in the service of nominalist claims to authentic experience or neoliberal appeals to universalism, elide the complex ways in which differences are articulated, reworked and, indeed, relativized through practices of political and representational rule. As Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper noted recently, “hegemonic power does not simply manipulate naively given differences between individuals and social groups, it actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division that are advantageous to its empowerment.”<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely this productive aspect of hegemonic power (what Foucault has called subjectification) that requires close scrutiny if we are to appreciate the political work of the color line at the present moment. Specifically, I want to stress the central role that the color line plays in reworking American nationalism—in marking the boundary between the “nation” in its specific, postindustrial iteration, and its imagined nemesis: an entity which, as Etienne Balibar writes in an analogous context, “represents the internal enemy of all cultures and all dominated populations.”<sup>5</sup>

However, rather than name that enemy, I will defer to a heated exchange between a politician and a civic activist which I observed at a public meeting in Queens, New York. The Town Hall Meeting was organized by the United Community Civic Association, a neighborhood group based in Astoria, which had been working to unite civic associations active in northern Queens.

The purpose of the meeting, which was attended by over 500 people—mostly white residents and civic activists from northern Queens—was to provide a forum at which local politicians and city officials could be called upon to respond publicly to “community concerns.” Public testimony addressed several quality-of-life issues, ranging from cuts in funding for youth services to the failure of law enforcement officials to aggressively police crime, vagrancy, prostitution, and other quality-of-life threats.

Midway through the forum, the president of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group challenged politicians and city officials to form a task force to deal with “new people” who were moving into apartment buildings in the neighborhood and destroying its quality of life. The city, she claimed, was subsidizing this deterioration of the area—a claim that was contested by a local politician in a vociferous exchange. (ACT = activist, POL = politician)

ACT: People are putting city, state, and federal money into these people.

POL: I don't know—who are these people?

ACT: Obviously the renters, because I'll tell you what. We have documented . . .

POL: I'd like to know—you're talking in a public forum—and since you've made this a public issue, *those* people and *public* money, I'd like to know . . .

ACT: Welfare recipients, group home turnstiles—would you like me to go on? I can show you children who have been put in for a group home—and I'm not talkin' disabled. I'm talkin' rap sheets that are six feet long.

POL: Are you talking group homes?

ACT: I'm talking—I'm talking delinquent people that are coming in, getting city-subsidized money, and going into these rental complexes without us *even* knowing about it.

[applause from the audience]

POL: Are you saying—are you saying that the city is giving money to the criminals to move into apartments?

ACT: To landlords!

POL: I'm just trying to clarify what you're saying. Are you saying to me that the City of New York is picking up criminals, giving them money to occupy legal apartments? That's what you're saying.

[loud jeering from the audience]

ACT: I am telling you—you asked me who is living in those apartments and how, and I am telling you how.

POL: That there are only criminals moving in?

ACT: Yes sir! Look at the quality of life we have. You think that's done by us? I mean be real. We're obviously bulging at the seams.

POL: I don't know who "us" is.

ACT: The people that are *here!*

The metonymic slide from renters, to welfare recipients, to rap-sheet kids in this familiar account of delinquency among "us" traces the frontiers of a sociopolitical space, whose composite, phantom-like residents serve as foils for imagining, as Mitchell Duneier puts it (quite without irony), "the order and diversity of a wider society."<sup>6</sup>

This "inner city," this privileged surface of post-race, neo-liberal theorizing and policy making, is overdetermined by blackness. The alignment of distinctions that constitute the inner city as the antithesis to the nation,

The welfare  
mother is a  
privileged site,  
where the brutali-  
ties of racism,  
patriarchy, and  
post-Fordist  
economic  
restructuring are  
mystified and,  
indeed, eroticized  
as the reproduc-  
tive pathologies  
of black poverty.

mapping the latter's internal alterity (undisciplined labor, socio-sexual pathology, and so forth), has been fashioned through the specific history of U.S. racism—a mode of racism in which the subjugation and resistance of peoples of African descent have played leading, though not exclusive, roles in articulating the institutional and symbolic formations of racist practices.<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere is the visibility of blackness and its complex entanglements with postindustrial constructions of delinquency more apparent than in the iconography of the “welfare mother.” Like the figure of the *mulata* in Cuban nationalist discourses of the nineteenth century, the welfare mother “indexes areas of structural instability and ideological volatility . . . that have to be hidden from view to maintain the political fiction of cultural cohesion and synthesis.”<sup>8</sup>

She is a privileged site, where the brutalities of racism, patriarchy, and post-Fordist economic restructuring are mystified and, indeed, eroticized as the reproductive pathologies of black poverty. It is precisely this displacement of a politics of real bodies for a biopolitics of patriarchal desire that renders the iconography of the welfare mother and the inner city serviceable to a wide spectrum of cultural and political projects, ranging from the misogynist beats of gangsta rappers, to the more sober, but no less phallogocentric, politics of welfare reform. What these projects share, whether as an appeal for a more “paternalistic” state authority (e.g., Lawrence Mead), the aggressive policing of “group home turnstiles,” or the selective re-tooling of black masculinity à la *Boyz 'N the Hood*, is the conviction that patriarchy is the bedrock of nation-building.

The lure of this male homosociality, secured through the punitive social and discursive positioning of welfare mothers and their dependent children, enables the masking of race, class, and sex/gender hierarchies—relations which are imagined to be reconcilable through welfare biopolitics—and the production of a vicarious national community: a gorgeous mosaic, united in its commitment to family values, self-reliance, and unfettered access to the pleasures of the marketplace.

The inner city, constructed as a deeply sex/gendered and racialized space of socio-sexual disorder, has become a kind of anti-nation: a foil to an emergent, multicultural brand of American nationalism whose “fictive ethnicity,” to use Balibar's term, is imagined increasingly in terms of the accessibility of people as labor power to postindustrial circuits of capital. Discourses about the underclass and their enabling practices constitute, in part, an effort to reconstruct “free labor,” which in the hyperstratified, postindustrial city has become immobilized, or locked-up in the underground economy and in the putative cycle of welfare dependency. It is this fixity of the inner-city poor, their apparent refusal to mobilize in response to the post-Fordist demands of capital, that drives calls for “taking back

the streets,” breaking the cycle of welfare dependency, and restoring the “self-reliance” of the patriarchal family.

The specific form of racism that is called into service for this project departs from the myths and categories of nineteenth-century pseudoscience. Blackness, I would argue, remains the anchor of the U.S. racial hierarchy, but it is a construction of blackness that increasingly indexes its myths of inherited difference to evaluations of the productivity and governability of bodies (what the poverty industry calls “labor force attachment”) in the polarized, postindustrial economy. In short, it is a mode of racist practice that is increasingly disengaged from the somatic referents of earlier systems of classification and is actively inventing new mythologies of natural difference.

However, it would be misleading to conceptualize this development as an emergent “neo-racism,” which has redirected its epistemological investments from biology to culture. Scientific racism and the genocidal fantasies of the eugenicists were no less cultural than contemporary articulations of racial difference. The crania, genitalia, and other body parts that were measured, exhibited, and stored in specimen jars in the temples of medicine were always eroticized, constituted through a politics of desire, which remains a calling of science.

Science retains a privileged role in the body work of contemporary racist practices. We need only look to the persistent attempts to tie welfare benefits to the implantation of Norplant in the bodies of poor women<sup>9</sup>; or, to the compulsive search for genetic markers, or “risk factors,” for (black) criminality; or, for that matter, to the deployment of statistics (the “moral science,” as it was once called) in the exercise of bureaucratic power over the poor, and in constructing the pathological profile of the ghetto underclass, the “mud-sill” of contemporary U.S. society.

The United States *is* divided into two nations, one “black” and the other “white,” but the meanings and socio-spatial terrain of both terms are shifting, as they always have. Whereas the “underclass,” a hyper-exploited race/gender/class fraction, is emerging as the nodal point in the articulation of postindustrial blackness, “whiteness” has opened its arms to a gorgeous mosaic of differences, whose inscription in the global economy, rather than the federal census, increasingly defines belonging.

### **Grant Farred**

Wherever the racial categories “black” and “white” have significant currency—and there are few places where they do not—there are at least three issues of which we should always be mindful: a marked power imbalance, the construction of the dominated group (seldom does that

mean anything other than black), and the manner and moment in which these racialized concepts are deployed. In a society where a single group has routinely subjugated not one but several other communities, this condition becomes even more problematic. Ironically, in this situation it is likely that the oppressed community, which establishes itself as the most effective opposition, will occupy a “privileged” position vis-à-vis both the power elite and other oppressed groups. In relation to the hegemonic bloc, privilege implies that the dominant group will monitor developments in this particular subjugated community more closely. Privilege, in relation to the other marginalized groups, means less the guarantee of material advances (though that potentiality is not excluded) than the construction of a sociopolitical tradition: one of ongoing struggle against the hegemonic bloc. The outstanding, and most troubling, aspect of this phenomenon is that a single community comes to be taken as representative of the entire marginalized population. More important, however, is the way and the moments in which this one group is presumed not only to speak for itself, but also as having subsumed the traditions, cultures, and idiosyncratic experiences of the other communities alongside which it has struggled. According to the terms of this social arrangement, the hegemonic group (white) is opposed by a counterhegemonic group (black); in the process of opposition, the counterhegemonic community has acquired a certain hegemony within the ranks of the historically disenfranchised.

In this paradigm, where the “problem of the twentieth century” persists with a rare vigor, the “darker races” are reduced to a solitary signifier. Laconically put, one hue is enough to represent the entire (black) spectrum. For the purposes of this piece, “black” functions as a general, incorporative political category, a framework which includes all those communities that have been subjected to some form of disenfranchisement and/or oppression by white America. Although this definition is problematic, in part because it tends to flatten the various experiences of these different groups and presumes alliances where there are tensions and fissures (many on the grounds of race), it is nevertheless a conceptual approach which is useful for addressing this symposium. In the U.S., a nation in which a white majority subjugates a range of other communities (some of which can be, and have been, accommodated under the umbrella labeled *black*), African Americans more than any other oppressed community have a history of conducting determined and intensive campaigns against the white group’s domination. Because of the creativity, resourcefulness, and, most importantly, length of their struggle, African Americans have often located themselves as prominent spokespersons for the black community. In producing a history of resistance, African Americans have had to confront and engage the essential racist

dialectic—white versus black—that undergirds U.S. society; as a result, they have often come to stand as *the* black community. But the issue here, to put it oxymoronically, is not African American hegemony. Rather, it is the recognition that when African Americans speak, it is both an enabling and a disabling condition.

Having secured a space for themselves in an antagonistic public sphere, disenfranchised communities then have to deal with what we might call the politics or the burden of over-representation: being placed in a position where it is necessary to assume responsibility for cultures and experiences with which they are not adequately familiar (or completely unfamiliar); speaking in general when their concerns are specific; and taking on (unsought) public roles because the status quo chooses to deal with those black people it has a history of engaging, however unsympathetically.<sup>10</sup> Because of the way in which leadership functions, there is always a great potential that certain constituencies will be rendered voiceless—be they Latinos, Asian Americans, or gays, to name only a few. However, even when these excluded voices are heard, it is in a muted or mutated way, their concerns filtered through the only available channel to the world outside the barrio or the gay enclave. And this channel, as we know all too well, is often filled with the static of homophobia, misogyny, or other antagonisms that mark the history of conflict between and within these disenfranchised constituencies.

The politics of over-representation, then, requires that those who have access to the public sphere acquaint themselves with the histories, struggles, and traditions of other communities; spokespersons have to (re-)negotiate their relationship to other excluded groups. Even if we take seriously the Derridian concept of erasure, where for everything we say we leave several other things unspoken, we have to accept that position as a political starting point, not as an exhaustive political explanation. Derrida's is an injunction to think about how the burden of over-representation is premised upon a politics of under-representation. Under-representation, in turn, should give us pause to reflect on the process by which "selective enfranchisement" can sustain, reconfigure, and even legitimize a Manichaeian paradigm. We need to challenge the notion that when some black voices have a public platform, all others, by simple extension, are enfranchised. Erasure compels us to rethink the efficacy of our political work: what our agendas are; how, and by whom, they are produced; and how we represent them. Derrida's concept also serves as a caution because it reminds us that, given the way our black community is constructed, we are likely to be heard (or misheard) in so many registers, even as we struggle for a single resonance. Mostly, then, erasure is an invitation to formulate or reformulate our political priorities and ideological

---

When African  
Americans speak,  
it is both an  
enabling and  
a disabling  
condition.

---

The black/white  
binary depends  
upon a collapsing  
of multiple  
histories into one.

agenda(s) so that we can achieve a voice that attends to, but is not paralyzed by, the problematics of over- and under-representation.

At the core of the struggle to articulate a voice that is representative—attentive to a variety of experiences—is the commitment to overcome the limitations of Manichaeian thinking. Such a project requires an understanding of how the black/white binary depends upon a collapsing of multiple histories into one. The uncomplicated packaging of histories is a strategic maneuver which, of course, can be employed by both constituencies—the white right, and several other constituencies, lay unproblematic claim to a European heritage, while black nationalists believe that they can achieve a single, essentialist political identity. The goal of these reductive strategies is usually to effect (or perhaps to just increase) either unity or division, to engender or prevent fissuring, whatever political end is envisaged. In a situation as fraught as this, the primary function of Manichaeian paradigms, to consolidate oppositions (in part by delimiting the range of political struggle and restricting the number of agents), is only nominally available. In a global environment where diverse cultures and disparate economic programs and ideologies interact daily, it is extremely difficult to keep distinctions absolute. The categories will not be restricted to two. That does not mean, however, that the black-versus-white scenario cannot and is not frequently referenced. When such a scenario is presented, however, it should raise questions about the way in which the debates about race, ideology, economics, and culture have been conducted. At which moment do Manichaeian terms assume a discursive dominance? Binary oppositions take precedence when other explanations are considered inadequate or obfuscatory, when the debate is read as too nuanced or unnecessarily complicated; more disturbingly, they dominate when arguments have become reductive. Finally, binary oppositions hold sway when there is a considerable amount of capital—ideological, cultural, economic—at stake. The capacity and preparedness to deal with the complexity of our society—particularly in terms of race—has a threshold. When such a discursive limitation is encountered, binary concepts have a greater attraction because they offer less entangled, “common sense” views of the world.

The U.S. fits the profile of a society in which Manichaeian terms are alternately invoked and abandoned. If, for example, one is to believe the right wing of the PC debate, then it is whites who are being discriminated against by blacks because it is the latter who are now in a position of privilege—American history is being rewritten, jobs are being apportioned differently, university admissions policies have been rendered unrecognizable. This critique is, of course, intensified by the fact that the “beneficiaries” of these (unfair) practices include a range of traditionally disenfranchised constituencies, among them gays, lesbians, as well as African

Americans and Latinos, groups which previously had little purchase on the society's power structures. White women, of course, represent a particular ambivalence that confounds the binaries, because they can and cannot be located within this neatly divided structure. On the other hand, almost as a matter of rote, the melting pot metaphor is routinely deployed to keep alive the myth of an accommodating, incorporative U.S. society. This very myth of inclusivity is, of course, relied upon to make not only a place for new arrivals, but to identify a space consistent with the terms of the Manichaeian social alignment. Black and white immigrant communities are allotted very different places in this alignment; they are ingredients required to perform very different functions in the social brewing of the melting pot.

There has never been a reluctance on the part of the hegemonic bloc to engage the realities and opportunities for postindustrial capitalism contained within the paradigm of cultural difference. We not only see examples of this deliberate marketing of difference in those Benetton ads (which appear to be everywhere), but have you checked your latest J. Crew or Victoria's Secret catalog? There are black folks in dreads wearing flannel shirts and silky undergarments for all consumers to partake of. Difference (particularly of the hybrid variety), as we have known for a while, is not only hip, but it is profitable, too. Multinationals have not been slow to explore and exploit beyond the black/white divide and to locate opportunities for capital within the fissures of the current constructions of black and white. The argument, then, is not whether cultural difference has reinvigorated racism (which would be to suggest that the practice was in remission), but rather how this kind of difference is facilitating the practice in a postmodern world. The grounds upon which we have traditionally been able to critique racism, the absence or stereotyping of blacks, has changed significantly. Now blacks do have a highly visible presence, even a glamorous one. But that does not mean that we can prepare the R.I.P. signs for racism. Far from it.

Furthermore, it does not mean that it is enough to understand the historical trajectory that has enabled us to change (even as we continue to fight on these fronts) the profile of our public faces—in advertising, movies, TV, and sport. While the issue still turns, though not solely, upon access to resources, it now requires a new vigilance to the ways in which blacks are not only being represented (shown in the public sphere), but interpellated (spoken to and of in that sphere). This is certainly not to imply that blatant racism is a bygone thing, but to suggest that, problematic as the representations of blacks are, this practice can immunize itself from the charge of racism because there are more of us in a less unflattering light. Racism is not so much resilient as it is, like capitalism, amoeba-like, apparently born with the capacity to take on the shape

the historical moment requires; racism and capitalism make major or slight adjustments (as the case may be) as the material conditions demand. Since we so seldom make history under conditions of our own choosing, our interrogations of the phenomenon have to adapt to the changing shape of the playing field. We are implicated in the process of representing ourselves. We are addressed directly or as enfranchised members of an American constituency. We are treated equally as potential consumers and, occasionally, as producers. Our histories are glossed if not referenced; our cultures—as we see every day—are appropriated, disseminated, deployed (often against us), and enjoyed by a group of people who look nothing like us. To invoke the cultural shorthand of Cornel West's argument, what we are experiencing is all part of the African-Americanization of American culture. (Black culture, of course, has itself drawn on white styles of dress and self-representation. Is there more than six degrees of separation between B-Boy culture and white preppiness?) Whether it's hip-hop clothing, hairstyles, music, or simply the way black youth wear their Kangol hats and their baseball caps backwards, black culture enjoys a ubiquity and a currency that spells "cool," not only in the white suburbs but also in places far beyond the borders of this country.

Of course, this phenomenon of white cultural appropriation and exploitation has a much longer history. However, technology and the mass marketing strategies of late capitalism have made the cultural artifacts available to blacks. Blacks therefore see themselves not only in their own spaces, but as (temporary?) cultural icons and arbiters for other communities. These cultural trendsetters, however, are seldom located in the conditions under which they produce. The politics of their self-representation is quickly reduced to stereotypical explanations (it is an anti-aesthetic or a confrontational aesthetic); their engagement with the dominant culture and its structural disenfranchisement of their community is hastily written out of their experiences; and their resistance to and implication in (and enjoyment of) the dominant culture are positions that seldom find voice in the mainstream analyses. Subjugation in contemporary America is an insidious process because it silences constituencies even as it gives voice and face to their culture and histories. It adopts black dress and posture, it facilitates black interpellation without enfranchisement, it addresses blacks without providing channels and forums for response and critical engagement; it takes on repertoires of black representation without respect for the conditions under which the history of that community is made. It is not, therefore, that the racist ideology upon which biological mythologies were founded are obsolete. It is simply that the function that mythology fulfilled can now be performed by more sophisticated, high-tech ideological apparatuses.

. . . anthropological culturalism, which is entirely orientated towards the recognition of the diversity and equality of cultures . . . and also their trans-historical permanence, had provided the humanist and cosmopolitan anti-racism . . . with most of its arguments.

—Etienne Balibar

Escape from ethnocentrism is our business, but a definitive escape puts us out of business altogether.

—Steven Webster

Steven Webster is referring to the work of social anthropologists who, as he puts it, can do but one thing: “translate one culture into another.”<sup>11</sup> Etienne Balibar’s recent description of a “neo-racism,” one which preoccupies itself with cultural rather than biological distinctions, also assumes intellectual participants, in this case both aiding in the production of neo-racist knowledge and popularizing neo-racist thought. It might be fruitful, then, for us first to consider the question of the dominant public image of an America divided into two nations—black and white—in relationship to the work many of us do to fortify that impression, or at least to continue to render us unable to successfully combat it.

Most anthropologists and ethnographers, whether or not they subscribe to the poststructuralist critique of their practice (and in most cases I think it’s fair to say they do not), are nonetheless increasingly able to make an account of themselves in relation to that critique. In the case of those scholars working on U.S. and non-U.S. black cultures, and most especially where they are not themselves from these social groups, there is an awareness of the necessity to position oneself in relation to the work; here, poststructuralism and self-conscious “new” social movements in the African diaspora combine to constrain the social scientist who might otherwise forget his or her own position.

Those of us who do not work traditionally in the social sciences but in African American or cultural studies or popular culture more generally have been, however, breathing the air of this kind of research for years. This may be hard to accept, considering the extent to which anthropology’s methods of eliciting culture and its descriptions of that culture have become easy targets for many of us, often the vague but supreme example of what has been wrong—racist, sexist, imperialist—with considerations of culture in the past. But how else did we learn to endlessly ascribe orality to black practices; to emphasize and celebrate spirituality and folk religion over other social spheres; or to describe gender relations in the black community as they extended out of Africa, through slave relations, and

into the contemporary moment? Is it really because this is the “truth” of black life?

Anthropology—of the sort that combated biological racism in the earlier part of this century and provided intellectuals with a much more satisfying cultural scenario of difference—is at least partly responsible for the way we currently classify texts and authors under multiculturalism by national ethnic constituencies and regional similarities. Anthropology is in the way we have produced African American canons in the various disciplines. It is, after all, in the way we have produced a notion of black *difference* in America.

What Steven Webster points out is that many of us, and I would add that this is especially the case when we ourselves are black, have been preoccupied with producing work that confounds racism and ethnocentrism, at the same time that we have explained (or been taught to explain) black cultures to the scholarly, and increasingly to the popular, world. Indeed, racism endures, and it has proved to be malleable, resilient, ever adaptable to the various challenges that have been given to it. This is a commonplace. And Balibar’s proposition—that culture-based neo-racism is a more virulent form of the phenomenon (racism) that “organizes affects . . . by conferring upon them a stereotyped form”—can be supported not only in the African American case, but perhaps more clearly in the cases of other so-called “ethnic minorities” and in the relations among them (or, rather, us).<sup>12</sup>

Examine, for instance, the recent reactions, where we could find them reported, to the introduction of NAFTA on the part of the black and Latino communities. Here is a perfect opportunity to consider Balibar’s argument not only in relation to the described “community of racists” but from the point of view of the complex interrelations *between* minorities. To think this through would require (at least) a consideration of current black and Latino participation in unionized labor; the perceptions of and statistical information regarding the relationship between national unemployment and immigration; the self-consciousness of these groups as communities; and the production of that self-consciousness for the purpose of promoting *and* fighting NAFTA. In other words, where the intensified interest in the cultural identities of “ethnic minorities” serves *both* sides of political debate, what interest could there possibly be in popularizing an idea of culture that isn’t merely a cover for the idea of race?

This brings me to Balibar and the question of how we might apply his analysis to the problem of scholars and public intellectuals in the popularization of what he describes as neo-racism. What are the problems for us that he implies and does not yet name? First, the objects of racism are “*constrained* to see themselves as a community;” second, the objects of racism are simultaneously denied the right to define that community for

themselves; and third, destruction of the “racist complex” presupposes the “internal decomposition” of the community racism made.<sup>13</sup> In making this last point, I have read Balibar against himself, since there he shifts toward discussing the community of *racists* made by racism and away from a consideration of the community of its “*victims*.” And this, it seems to me, is crucial. Balibar has left us to consider for ourselves what this might mean for the community we have been *constrained* to become.

For those of us whose identities are supported by the idea of the community that racism is said to have produced, and for those of us who have devoted time and thought to attempts at the self-definition of that community, it is probably near impossible to imagine that the end of racism in any way requires the relinquishing of that community. In other words, we have been quite content in the everyday experience of that fiction, have even relished the romance of it. We have become experts in negotiating competing authenticity claims, in promoting a style of intervention that suits our personal tastes and our notions of cultural integrity, and in translating our most fervent fantasies into scholarly and theoretical arguments so sophisticated that our friends don’t even recognize themselves. But those who watch us, hear us, read us do. They learn to read this work we make of our lives like the autobiography of a race we purport it to be, all the while forgetting how we were raised the postmodern way, how we appeared as subjects after the death of the subject, how we live and dance in the semi-awareness of all the desire that is filtered through us. They forget, that is, all we have learned about how to read autobiography. Afrocentrists, often held responsible for *their* descriptions of black and white life, are caught and devoured in the web of cultural invention (perhaps as our easiest scapegoats?), but the rest of us evade it time and again. And why not? As Hortense Spillers said some years ago, “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have been invented.”<sup>14</sup>

In an era where we invent ourselves (where the community of victims is no longer barred entirely from self-definition), we might want to reconsider that double-consciousness so often *misapplied* to describe the experience of existing between two worlds, a black one and a white one. To rediscover Du Bois’s central insight, we must focus not merely on this “two-ness” Du Bois spoke of, the sheer valence of context he deployed, but on the *mechanism* he described by which black people come to know themselves, to experience what is an enforced group consciousness (descriptive), rather than self-consciousness as a class (transformative):<sup>15</sup>

. . . the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the

Our challenge  
now is to know  
ourselves not  
only as subjects  
but as the  
producers of  
subjects, as trans-  
lators on a  
larger scale.

other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others . . .<sup>16</sup>

What Du Bois described was the mode by which black people came to know themselves as subjects, a mode which was essentially anthropological—it translated from one culture into another. Our challenge now is to know ourselves not only as subjects but as the producers of subjects, as translators on a larger scale.

As translators, we operate not only with the dynamics of native informancy, but with the problem of how to remember the mode of our essential subjecthood when, for example, popular cultural studies seeks more and more to produce ethnography. If we believe in our intellectual training, it makes more sense that a popular project, the one that must by definition be more responsible, should come after the scholarly one that asks: What is the skeleton we are producing? What are the questions we are asking? What information is the substance of culture? In the end, what would we think if we found that we were merely the reproducers of what Wahneema Lubiano has called “black cultural commonsense”?<sup>17</sup>

In our research on black subjects, most of us are keen to show how what we find proves the absence of false consciousness. But we make that same mistake at another level in our insistence on the distinction between the real cultural life of “diversity” and the public image of an America divided into two nations. If it is our narrative, it is what we are *experiencing*. In seeking to fill the gap between what “they” know and what “they” are experiencing, we make the mistake of attributing false consciousness to the communities racism made, rather than reminding ourselves of the mode through which our true transformative self-consciousness must come—in part by understanding ourselves as anthropologically produced subjects currently consumed with (and profiting by) the expression of our investment in that production. In a time when black subjects are fashionable, sometimes the cultural narratives we produce for their fast consumption are unaware of their contribution to the neo-logic of neo-racism. Without ethnocentrism, Steven Webster says, anthropologists are out of business. Is this true for those of us who deploy culture in cultural studies as well?

**David Roediger**

The first question touches on a number of hard problems in contemporary racial discourse and racial formation. Within a U.S. context, the first set of problems involves the tendency, hardly confined to academics, to discuss an increasingly multiracial population in biracial (or perhaps even

monoracial, since the discourse usually takes whites as normative and ascribes race only to African Americans) terms. Thus, neither the clear footage of Latino and sometimes white looters in the Los Angeles rebellion nor the episodic emphasis on Asian American victims much deterred television voice-overs from framing the events simply as ones in which black rioters exacted revenge by striking out at white institutions and occasionally at white passersby. Secondly, the black/white model draws fire because it fails to account for large and growing numbers of Americans of mixed racial identity and fails to find a place for often striking insights nurtured in what might be called contradictory racial locations. Finally comes the largest issue: The extent to which American culture is neither black nor white but, as Albert Murray has put it, “incontestably mulatto,” and beyond that, formed from astonishing varieties of other hybridities, racial and ethnic.

All that said, however, I would caution against regarding the “two nations—black and white” lens as simply a kind of anachronism or false consciousness to be exposed and easily discarded. The lens is, to be sure, an ideological one. As such it not only distorts but accounts for lived experience. Thus in the Los Angeles case, the racialized identities of Salvadorans and Koreans do derive from legal and cultural history profoundly shaped by the black-white experiences of slavery and segregation, although the dynamics of that history cannot be read unproblematically into the realities of the late twentieth century. Moreover, in at least one reading of it, the generalization that the black/white model “bears little relation to the actual experience of social . . . life in this country for all its citizens” can mislead. The Rodney King beating itself and the Simi Valley verdict in the case *can* be more or less cogently explained by sticking to the “two nations” model of racialization, if class and gender are also considered. For many residents of the U.S. increasingly segregated on black-white racial lines, police brutality, fear, want, community, and love are black experiences, even if shared by the poor of other races. For many whites, as President Clinton first learned from and then taught the Republicans, African American Others seen largely on television constitute the negative (if also at times powerfully attractive) reference point which makes “white” the nation's most powerful political color. We need, therefore, to ask, “How can people believe that the U.S. is divided simply along black-white lines?”, not condescendingly and impatiently but humbly and consistently, with the goal of both comprehending and extending existing discourse. Stuart Hall's recent prediction that the future “belongs to the impure” aptly reminds us of the subversive potential of hybridity. But, like the “two nations” model, ones that emphasize mixing are true only to part of the U.S. experience.

In response to the third question, the two instances in my experience

in which social groups seemed least burdened by racialization are both African, but differ widely and instructively. The first is village society in Ghana, in places largely without European and Euro-American presence. Here there is a literal absence of racialized identities (though ethnicity often matters greatly) and an arresting freshness in interaction with whites who do come. Two caveats apply. First, race does matter insofar as the racialized policies of the IMF and of imperialism generally very much structure the poverty and prospects of the villages. And secondly, the lack of physical presence of racialized Others does not *automatically* make race matter less. All-white towns and suburbs in the U.S. often contend for the dubious distinction of being the most racialized places on the planet.

South Africa presents very different hints of what societies in which race does not matter might look like. I do believe that the term *nonracial*, though often facetiously invoked, applies to the best of the liberation movement (inside and outside the ANC) there, but not simply because the anti-apartheid struggle united participants across state-imposed racial boundaries. Bracing as it is to hear *comrade* so broadly used—instructive as it is to hear militants attempt to challenge racialization with terms like *so-called coloreds* and even *so-called whites*—still more impressive is the deep awareness in many quarters that racial oppression in South Africa cannot be addressed without full discussion of race and bold race-specific policy initiatives. The difficult idea that nonracialism “works through race” makes race matter more and less simultaneously in critical ways.

Other possibilities: Notting Hill Carnival in London; SOS Racisme’s “Hands Off My Buddy” campaign in France; the Black Studies Program at the University of Missouri under Sundiata Cha-Jua’s directorship.

### **Amiri Baraka**

To speak of black leadership is to speak not only of the leadership of the oppressed Afro-American nation but also of the oppressed Afro-American nationality everywhere else in the United States. In the still existent Black Belt South (which now has two of its Anglo-American residents in the White House), the Afro-American people are an oppressed nation with the right of self-determination. But everywhere else, black people live in large pluralities or in a majority in a replica of the Black Belt, reproduced ghetto-style throughout America.

In the 1990s, the leadership of the masses of black people must seek to exercise that right of self-determination as its specific national priority. The essential development necessary is to help bring together a conscious United Front for Afro-American Self-Determination (UFAASD) as part of the overall United Front Against Fascism (UFAF).

The task of such a UFAASD must be the carrying out of a national referendum or plebescite among the Afro-American people which asks, "What should be the relationship of the Afro-American people to the United States of America?" The successful construction of such a plebescite will build a united front as a conscious organization of struggle.

Such a front must include the spectrum of black ideological development—Communists, Socialists, Nationalists, Democrats, Christians, Muslims, and so on—in their most expansive forms. Each tendency or formation must give as an ongoing form of essential dialogue their understanding of self-determination for the Afro-American nation and the democracy inherent in that for all Afro-American people.

It is my intention to see that the whole spectrum of theories, stances, and specific leading politics of all black people are put forward in a truly national debate. In structuring such a debate, a truer self-consciousness can emerge among black people. A true self-consciousness will prioritize and make a leading issue the Afro-American people's right of self-determination.

To me this is the major work of any would-be black leadership: to build such a United Front for Afro-American Self-Determination; to construct and exercise a necessary referendum; and to help focus a truly self-conscious Afro-American people on that conscious and nationally structured struggle for self-determination and democracy.

This is a democratic struggle, which must include all sectors of the people. At the same time, it cannot hope to be successful unless it is led by revolutionaries, by Communists who are ultimately struggling for the overthrow of imperialist rule over the Afro-American nation, of monopoly capitalist U.S., and of imperialism's moment-by-moment implementation of the international fascism of the new world order. This fascism comes directly and openly from international cartels as well as from them through governments; it is a fascism in which even governments are very clearly and routinely insignificant accountancies working for international fascist imperialism.

If we understand that the charge of imperialism into an international fascist system is responsible for the aggressive attack of the right across the U.S. and across the world, we should also understand the need for an anti-fascist united front in the U.S. (as well as internationally). The best form for such a front will be a mass electoral style party that can unite the masses of Americans against the Democratic and Republican parties and that can struggle daily against neofascist attacks in the U.S.

Unless such a party has at the core of its leadership revolutionaries, it will be unable to perform its critically needed tasks of opposing the two major parties of imperialism and of countering the explosions of elephant feces and donkey feces with propaganda, agitation, and the legal forms of struggle inherent in electoral mass politics.

We must be clear that neither of the forms of struggle outlined above—the united front against imperialism, of which the UFAASD is one sector, and the united front against fascism in the form of a mass electoral party—can exist with any integrity or real force without the leadership of revolutionaries, at whose core are those struggling to unite the advances to communism.

The most pressing priority is to begin to organize circles of revolutionaries who claim a radical stance against imperialism and national oppression. In the daily practice of carrying out revolutionary struggle against fascism and imperialism, such revolutionary circles would lead to the ultimate organization and form of struggle, the building of a multinational revolutionary communist party and the overthrow of U.S. monopoly capitalism, carried out as part of the general overthrow of international fascist imperialism.

We are handicapped by the lack of such a multinational party as a national form of expression of U.S. revolutionary forces. We are handicapped not only by the absence of such a party, but by the overthrow of the social-imperialist Soviet Union and by the plummet toward capitalist restoration we see everyday in China. The organization of national circles of revolutionaries must be the first step.

**Stanley Aronowitz**

In the early 1960s, Michael Harrington popularized the idea that the United States was really two distinct nations. Reflecting the statistics, he defined the “other America” as a biracial group, the poor who had failed to make it in the postwar boom. During a time of relatively buoyant economic growth, full employment, and a well-developed consumer society, Harrington called attention to the paradox of substantial poverty amid plenty. Although well below the depression-level of nearly forty percent, in 1960 one out of five Americans still lived below the officially designated poverty line. Raising the minimum family income, a more realistic estimate of economic deprivation, might have increased that amount, but the government figure was sufficiently shocking to middle-class Americans, and the Civil Rights movement politically potent enough to prompt Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to launch a major antipoverty crusade that, with its ups and downs, lasted throughout the 1960s. Bloated by the permanent war economy and the as yet unchallenged U.S. economic dominance of global production and consumption which combined to produce nearly full employment, the “active” population—mostly but not exclusively composed of middle-class white America—displayed an

uncharacteristic generosity when it supported President Johnson's panoply of welfare and job creation measures designed to reduce poverty.

The major strategy—getting the jobless back to work and supplementing the incomes of the majority which held full- or part-time jobs—was a version of New Deal intervention: job training, creating public-sector jobs for youth and welfare recipients, providing educational opportunities, housing subsidies, public housing, and food stamps. The underlying assumption of these programs was that if the government provided both monetary and educational boosts, the poor, even the black poor, could take their rightful place in the mainstream. By the end of the decade, the number of people whose incomes were below the official poverty line had been dramatically reduced, even if not entirely through government programs. For, even as well-paying factory jobs stagnated, the service sector began its steep ascent. Service wages were generally lower, but jobs were plentiful and, with a little help from the government, many people were able to get on public and private payrolls and enter consumer society.

Of course, since blacks comprised only 12 to 15 percent of the U.S. population, most of the forty million poor were coded as "white." But the fact that most of the poor were white did not prevent the media, politicians, and most welfare agencies from identifying poverty with race since, according to the prevailing discourse, there could be no substantial white indigence. The white poor, in this view, must be the drunks and druggies, the sexually promiscuous (single female parents), a few bad apples, mostly ethnics who have always constituted a substantial portion of the criminal class, and victims of hard luck. White people are hardworking, middle class, and God fearing. Even though experts acknowledge that most blacks fall into this "responsible" category, images belie these judgments. Black people are perennially depicted as clients of the welfare state and the prison system, and they are suffused with rage and violence, especially black youth who have congenitally failed to imbibe the moral code according to which most of the rest of us live.

Here we can see that neither statistics nor common sense is able to overcome the *will* to resentment among substantial sections of whites. "They" get the benefits of the welfare state, are over-represented among affluent athletes and entertainers (occupational benefits which accrue due to their superior natural physical or artistic talents), while "our" taxes soar, wages stagnate, and expectations of personal security are shattered by "their" violent rage.

In the 1960s, white support for measures to decrease black poverty was as much a question of perceived self-interest as it was providential. Whites feared, correctly as it turned out, that if the government did not intervene, black rage might spill over the invisible walls of whiteness.

Neither statistics  
nor common  
sense is able to  
overcome the *will*  
to resentment  
among substan-  
tial sections  
of whites.

Indeed, one of the unintended consequences of the initial efforts to reduce poverty and to provide African Americans with more economic and social equality was that these efforts helped generate a new wave of black nationalism and political radicalism in the ghettos and on college campuses. When the overblown liberal rhetoric of equality was not matched by performance and, in the wake of this failure of nerve, the conservatives began their long march to cultural and political hegemony, the inevitable disillusionment, especially among black youth, produced an unprecedented insurgency in many large cities, which electrified the country. The rebellions, notably those in New York, Newark, Los Angeles, and Detroit, together with the burgeoning antiwar movement, brought the Johnson administration to its knees. Contrary to left-liberal expectations, the white middle class and a substantial portion of working-class whites interpreted the political unraveling of 1968 as a signal to swing to the right in the expectation that reaction could paste the social bond back together.

The primary fall-out of the insurgency was not the emergence of a powerful new radical or nationalist movement capable of imposing the historic black freedom demands on a reluctant political establishment. Instead, since the 1970s, conservatives have jettisoned the Johnson program but have retained one of its more important by-products: building and otherwise strengthening the black bourgeoisie. While isolating and waging a relentless war on the black working class, an effort that has swelled the ranks of the black poor, the Nixon presidency inaugurated one of the most sophisticated wars of position in modern politics. It actively promoted the black middle class's growth, even as it encouraged the further functional differentiation of social structure. A new stratum of African American managers was funded by corporations as much as the government to run the cities, the newly hired black public and private work force, and the media-market segment assigned to, if not controlled by, blacks. The rise of the black bourgeoisie (now renamed African Americans) grew apace even as the proportion of racialized poor (including Latinos and Asians) to the total population rose sharply due to the puncturing of the social safety net. As a result, the African American managerial and professional class and the black poor are more politically and culturally visible. Among other identifications, the urban black poor has been cathected, in the popular imagination as well as in cultural representations such as TV and film, to rising crime rates, welfare fraud, and other moral calamities. Having devastated the welfare state and promoted urban development and gentrification policies that have driven millions from their homes, conservatives (including many erstwhile liberals) blame the victim for the social inconveniences of homelessness, such as the presence of the poor on the streets of many cities and towns. Meanwhile, private charities such as the Catholic Church struggle to feed the hungry,

among the more invisible contingents of the black and white poor. Needless to say, the enveloping new conservatism which has dominated politics and, increasingly, culture, cannot be divorced from these events. While the Nixon administration did not succeed in overhauling the entire welfare system, he severely crippled, when he did not dismantle, the antipoverty programs. What Nixon left undone, Carter and especially Reagan finished. And, true to its “new Democrat” label, the Clinton administration has steadfastly refused to reverse this legacy. On the contrary, it promises welfare “reform” which, translated into plain language, means getting the poor off welfare by imposing term limits on benefits. At the same time, it prattles on about training and work programs for jobs that simply do not exist.

“Affirmative action babies”—Steven Carter, Thomas Sowell, and Clarence Thomas among them—bemoan with impunity the dependency wrought by the welfare system, a winning stratagem even if, as in Carter’s case, they recognize the irony of their situated knowledge and their hard-won successes. In the same vein, following in the footsteps of its white progenitors, the “new” black middle class generated by the freedom struggles of the last forty years is migrating to the suburbs. After all, like other middle-class fractions, it did not rise to professional status or middle management to remain on the mean streets. There is no denying anyone the pleasures of consumer society simply because the vast majority of blacks remain locked into urban decline or to correctional institutions. (One out of eight black men will have been incarcerated sometime in his life; the figure for whites is about one in twenty, still a draconian statistic).

The movements of the African American contingent of the professional and managerial class reveal one of the aspects of the fusion of race and class. According to a recent *New York Times* feature, when Maryland blacks succeed, they form racialized enclaves in suburban precincts and look with apprehension at the jungle of the cities of Baltimore and Washington, just like their white counterparts. Here we can observe the importance of forgetting. Cultural and social critics may indulge the luxury of showing the arc (roughly the origin) of the new privileged tenth in the dialectic of social combat and conservative policy. But the subjects cannot afford to recall the conditions of their possibility without suffering the pain they would rather escape. Guilt is rarely productive and, in this case, is downright fractious.

There are good reasons in the annals of the freedom struggle for forgetting. Recall that Martin Luther King’s intervention on behalf of the Memphis sanitation workers produced considerable head-wagging among leading figures in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who *knew* the price he would pay for linking civil rights with building a new labor movement and a movement of the poor. As we know, he paid

Intellectuals such  
as Henry Louis  
Gates, Jr. and  
Cornel West  
may be fêted,  
celebrated, and  
made visible in  
white liberal  
circles. However,  
they are still  
racially coded;  
their pronounc-  
ments have  
weight only as  
*information*  
about the other  
America.

with his life for these indiscretions. And, virtually no major black or white political or labor leader—with the partial exception of Jesse Jackson in his 1988 presidential campaign—has been willing to propose, much less implement, such a strategy.

I have been around long enough to remember how difficult it was for King to step out of the identity code into which he had been interpellated. Similarly, activists in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were, early in the organization's development, extremely reluctant to take up economic issues lest the main thrust of its work, voter registration and education, be diverted. Even though SNCC did make some efforts towards addressing these issues, it was only with extreme trepidation. In the end, neither SCLC, the major organization of the southern movement, nor SNCC was able to pursue Dr. King's new direction after his murder. These are some of the wages of racialization. Along with the ideology of integration, the last chance for class politics died with Dr. King.

I am not claiming that there is no difference between middle-class whites and blacks. The black middle class has suffered the vagaries of racialization in ways unknown to most white men, even Jews and Italians. Like women, blacks confront the "glass ceiling" in large sectors of corporate culture. And, after forty years of the "second wave" civil rights movement, the black prominenti remain, as always, largely confined to entertainment such as sports, the arts, and media, and to religion and education. To be sure, there are some emerging African American intellectuals who have been able to forge public space, but on severely restricted terms. For example, intellectuals such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West may be fêted, celebrated, and made visible in white liberal circles. However, they are still racially coded; their pronouncements have weight only as *information* about the other America. And their intellectual work, however compelling, must not only maintain race as a frame of reference, but must be tacitly aware of the limits of discourse. When, and if, African American intellectuals step out of the identity codes to speak of class issues like the recent General Motors strike, international relations (say, Bosnia) or, heaven forbid, the viability of current political arrangements they, like Martin Luther King who publicly opposed the Vietnam War, risk marginalization, let alone excoriation.

In response to the second question, race in the post-King era works in the spatial residue of the monumental defeats sustained by the popular Left since 1966. There is, of course, no single "cause" such as racism to explain the new situation. Description demands explanation, even if complexity forbids clarity. I have sketched some key features of the historical dimension: even at its high point the movement was constrained by the

deep-seated racial codes that pervade discourse and overwhelm class consideration. The “wages of whiteness”—in David Roediger’s felicitous phrase—accounts for a great deal, especially for the catastrophic decline of a labor movement unable or unwilling to deal with racialization of class issues. And perhaps equally significant is the tendency of the historic Left to adamantly refuse to say what it means, to transform its private understanding into public debate, in short, to engage in a genuine radical politics. Rather, the labor, civil rights, and other movements and the ideological lefts on their periphery have, with few exceptions, acted *strategically* rather than according to their own views. On the other side, the Right has become ever more emboldened to utter its deepest beliefs, and has reached down to the fears of white America—sexual as much as economic. Where new space has been created, it is nearly exclusively on the terrain of identity politics.

Now, identity politics may have been absolutely necessary to overcome the silence of oppression. And, these movements and their intellectuals have produced new spaces of discourse and action which, among other achievements, have forged new chains of solidarity within segments of the oppressed. But, as I have argued, the codes themselves are instruments of imprisonment as well as empowerment. To break out of the constraints of racialization, whites as well as blacks could begin to speak “truth” to power; to reverse as well as to wield identity codes; to speak as the Other as much as the “self”. Of course, these scenarios would be contrary to what appears to be going on. An African American woman would, as Michelle Wallace has done, be free, or at least be willing, to risk freedom by speaking the consequences of masculinism among black men. Whites would go among whites—an early demand of the Black Power movement—and speak about race. In practice, as well as in theory, we would collectively elaborate the work begun by Ted Allen, Noel Ingatiev, and Alex Saxton among others. They have argued that race is a white problem and have shown that racialization enslaves blacks, but also whites, even as they are *relatively* privileged. It’s an old Marxist idea and maybe a humanist one as well, but it throws a brilliant light on race and racism, one that blacks have been pointing out for centuries. Allen and his colleagues recognize that there is no possibility to address the dirty secret of American politics and culture—class exploitation and social hierarchy—unless whiteness is done in. Which would not prevent the development of a new politics of alliance in which class would be interwoven with considerations of gender, sexuality, and racialization.

When whites are prepared to deconstruct their own racial identity, straights are prepared to recognize their polymorphousness, and men are ready to confront masculinism, then we may expect to have the dialogue that might make it possible to construct a new heterogeneous, if not

The cat has been  
let out of the bag:  
affirmative action  
guidelines can be  
met through  
hiring white  
women and  
designated non-  
black minorities.

plural, radicalism. Of course, these discursive moves do not erase or evade the urgency of building such practical alliances as might be possible in these hard times. In this connection, would that Clinton was confronted by a solid bloc capable of staying his hand on the withdrawal of Lani Guinier's nomination or Johnetta Cole's non-nomination to the post of Education Secretary. More to the point, where are the voices opposing workfare and the free market claptrap that has been used to take the costs of the current economic crisis out on a racialized working class? Why are we unable to say what we mean?

**Lewis R. Gordon**

Perhaps the most dominant feature of racist ideology is the extent to which it is premised upon a spirit of evasion. The very supposition of a superior segment of humanity—a primary theme requiring a designated *inferior* humanity, which stands as the sine qua non of racism—demands the recalcitrant attitude of looking in the face of human beings and failing to see them. In this regard, racism stands fundamentally as a form of bad faith, wherein one lies to oneself in an effort to hide from freedom and responsibility. Since responsibility is an ever-present feature of human relationships, bad faith involves the effort to evade the responsibility incumbent upon the recognition of human beings. Such evasion hides one, ultimately, from oneself.<sup>18</sup>

I open with these remarks primarily because of the extent to which such evasion is not only a feature of race discourse, particularly in the United States, but also a feature of the naiveté that accompanies a great deal of “popular” responses to racist ideology. There is, for instance, in the current hoopla of “multicultural” discourse, a full-fledged self-bewitchment which confuses antiracial rhetoric with the achievement of antiracial reality. What is submerged in the ecstasy of self-delusion is the extent to which the quest for denial may be premised upon the continued reality of racial injustice. This circumstance is in part premised upon the fact that racial justice is no more than a verbal aim of a society that depends so much on racial injustice. Thus, mystification is the usual response. For instance, it has become popular to treat racism as an equal opportunity affair. If racial discrimination can be leveled out, then racial responsibility and racial “privilege,” the argument goes, can be rendered truly anonymous.

The problem is that demographical reality says otherwise. Take, for example, the case of affirmative action. Although blacks have been getting laid off at up to five times that of whites, affirmative action guidelines continue to be met in various sectors of American society. How is that possi-

ble? The obvious answer is that the cat has been let out of the bag: affirmative action guidelines can be met through hiring white women and designated non-black minorities. What both private and public sectors show in this regard is that, given the opportunity to hire or admit any other ethnic or racial group besides blacks, the hiring of blacks would fall low on the priority list. In fact, blacks may even be fired or laid off for the purposes of hiring more “acceptable” groups—groups, that is, who in fact have a greater possibility of identification/ assimilation within the United States’ racist status quo, such as, for example, white women and Latinas and Latinas who can “pass.”<sup>19</sup>

What this suggests, then, is that in the context of the United States, the black/white dichotomy functions in a far more determining way than is acknowledged in the current rhetoric of equal-opportunity discrimination. This is because, in the United States, *racism* means *antiblack racism*. All other groups are assessed and ultimately discriminated against or favored in terms of the extent to which they carry residues of whiteness or blackness. Thus, to articulate the racial situation in the United States without focusing on blacks leads, ultimately, to *evading* American racism.

Blackness as a marker of racial ideology permeates not only the structures of employment and opportunity, but also the directions of social scientific *explanations* as well. Choose any social phenomenon and simply make a black subject its bearer. Suddenly, race-causal explanations would emerge. There are people out there studying black subjects in experiments to see if blacks are predisposed to violence against each other, as though millions of people crammed into small geographical domains have never been violent to each other throughout the course of history, or as though a crime-dominated, segregated society like the United States doesn’t result in people killing those to whom they have the most access. There are people out there studying blacks’ disposition to crime as though police officers and many Americans do not tend to “see” crime only in the form of the black body. There are also people studying the supposed promiscuity of black working-class teenagers without accounting for whether the assault on the poor in this country leaves similar teenage-pregnancy rates among white working-class teenagers. W. E. B. Du Bois said it well at the turn of the century when he pointed out that, in the American context, black people are not often seen as having legitimate problems. They are seen as the problems themselves.

There is a Manichaeism element to racism. Under Manichaeism, one treats problems of value like problems of pollution; one need only clean away a vice and injustice as one would sterilize bacteria from water. We find this dimension of Manichaeism ironically presented in the form of purported anti-Manichaeism today, in the popular rhetoric of eliminating race itself instead of dealing with conditions that militate against treating

members of “races” as respected members of the human community. This approach is misguided because it fails to account for how race functions in a racist society to begin with. Only people who are designated as inferior are regarded ultimately as races. In the U.S. context, this means that whites have the luxury of bare-human designation.

Thus, we find whites who are indignant in a world in which they are expected to regard blacks as their equal. The demand for equality drags them down from their godly status into the realm of staring the possibility of humanity in the face. The problem is that they’ve never taken seriously the possibility that the humanity that stares them back in the face may be a black one. Finding themselves in such a situation, they find themselves suddenly *racialized* and have, with the ready aid of black cohorts, unleashed the familiar war on racial identity.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, there is a reason why, in the face of the demand for racial justice, there exists so much resistance to the very question of racial justice itself. If whites do in fact benefit from an antiblack world, how can it be possible that racial justice should be an issue for whites? There is a reason why in various parts of the country hate groups are preparing themselves for a race war by training in paramilitary techniques. There is a reason why, in spite of its well known terrorist activity, the Ku Klux Klan maintains “legal” status in the U.S. It is fear of an implication of just decisions made in “favor” of blacks, and that is this: racial justice is not designed for *whites*. It is absurd to articulate whites as an historically oppressed group, and it is because of that absurdity that there have been efforts to decenter the discourse on racial justice from its focus on race to ethnic groups and individuals. Thus, one hears about historically oppressed white ethnics and then *Bakke* who was supposedly discriminated against by policies that favored *blacks*.

The discussion is then “loosened up” in a form purporting to respond to everyone’s “difference.” But we know what lurks in the background of current “cultural differences” discourse. It has been suggested in the context of this symposium on the current state of the debates on race, for instance, that race may still matter because racism endures. An assumption here, however, is that racism itself is not the primary target as much as the accompanying assertion of race. If so, I don’t see how the following conclusion can be avoided: Why not simply give up race?

At this point, blacks more than any other group have reason to be suspicious, since such a quest often translates into a call for blacks to turn their faces away from reality. Whites have nothing to lose in a world in which one no longer sees race precisely because they are the already-assumed standpoint of humanity and the group by which race is conditioned. Not to see race means not only to “see” only white people or see all other people as white, but also to act as if the conditions that govern the distribution of racial reality were in the hands of blacks and other

people of color. While whites can act as though there were no such realities as race and racism, any black that chooses to do so acts at his or her peril.<sup>21</sup>

It is not my wish to disappear. The rhetoric of eliminating race as a category of discussion—usually in virtue of its status as a constructed phenomenon—misses the fundamental ethical issue. One doesn't deal with racism by evading its subject matter. The arduous ethical task of forging a relationship of respect toward black people in U.S. society cannot be addressed by pretending they no longer exist. In other words, the bottom line is: Do black people have a right to exist?

Since I don't know of any group of human beings who can make a viable response to such a loaded question, a question loaded in the sense of playing on the bare fact that existence in itself justifies nothing save that one faces either the choice to go on or the self-defeating resort of suicide, we can then see the oppressive nature of the demand. Yet, black people face this demand everyday. To be black in the United States is the ever-present call to justify still being around.

I spoke earlier of affirmative action. The year I entered the university in which I now work, there were sixteen black faculty members out of two thousand white ones. I was the only black hired that year in my division. There were forty hires. I am in a profession in which my group, blacks, comprises two percent. Throughout the year, the school paper published a constant stream of dribble about the displacement of workers by blacks and the lowering of "standards" at the institution. There was even a Ku Klux Klan march, in which the major rallying cry was against the displacement of whites by blacks in what were presumed to be white jobs.

It is amazing how many mediocre white folks and misguided black folks in the United States gullibly pursue such rubbish. How often do resentment and concern for standards emerge among such whites when only whites have been hired in such positions? Apparently, they are only displaced when blacks are hired. So, apparently, whites don't have to justify being hired over other whites but blacks have to justify such apparent "injustice." I wonder how many white academics, for instance, would like to trade the two percent probability with their black colleagues, given that hiring rates persist at well over ninety percent in favor of whites. If there is anyone "taking jobs" away from white people, the demographics show that it is, in some cases nine times out of ten, other white people.

Yet whites "see" too many black people out there, too many black people ever alert to get their bit of whiteness. Why? If we return to our disgruntled white individual in a world of black opportunity, it becomes obvious. If he doesn't have a cause for alarm until a black is either hired or admitted, then the basic assumption on which his reasoning is based becomes clear. How many black people are too many in an antiblack racist's world? The answer is simple: one.

---

To be black in the  
United States is  
the ever-present  
call to justify still  
being around.

---

To be black, then, means to live in a world in which one is always superfluous. The significance of this phenomenon is what is denied in the current effort to deny racism itself. The one-is-one-too-many motif enables, of course, the illusion of a proliferation of racial “mixing.” The black man who stands in supposedly “integrated” advertisements constitutes black presence. The tiny cadre of black faculty in universities is treated as the accomplishment of racial justice. In fact, a special kind of rhetorical device holds the day. Institutions boast about “having” blacks, as though one can have black people through the “possession” of one or two. The representative dimension of such “possessing” comes to the fore, however, when we think of them as “representing” blacks who are absent. In a world of having blacks, there is the evasion of black inclusion itself. Responsibility is sanitized in a protective wrapping that keeps many blacks out through profiling the few who are presented as being “in.” This move renders the excluded to a form of invisibility in which even their cries are rendered mute.

Representative blackness also affords the familiar devices of Booker T. Washington-ism through which blackness is presented to white America in a filtered, acceptable form. We have witnessed this phenomenon emerge in full force over the past decade and a half with the ascendance of a black pseudo-intelligentsia/pseudo-bourgeoisie that ultimately takes the heat off of whites in race politics in the United States, with rhetoric that relegates the experience of black people to paranoia, illusion, pathology, nihilism, self-hatred, and intellectual deficiency. They are pseudo-powerful because their only source of capital is the intermediary role they play between powerful white communities and economically comfortable but alienated segments of black communities, which encourages their tendency to work amid the illusion of technique premised on a philosophical position that judges, while rejecting the conditions of being judged. They constitute a pseudo-intelligentsia because of the extent to which, when all is said and done, the only political organizing they are engaged in has more impact on the linings of their pockets than on the forces of misrepresentation and dehumanization in their specializations and communities. The players are well known and the falsehoods they spread are popular ultimately because they have an audience who accepts fiction as fact and regards fact as fiction.

There is a great deal of fiction being spread out there about black folks. But in the past two decades, there has been a destabilization of intellectual disciplinary techniques with which to respond to such tales of the crypt. Today, anyone can publish any falsehood about black people without worry, precisely because the *responses* won't be aired within the media contexts in which the damaging assertions were first made, and the people who make them never go on record as acknowledging their false-

hoods. Worse, we are dealing here with individuals who are scholars and high-ranking public officials who encourage a population already without good will to accept as fact what is said. For a time, I thought this was a problem of gullible white people. But more and more, it seems to me that the situation stems from an unwillingness to seek information that may prove otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard said it best when he asked: “Which deception is most dangerous? Whose recovery is more doubtful, that of him who does not see or of him who sees and still does not see? Which is more difficult, to awaken one who sleeps or to awaken one who, awake, dreams that he is awake?”<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard wrote in the context of what he saw as the comfortable scandal of the Present Age. His remarks work very well also amid the comfortable sleeping awokenness of the current Racist Age.

### **Kevin Gaines**

The dubious black middle-class conviction that positive images of black success and achievement, long repressed in the white-dominated mass media, would acquit the race, as it were, and diminish racism, was exploded yet again in April of 1992.<sup>24</sup> That was when the final episode of the Cosby show coincided with the acquittal of the Los Angeles policemen who had beaten Rodney King, and the ensuing rebellion. The exemplary image of Cosby’s television family was clearly no match for the murderous racism that had violated King’s citizenship and humanity not just once with his beating, but a second time, in a court, even after the horrific attack had been videotaped, making the entire world a witness.<sup>25</sup>

That contradictory moment of upheaval epitomizes the benign but deadly logic of neoliberal racism in the media and the courts, institutions that, like the church and state, refuse to remain separate in a society increasingly defined by multimedia corporate power. In the post-Civil Rights era, the media politics of neoliberal racism wants it both ways, renouncing legal segregation while advancing a respectable, cultural racism that enables domestic attacks on the welfare state and formulations of punitive urban policies. In addition, neoliberal racism exploits the symbolism of a multiracial U.S. military to give a humanitarian cast to anti-democratic operations in underdeveloped countries, such as Somalia and Haiti.

Within today’s media racism, symbols of racial progress reinforce, rather than refute, degrading group stereotypes of family disorganization and crime. Here, biological and cultural racisms often merge, as seen in the “violence initiative,” a federally supported research program seeking a genetic basis for identifying potentially violent inner-city youth.<sup>26</sup> Neolib-

The problem with  
the neoliberal  
fixation on black  
racism is its  
steadfast refusal  
to situate the  
internalized  
racism of under-  
standably angry  
and aggrieved  
African Americans  
within a historical  
legacy of institu-  
tionalized white  
supremacy.

eral racism perpetuates an American tradition of negrophobic scapegoating in the mass media at election time, and it has also created the recent phenomenon of the televised racial (and sexual) courtroom spectacle.

Neoliberal media coverage strongly suggests that the only racists left are black militants or separatists. This question of “reverse racism,” of whether African Americans can be racists, is polarizing, evasive, and ultimately trivial. No group’s oppressed status makes it immune from harboring racial prejudices. The problem with the neoliberal fixation on black racism is its steadfast refusal to situate the internalized racism of understandably angry and aggrieved African Americans within a historical legacy of institutionalized white supremacy.

Although it thrives on sensationalism, neoliberal racism is absorbed daily by audiences with numbing regularity. Crucial to this process is the suppression of the actual diversity and contested nature of black social thought in the mass media, with only the unconscious internalized racism of African American media spokespersons judged fit for audiences. Put bluntly, racism sells, and the commodity status of neoliberal racism in the corporate media (in talk radio, television, print journalism, and the literary marketplace), provoking audiences and broadcasting disinformation, poses a formidable challenge for black media spokespersons intent on opposing neoliberal ideology.<sup>27</sup>

Neoliberal editors and television news producers often feature ambivalent black expressions of nostalgia for the era of segregation. Here, a select few are drafted to suggest that blacks themselves believe that “integration” may well have been a failure. Neoliberal racism thus employs representative black media spokespersons to play the race card by proxy, authenticating its weak commitment to the enforcement of civil rights and to policies in the interest of poor and working people, both at home and abroad.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, the interests of neoliberal racism are tacitly advanced by black media spokespersons’ well-intentioned concern for the survival and cultural integrity of their communities. Here, black self-determination is tailored to neoliberals’ narcissistic (and constant, given the need to manage the routine destabilizing violence of state and police repression) need to reaffirm their race-neutral credentials. As for black conservatives who opportunistically invoke the racialized language of family and patriarchy, it is difficult to regard them as anything but a school of bottom dwellers, scrounging for the crumbs that trickle down from the powers presiding over deepening inequality and racial polarization.

Ostensibly antagonistic positions of neoliberal racism and problematic articulations of black cultural nationalism speak the same dominant language of the patriarchal family, the versatile trope of cultural racism and so-called authentic blackness. Neoliberal racism marches on, partly

because antiracist movements have often mistaken black patriarchy for black liberation. That Mike Tyson could be classified by some as a political prisoner, along with Geronimo Pratt and other unlawfully jailed black activists, illustrates patriarchy's allure for many as the essence of black power and respectability. No wonder that black opposition, since the Civil Rights reforms, has been undermined by the sexism and homophobia commonly associated with white supremacy. Such black spokespersons plead "no contest" to the neoliberal right-wing assault on social spending, and risk becoming, for the moment, unprotesting bystanders to punitive policies of police repression and surveillance, prison construction, and incarceration. The preoccupation with patriarchy seems particularly misguided in light of the current assault on black political representation through opposition in the Federal courts to redistricting plans that would create black majority districts.<sup>29</sup>

Among many black opinion makers, class and gender anxieties fuel the defensive preoccupation with the patriarchal family as the symbol of community stability, if not survival. In its disenchantment with the limits of integration and its unfulfilled promise of equality, much black cultural nationalist rhetoric often regards class mobility with suspicion, viewing it as an obstacle to the realization of an authentic, unified black community or nation.<sup>30</sup> As a result, those able to leave black neighborhoods after desegregation have been seen by many in the neoliberal mass media to *represent* the problem. This is not to say that black nationalists' vigilant skepticism toward class mobility has not manifested itself constructively in the past as a trenchant critique of black elites and as an abiding concern for independent leadership and institution building. What the post-Civil Rights renunciation of "integration" by black cultural nationalists really represents, however, is the Black Power movement's analysis of the limitations of integrationist civil rights reforms. After their strategy of nonviolent direct action had desegregated the South, blacks in the movement mounted campaigns against northern poverty and residential segregation, and supported movements opposing U.S. imperialism. At present, neoliberal racism distorts the anti-integrationist collective memory of too many black media spokespersons, for whom one's blackness is chiefly defined by a depoliticized notion of one's presence or absence in the community.

The hegemony of self-help ideology—in other words, the shared emphasis of neoliberals and certain black media spokespersons on the perceived duties and obligations of the black middle class to "uplift the race"—is inescapably rooted in the white supremacist expectation that African Americans of all social strata remain in their place.<sup>31</sup> This past was revisited throughout the anti-civil rights Reaganite 1980s, when, ironically, many black cultural elites were drawn to the popular media diagnosis attributing urban decline to the exodus of the black middle class from

inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup> Such moralizing, reflecting the separate-but-equal status of black media commentators, precluded any discussion of such issues as the flight of manufacturing jobs and capital from central cities, the deterioration of municipal services, and especially of urban schools, the public institution most crucial to social mobility.

As members of the black middle class stand accused in the mass media of abandoning what are patronizingly construed as “their” problems, and with central cities and poor rural districts besieged by endemic joblessness, violence, disease, and death (including family violence against women), all we seem to hear is nostalgia for an imagined golden age of segregation and self-help symbolized by patriarchy. This nostalgia renders suspect all instances of social mobility outside the figurative boundaries of race and family: for example, within (white) suburbia, “corporate America,” historically nonblack colleges, transracial adoptions, or in marriages with nonblacks (where blacks are denounced as being “white-identified,” or as “selling out”). These options, including feminist or womanist consciousness, and gay and lesbian sexual orientations, are scapegoated by many black nationalists and middle-class blacks (often one and the same), as a betrayal of the race and a threat to “the black family.”<sup>33</sup> Matters are further complicated by the fact that, for many, the family—extended as often as nuclear—remains a wellspring of emotional and material support. Indeed, if the diversity and flexibility of actual families were truly affirmed, then black nationalism might become a political force to be reckoned with. But family ideals can only polarize when predicated on patriarchal power, as the humiliations imposed by poverty and racism reverberate, so often lethally, within the domestic realm (and African Americans are not the only group so afflicted).

While neoliberals and some black nationalists collaborate on subtle race-baiting in the media, the pursuit of unrestricted markets, corporate downsizing, and union-busting policies continue, and unemployment, poverty, and homelessness are viewed stubbornly through the racially distorted lens of an entrenched ghetto subculture impervious to any but the most punitive policy interventions. Civil liberties are eroded as more black men find themselves disproportionately under the control of an expanding criminal justice system, while the lion’s share of abusers of illegal substances return unmolested to the suburbs. As for poor women on welfare (who are predominantly nonblack), it is feared that they will reproduce the “culture of poverty” indefinitely, barring workfare arrangements by states and the private sector to dislodge them from the public assistance rolls to the bottom of the labor market. Issues of exploitation and maldistribution of such human needs as health care and education are reduced to biological matters, which, in turn, justify draconian efforts by corporations and municipalities to suppress wages and police black communities.

Finally, the widespread concern, shared by many blacks, with upholding respectability through “family values,” has militated against AIDS awareness and prevention, with disastrous (and too often ignored) results for black women and for other communities of color.

Instead of addressing realities of joblessness and poverty, irresponsible neoliberal preacher-politicians exploit racism, transforming the public sphere into a church and blurring politics and religion. Among blacks, increased control of the mass media is crucial. The recuperation of the African American past within world history offers a potential alternative to the separate-but-equal terms dictated by neoliberal racism. A noteworthy example of this quest for true intellectual independence is Haile Gerima’s feature film *Sankofa* (an Akan word which means, “remember the past and go forward”), which transcends the racialized dynamics of positive images, effecting audiences’ engagement with the long submerged history of enslavement and resistance. Perhaps it is necessary to visualize the Old World dungeons from whence we came in order to unambiguously refuse the attitudes and policies that threaten to divide, conquer, and imprison us all back home.

## Notes

1. Itabari Njeri, “Words to Live or Die By: Mapping the Psychological Landscape of a Scarred Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 31 May 1992, 23.

2. Quoted in Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (New York: Verso, 1990), 150.

3. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 1985), 116.

4. Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper, “The Spaces That Difference Makes: Some Notes on the Geographical Margins of the New Cultural Politics,” in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (New York: Routledge, 1993), 184–5.

5. Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: Verso, 1991), 52.

6. Mitchell Duneier, *Slim’s Table* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 96.

7. Indeed, if the images of rebellion in Los Angeles obeyed the logic of black rage, those of its aftermath belied a different representational economy: one which invited people of all cultures and all races to participate in rebuilding what Robert Reinhold describes as the “city of nightmares” (*New York Times*, 3 May 1992, D1).

8. Vera M. Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 172.

9. See *Legislation and Litigation Involving Norplant: Background* (Washington, D.C.: Women’s Legal Defense Fund, n.d.).

10. To complicate the situation even further, however, we need to recognize

that the dominant group has at its disposal the strategy of political subversion. The dominant bloc can appeal to and exploit differences within the disenfranchised ranks as a way of countering the most oppositional black constituency. It can address the leading subjugated group antagonistically, while speaking amicably to that group—or groups—with which it hopes to make common cause. In Britain, for example, the Thatcher regime was very successful in splitting the black British vote. On the one hand, the Tories made a concerted effort to obtain the south Asian vote; on the other, the Thatcher administration made clear its intention to not court the Afro-Caribbean vote at all. In this country there are similar splits in the black vote, even if the nuances are different. Even when other subjugated voices are not ostensibly silent, therefore, they do impact the way in which the people who supposedly speak in their name are heard.

11. Steven Webster, "Dialogue and Fiction in Ethnography," *Dialectical Anthropology* 7 (1982): 101.

12. Etienne Balibar, "Is There a Neo-Racism?" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 18.

13. *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

14. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65.

15. The rearticulation of Marx as set forth by Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 277.

16. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1982), 45.

17. Wahneema Lubiano, from an unpublished essay.

18. For more discussion of this phenomenon, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: The Humanities Press, 1995).

19. For a discussion, see Anthony Monteiro, "Toward a Program for African-American Equality," *Political Affairs* 73 (February 1994): 19–25.

20. For a discussion of the "racialization" of whites, see Robert Westley, "White Normativity and the Racial Rhetoric of Equal Protection," in *Black Texts and Black Textuality: Constructing and De-Constructing Blackness*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Renee T. White (forthcoming). The *cohorts* here refers to the phenomenon of "elite" cultural studies, wherein there is the ongoing evasion, for the most part, of serious confrontation with race issues through focus on the red herring and often strawman of "modernism."

21. Think of Frantz Fanon's concerns throughout his classic *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967).

22. For a discussion of the circumstances alluded to here, see the provocative issue of *Black Studies Bulletin: Words Work, A Periodic Journal of Black Culture* 16 (Winter 1993–1994), subtitled "Blacks, Jews, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: A Response."

23. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 23.

24. The author wishes to thank the *Social Text* collective, Louise Newman, Tricia Rose, Arno Mayer, and Juliet Walker for helpful conversations and suggestions, and Wahneema Lubiano, Arnold Rampersad, Judith Ferszt, and the

African-American and American Studies programs at Princeton University for their contributions in organizing the "Race Matters" conference at Princeton University in April of 1994, an event which enabled these reflections.

25. See John Hess, Chuck Klienhaus, and Julia Lesage, "After Cosby/After the L.A. Rebellion: The Politics of Transnational Culture in the Post Cold War Era," *Jump Cut* 37 (July 1992): 1-4.

26. Peter R. Breggin, "U.S. Hasn't Given Up Linking Genes to Crime," *New York Times*, 18 September 1992, A34.

27. The recent mobilization of African American, Latino and Asian American journalists against media racism is an encouraging sign. Several memoirs by black journalists, post-Civil Rights era pioneers with such mainstream media organizations as the *New York Times*, *Time*, and the *Washington Post*, recounted their confrontations with white (and black) editors over problematic constructions of race, poverty, and pathology. See Roger Wilkins, *A Man's Life* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Oxbow, 1991); Jake Lamar, *Bourgeois Blues* (New York: Summit Books, 1991); and Jill Nelson, *Volunteer Slavery* (Chicago: Noble, 1993).

28. Charisse Jones, "Years on Integration Road: New Views of an Old Goal," *New York Times*, 10 April 1994, A1, 40. On the anti-civil rights agenda of the Reagan era, see John Hope Franklin, *The Color Line* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

29. Elaine R. Jones, "In Peril: Black Lawmakers," *New York Times*, 11 September 1994, E19.

30. This phenomenon is examined in Deborah King, "Unraveling the Fabric, Missing the Beat: Class and Gender in Afro-American Social Issues," *The Black Scholar* 22 (1992): 36-43.

31. For a historical treatment of black middle-class "racial uplift" ideology, see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Culture, Politics and Leadership Since the Turn of the Century* (forthcoming, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

32. Many black cultural nationalists have inherited the "underclass" and "culture of poverty" theories surrounding William Julius Wilson's research on the causes of urban poverty, which dominated media discussions of race and urban poverty in the mid-1980s. Wilson's thesis was further "authenticated" by Bill Moyers' documentary on the "vanishing black family," which solidified the linkage between racial progress and pathology in the public mind, discrediting African American citizens' claims to equal access and entitlement to the resources of the state. On middle-class blacks' sense of obligation to less privileged blacks, motivated by the equation of race and family ideals, see Bill E. Lawson, "Uplifting the Race: Middle-Class Blacks and the Truly Disadvantaged," in *The Underclass Question*, ed. Bill Lawson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 90-113; Roy Brooks, *Rethinking the American Race Problem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 142-9; and Michele Ingrassia, "Endangered Family," *Newsweek* (30 August 1993): 17-27.

33. Concern for the racial integrity of black families is reflected in the controversy over transracial adoption. Those opposing the adoption of black children by nonblack families contend that while white parents may be as loving as any other parents, they lack the cultural experience of racism, and thus cannot prepare black children to withstand the pressures of societal racism. Such logic effectively pathologizes black children of white adoptive parents, and although such opponents as the National Association of Black Social Workers make cultural argu-

ments to support their position, it appears that a biological determinism influences their views. These views reflect the general trend of birth parents, who assert their rights to their children over those of adoptive parents. Black cultural nationalists thus assert a correlation between race, family, and biology that becomes suspect if one considers that, given our history, black families themselves may not provide assurance that their children will be well adapted to racism. And there remains the sobering fact that while black families adopt children at a higher rate than white families, there are not enough black families for the number of black children in foster care. See David Wheeler, "Black Children, White Parents: The Difficult Issue of Transracial Adoption," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, v. XL, no. 4 (15 September 1993): A8, 9, 16.

## LINKED CITATIONS

- Page 1 of 1 -



You have printed the following article:

### **Race and Racism: A Symposium**

Tricia Rose; Andrew Ross; Robin D. G. Kelley; Joe Wood; Howard Winant; Jacquie Jones; Michael Eric Dyson; Phillip Brian Harper; Steven Gregory; Grant Farred; Gina Dent; David Roediger; Amiri Baraka; Stanley Aronowitz; Lewis R. Gordon; Kevin Gaines

*Social Text*, No. 42. (Spring, 1995), pp. 1-52.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0164-2472%28199521%290%3A42%3C1%3ARARAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

---

*This article references the following linked citations. If you are trying to access articles from an off-campus location, you may be required to first logon via your library web site to access JSTOR. Please visit your library's website or contact a librarian to learn about options for remote access to JSTOR.*

### **Notes**

#### <sup>14</sup> **Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book**

Hortense J. Spillers

*Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Counteremory: The "American" Connection. (Summer, 1987), pp. 64-81.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0300-7162%28198722%2917%3A2%3C64%3AMBPMMA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>