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Whiteness, Racism, and Identity

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Abstract

As an organizing concept, whiteness rests on insecure theoretical ground—specifically, the notions of identity and agency. It replaces racism with race and equates race with racial identity, which it accepts uncritically both as an empirical datum and as a tool of analysis. It thereby establishes a false parallel between the objects and the authors of racism and between Afro-Americans and other Americans of non-European ancestry. Whiteness is the ideological counterpart of race relations, both of them ways of skirting around the relations of political, social, and economic power that have determined the place of Afro-Americans in American society.

Whiteness is the shotgun marriage of two incoherent but well-loved concepts: identity and agency. Racism—the assignment of people to an inferior category and the determination of their social, economic, civic, and human standing on that basis—unsettles fundamental instincts of American academic professionals who consider themselves liberal, leftist, or progressive. It is an act of peremptory, hostile, and supremely—often fatally—consequential identification that unceremoniously overrides its objects' sense of themselves. Racism thus unseats both identity and agency, if identity means sense of self,¹ and agency anything beyond conscious, goal-directed activity, however trivial or ineffectual.² The targets of racism do not “make” racism, nor are they free to “negotiate” it, though they may challenge it or its perpetrators and try to navigate the obstacles it places in their way. Even as racism exposes the hollowness of agency and identity, it violates the two-sides-to-every-story expectation of symmetry that Americans are peculiarly attached to. There is no voluntary and affirmative side to racism as far as its victims are concerned, and it has no respect for symmetry at all.

That is why well-meaning scholars are more apt to speak of *race* than of *racism*. *Race* is a homier and more tractable notion than *racism*, a rogue elephant gelded and tamed into a pliant beast of burden. Substituted for *racism*, *race* transforms the act of a subject into an attribute of the object. And because *race* denotes a state of mind, feeling, or being, rather than a program or pattern of action, it radiates a semantic and grammatical ambiguity that helps to restore an appearance of symmetry, particularly with the help of a thimblery that imperceptibly moves the pea from *race* to *racial identity*.

Whiteness is just such a thimblery. It performs a series of deft displacements, first substituting race for racism, then postulating identity as the social substance of race, and finally attributing racial identity to persons of European

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descent. By those maneuvers, it is possible to reinstate the orthodox pieties. *Whiteness* invests ordinary white people with agency (even if only in evil-doing), in the flabby sense that *agency* has acquired in American historical literature. Furthermore, by equating race with identity and attributing it to white persons, *whiteness* seems to banish the troubling asymmetry that is the essence of racism. The vagueness of the concept of identity and its usually undetected incursions back and forth across the border between individual and collective, subjective and objective, optional and compulsory,³ have tempted scholars to collapse racism—a forcible and authoritative assignment of race—into racial identity.

Once racism, having passed through the buffer zone of whiteness, crosses the border into identity and voluntarism, it returns to its point of origin with an alias—*race*—and a new passport. The blurred photograph shows a neutral face, and the impostor goes surrounded by the benevolent trappings of agency. A brand becomes an identity, and those who wear the brand become agents in its burning into their own flesh (the helpful ambiguity of the word leaving delicately obscure whether *agent* in this instance means initiator or instrument).⁴ As one artless formulation has it: “[R]ace,” as an embodied category of difference and a constructed aspect of identity, is not imposed by one group upon another . . . [I]t is a product of an ongoing dialogue. . . . ‘Racial’ identifications . . . function as tools of both domination and resistance.”⁵ When the domestication of racism is complete, those to whom race has been attached as a stigma appear instead as its willing co-authors, their co-authorship apotheosized as an act of resistance.

Traveling under the alias of race or racial identity, racism remains, nonetheless, as despotic as ever, the alias masking its despotism. Since it remains racism, whatever the name on its passport, it forbids its objects to be other than members of a race. When a *New York Times* reporter refers to “Anglos, blacks, and Hispanics,” it is not through ignorance that persons of African descent speak both English and Spanish, but because, once people are known to have African ancestry, no other characteristic is admissible as a public identification of them.⁶ Nor can persons of African descent escape the consequences of the imposed identification by assertion or manipulation of their sense of self.⁷ New York City police officers, having identified an African immigrant as a black man, killed him on the spot. There was no dialogue or negotiation, just as enslavement was no matter for dialogue or negotiation between owners and their property.⁸

Afro-Americans themselves have fought successively for different ways of naming themselves as a people: African, colored, Afro-American, Negro with capital letter, black (with or without capital letter), African-American. (The current jargon, *of color*, does not belong to the series, being instead a semantic device to equate the unlike situations of Afro-Americans and other Americans of non-European origin.)⁹ Rather than evidence of Afro-Americans’ participation in the creation of race, the campaign for each name has been an attempt, particular to its time and circumstances, to name, define, or create a sense of peoplehood, in opposition to the prevailing racial (that is, racist) assignment. Each name, once accepted into the general public vocabulary, has simply become a variant word for Afro-Americans’ race. A sense of peoplehood, nationhood, or

comradeship in struggle may be available to others; but, for persons of African descent, all reduce to race, a life sentence for them and their issue in perpetuity.

Necessarily, the boundaries of the group for which African-descended people themselves have sought to define the terms of belonging and solidarity more or less coincide with the boundaries of the group that law and custom designate a race: It was precisely in order to escape racism that they sought their own definition of belonging and solidarity. But the only reason scholars conclude without thought or hesitation that every such proposed self-definition is an acquiescence in (or, as the tedious jargon has it, construction of) race is that the equation of self-definition and race for Afro-Americans—and for them alone—is an axiom, no more in need of proof than susceptible of it. In other words, the equation of Afro-Americans' peoplehood with race is a corollary of racism.

For purposes of defining kinship or social belonging or of asserting or enforcing group solidarity, European immigrants might think of themselves, and be thought of by society at large, in many ways—as Finns, Scots, Fenians, Knights of Columbus, *paesani*, *Turnverein* members, Forty-Eighters, or (as Professor Arnesen acutely reminds us) Democrats or Roman Catholics—without those designations' automatically reducing to race. But not Afro-Americans. Any individual or group self-definition or self-understanding that persons of African descent have developed while attempting to survive or oppose enslavement or demand freedom and citizenship has become race when translated into the general American idiom.

A chasm thus separates race as applied to European immigrants and as applied to persons of African descent. *Racialization* is the rotten plank by which whiteness scholars try to bridge the chasm. But the plank will not bear any weight. In the first place, *racialize*, like most adjectives passing for verbs, does not denote a precise action. What, exactly, do scientists, immigration officials, ballot reformers, intelligence testers, newspaper cartoonists, employers and potential employers, WASP snobs, and middle- and working-class nativists do when they racialize immigrants? The question itself is part of the answer: Not all racializers do the same thing when they racialize; and Professor Arnesen is right, therefore, to deplore the passive and stative constructions that so often obscure subject and action in the whiteness literature.

The rest of the answer, however, is what causes the plank bridge to collapse. Whatever the various racializers of European immigrants do, there is one thing none does, and that is to assign European immigrants to a biological category on the basis of the one-drop-of-blood or any-known-ancestry rule that applies to Afro-Americans. The rule itself forestalls anything of the kind, since it is designed to identify only one race; if applicable to a second, it can no longer identify the first. A recent illustration is the decision of a faction of Seminoles, apparently with the encouragement of federal government officials, to expel Afro-Seminoles from membership. African ancestry, it seems, outweighs both Seminole ancestry and two hundred years of shared history. The official terminology of *black Seminoles* and *blood Seminoles*, in its bare-faced absurdity, perfectly captures the one-drop rule, working away at the old stand.¹⁰

Whether as rough-and-ready ideology or as legal definition, racism in America has served, not to classify or categorize people, but to specify who is black and who is not. It is considered chic in some quarters to elide that fact, with the concept *racialize* disguising the elision. *Multi-racial* and its euphemistic synonym, *multicultural*, occupy a place of honor, on the supposition, presumably, that a blight becomes a blessing if widely enough diffused. Whatever their defects as historical analysis, they have become obligatory public gestures. Among breaches of propriety, defining race in “bipolar” terms ranks well ahead of wearing animal fur.¹¹ Nevertheless, bipolarity and asymmetry are the essential historical constituents of American racial ideology and of the actions that the ideology distills.

Inseparable from the bipolarity and asymmetry of American racial ideology is the “unmarked, unnamed status,” “seeming normativity,” “structured invisibility,” and “false universality” of those who are designated “not black.” That is the datum the whiteness literature seeks to extinguish or overrule. Rather than explore what the absence of a mark or name means, whiteness scholarship mulishly insists upon inserting the mark and name, officiously making good the failure of people in the past to do it themselves, as Professor Arnesen properly complains. The point, it seems, is not to interpret the past but to change it. By its insistence upon marking and naming and making visible, whiteness scholarship first strews race and races everywhere and then, *mirabile dictu*, discovers them everywhere.

Race then becomes so ubiquitous as to lose determinate shape, as Professor Arnesen points out. “Race and races are American history,” according to Matthew Frye Jacobson. “[T]o write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing.”¹² Jacobson prefaces his own observation with Oscar Handlin’s parallel observation that “immigrants *were* American history.”¹³ Both are fallacious, and a notable blind spot in whiteness literature reveals how the two fallacies compound each other. Whereas exploring how European immigrants became white is all the rage, no one deems it pertinent to such exploration to ask how African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants became black.¹⁴ Whiteness, according to its bards, may be identity; but blackness, as their silence confirms, is identification, authoritative and external. So unremarkable appears the alchemy by which African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants become black that they barely register as immigrants in the first place. The only Americans of African descent whom American historical literature routinely, if metaphorically, sees as immigrants are those who were not (American slaves and their descendants); while the Americans of African descent who actually were immigrants (voluntary migrants from Africa and the Caribbean) scarcely figure in the history of immigration and, on the rare occasions when they do, figure in it on a strictly segregated basis.¹⁵

Thus, in asking how immigrants acquire racial status in America, whiteness scholarship ignores the immigrants who, willy-nilly, acquire such status, fully named and marked, in order to focus on those whose racial status must be named and marked retroactively by historians. Not only does the question of African

and Caribbean immigrants' transformation into black people not enter the reckoning; neither does the related question of how, in their own self-perception, African and Caribbean immigrants became Africans and Caribbeans, which most were not before they left home.¹⁶ Immigrants from Europe underwent no comparable transformation. However they came to define themselves, or be defined by others, upon their arrival in America—as white people, Italians, Germans, or Jews, for instance—*European* was not one of the definitions.

The question of Afro-immigrants' becoming black is the only context in which that of Euro-immigrants' becoming white makes any sense at all; though the real issue is not how immigrants became white or black, but how persons not born and bred to it, whatever their ancestry, became oriented in the American world of black and white. When the dichotomy was not completely irrelevant in the immigrants' place of origin (as for most European immigrants), it would have been overlaid with other pairs—peasant/landlord, villager/chief, native/colonial, illiterate/educated, *indigène/évolué*, black/brown (or coloured)—that fundamentally distinguish it from the stark opposition that prevailed in the United States.

There is no mystery about how Afro-Caribbeans became oriented: by sudden encounter with a system of racism whose extent, depth, and depravity took even the best informed among them by surprise.¹⁷ But, whereas Afro-immigrants could not avoid confronting the apparatus and conventions of racism head-on, Euro-immigrants varied in the extent to which they were even aware of the apparatus, let alone acquainted at first hand with Afro-Americans. Whiteness is consequently a mixed bag, whose contents might, on one hand, be the use of the word *nigger* in children's games and, on the other hand, the wielding of bludgeon, torch, and firearm in pogroms against Afro-Americans. The first, as David Roediger illustrates by the example of his own boyhood, could coexist with admiration for Curt Flood, Bob Gibson, Lou Brock, Muhammad Ali, Tina Turner, and Smokey Robinson; it might eventuate in authorship of *The Wages of Whiteness*, rather than in Klan or Aryan Nation membership or anti-black violence.¹⁸

In any case, what may appear to be black/white relations often turn out, when probed, to rest on relations of power and rank among white persons. During the early 1920s, Rebecca Garvin, an Afro-American resident of Charleston, South Carolina, used to take her infant grandson for a daily outing around Colonial Lake in a lavishly adorned baby carriage. Each day a burly Irish policeman would see her and smile, until one day he approached close enough to see that the baby inside was a black boy, not—as the carriage had led him to suppose—a young white son or daughter of the Charleston aristocracy taking a promenade with his black mammy. At once the policeman turned hostile and tried to ban Rebecca Garvin from the area (which, under the law, he could not do). Whatever that Irishman's views about Afro-Americans and however they may have figured in his sense of self, his conduct in that instance had primarily to do with his relationship to his white superiors.¹⁹

The concept of whiteness cannot, therefore, solve what I take to be its central problem (at least as far as labor history is concerned): the source of

working-class bigotry, often murderous, against persons of African descent. Indeed, as an organizing concept, whiteness leads to no conclusions that it does not begin with as assumptions. Whiteness is a racial identity; therefore, white people have a racial identity. Whiteness equals white supremacy; therefore, European immigrants become white by adopting white supremacy. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore, the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness.

Considering how whiteness scholars scourge others for assuming a built-in tendency toward solidarity among workers, they display a strikingly romantic vision of solidarity as the state of nature for white people. Exclusion from whiteness, they seem to assume, must account for any breach of solidarity. If a white man snubs another or calls him a hard name, let alone exploits or disfranchises him, the point at issue is bound to be the victim's racial bona fides. On the far side of the color line, it seems, universal brotherhood and equality prevail.

The wage that supposedly accrues to whiteness typifies the romanticism that besets whiteness scholarship. Even supposing Afro-Americans' access to resources reduced to zero, it would not follow that the resources thus freed would be sufficient for all white people to have a share. Nor would the exclusion of Afro-Americans from civic and material goods guarantee Euro-Americans' access to them, as white people of the laboring classes learned to their cost after disfranchisement in the South.²⁰ (Whether the denial of goods to Afro-Americans psychologically compensated white people for their own failure to obtain them is a question best left to those enamored of speculation that evidence can neither prove nor disprove.) Who receives what is denied to Afro-Americans depends on political contest. The contest might turn on which white people can best take advantage of power over Afro-Americans, or it might have little or nothing to do with Afro-Americans.

For example, the town-dwelling middle class in upstate South Carolina during the 1890s and 1900s sought to curtail lynching by expanding the definition of capital offenses and speeding the process of legal execution. Obviously, solicitude for the victims of lynching had nothing to do with it. The reformers were determined to restore law and order, which is to say rule by the right sort of white people under the right circumstances; their leverage over Afro-Americans in the penal system provided a handy means to that end.²¹ In contrast, the denial of Afro-Americans cannot account for the publicly subsidized middle-class entitlements that became available to white working people in the post-World War Two period. If it did, white people ought to have enjoyed such entitlements from the dawn of the republic.

In 1909, a remarkably plain-spoken white Southerner disentangled the Negro Problem from race and the topics commonly equated with it: the supposed laziness, ignorance, criminality, or physical repulsiveness of Negroes. It was, he concluded, a matter of power:

The problem, How to maintain the institution of chattel slavery, ceased to be at Appomattox; the problem, How to maintain the social, industrial, and civic infe-

riority of the descendants of chattel slaves, succeeded it, and is the race problem of the South at the present time. There is no other.²²

W. E. B. Du Bois reached a similar conclusion in discarding the academic race dogma within which he had once sought to discover a space for the aspirations of Afro-American people. “[T]he black man,” he eventually concluded, is simply “a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”²³

The ideological formulation *race relations* skirted the considerable difficulties of stating the Negro problem within the forms of a purportedly democratic polity and with respect to persons who were nominally citizens in that polity enjoying full political rights. *Race relations* so suited the liberal thought of the time, and has been so well able to accommodate the internal twists of liberal and neo-liberal thought since, that it remains a vital part of the prevailing public language today.²⁴ It lingers on to cozen scholars who, instead of investigating it as an ideological device, accept it ingenuously as an empirical datum.²⁵ What race relations has accomplished on one side of the equation of racism, whiteness bids fair to accomplish on the other. With identity and agency displacing questions of political, economic, and social power, whiteness offers us endless variations on the theme of race that, reproducing their assumptions as conclusions, invariably end where they started.

NOTES

1. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have subjected *identity* to overdue historical and theoretical scrutiny, urging its replacement with more precise terms for the varied and often mutually exclusive ideas that it seems to cover. They warn against assuming that the current ubiquity of *identity* as a category of practice proves its validity as a category of analysis or even its existence, until recent times, as a category of practice. See “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29 (2000):1–47.

2. Perry Anderson has reminded us that *agency* in the sense of conscious, goal-directed activity, is an analytically empty concept unless one also specifies the nature of the goal and the relationship between the conscious intent of those who pursue it and its social result. Agency in choosing to marry at a certain age, for example, is not agency in bringing about the population growth or decline to which the choice contributes. Perry Anderson, “Agency,” in *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980), 2–58.

3. As Brubaker and Cooper demonstrate, the concept of identity has grave shortcomings even when limited to individuals; particularly, its liability to reification and essentialism, which devotees have tried to correct by reducing the concept to a contradiction in terms. Defining it as contingent, fluid, and multiple may rescue it, at least nominally, from reification and essentialism, but only by raising the question of how, in that case, it is identity at all. In the transit from individual to collective, the concept becomes incoherent. Whatever one supposes to be the psychological, psychosocial, or psychoanalytic constituents of identity in the individual, they dissipate into feeble metaphor when transposed to the collective. Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity.”

4. *Agent* in English, as Perry Anderson points out, can carry the opposite connotations of active initiator or passive instrument, free agent or the agent of another. Anderson, “Agency,” 18.

5. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1789–1860* (Ithaca, 1998), 3–4. Note the apologetic quotation marks around “race” and “racial” and the quiet shift from *identity* to *identification*.

6. Rick Bragg, “Legacy of a Cuban Boy: Miami City Hall Is Remade,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2000, A20.

7. The identification, it must be added, is not a simple matter of how they happen to look. Walter White, one-time head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, looks like Dwight Eisenhower in the photograph at the front of his autobiography and was once assured that he was pure white by a white fellow passenger on a train who claimed to have a foolproof way to judge: “[I]f you had nigger blood,” his companion explained, “it would show here on your half-moons.” But face and fingernails notwithstanding, word got out about him while he was fact-finding in Phillips County, Arkansas, after a massacre there in the summer of 1919. “There’s a damned yellow nigger down here passing for white and the boys are going to get him,” an unknowing white train conductor told him as he was making good his getaway. White recounts the Phillips County episode in *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948), 51; the fingernail anecdote appears in Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (San Diego, 1970), 110.

8. See Adam Rothman’s astringent comments on the obscuring vocabulary of encounter, exchange, and negotiation that is becoming conventional in scholarly discussions of slavery and empire, in “The Expansion of Slavery in the Deep South, 1790–1820” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2000), 9.

9. It should not be necessary to add that distinguishing the situation of Afro-Americans from that of other Americans of non-European origin in no way denies or minimizes the bigotry, discrimination, and exploitation to which Americans of non-African, non-European origin have been subjected (as, indeed, have many Americans of European origin). It probably is necessary to add, however, that the situations of Americans of non-African, non-European origin can no more be equated with each other than with the situation of Afro-Americans.

10. William Glaberson, “Who Is a Seminole, and Who Gets to Decide?” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2001.

11. During a symposium at a university in southern California, a senior historian of white women rebuked me for emphasizing the historical origin of American racial ideology in the enslavement of Afro-Americans—not, apparently, because she judged the argument invalid, but because she thought it unseemly to make in California.

12. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 11.

13. Donna R. Gabaccia, “Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999):1115–34, asks why American historians of America have produced a nation-of-immigrants model, while historians of France, Canada, Germany, Australia, and Argentina, with at equal grounds for doing so, have not. Gabaccia attributes the peculiarity of the United States to its “long history of slavery as a source of significant national disunity.”

14. A few, not of the whiteness school, have done so with respect to post-1965 Caribbean immigrants. (None give detailed attention to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrations.) Like whiteness scholars, they remain trapped in the internal contradictions of *identity* as an organizing concept. They avoid systematic comparison with European immigrants and concern themselves with how Caribbean immigrants define themselves, to the neglect of how white Americans define them. For example, see Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (New York, 1999); and Milton Vickerman, *Crosscurrents: West Indian Immigrants and Race* (New York, 1999).

15. Winston James, in “Explaining Afro-Caribbean Social Mobility in the United States: Beyond the Sowell Thesis,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (forthcoming), establishes that, while fascinated with slave disembarkation ports as metaphorical Ellis Islands for Afro-Americans, American historians have been virtually blind to the thousands of African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants who passed through the real Ellis Island. He also upbraids historians for their preoccupation with comparing Caribbean immigrants to Afro-American natives, evading the more appropriate comparison of Caribbean immigrants to European immigrants. See also Roy Bryce-Laporte, “Black Immigrants: The Experience of Invisibility and Inequality,” *Journal of Black Studies* 3 (1972):29–56.

16. Vickerman, *Crosscurrents*, 9–12, deals with the problem briefly and schematically. Winston James investigates how migrants from the British Caribbean to Britain became “Caribbeans” after reaching their destination. See “Migration, Racism, and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain,” in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain*, ed. Winston James and Clive Harris (London, 1993), 231–87.

17. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London, 1998), chapter 3, “Coming At Midnight: Race and Caribbean Reactions to America.”

18. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), 3–5.

19. Mamie Garvin Fields and Karen E. Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York, 1983), 9–10.

20. In fact, most of them understood the danger from the outset, as J. Morgan Kousser has argued, and were not taken in by the blandishments of the disfranchisers. See *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, 1974).

21. Stephen A. West, “From Yeoman to Redneck in Upstate South Carolina, 1850–1915” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998), chapter 7.

22. Quincy Ewing, “The Heart of the Race Problem,” *Atlantic Monthly* 103 (1909):396. I am grateful to Cary Fraser for bringing this remarkable document to my attention.

23. Quoted in Adolph L. Reed, Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York, 1997), 124. In chapter 7, Reed takes on two important tasks. First, he seeks to establish the proper place of the idea of “double consciousness,” which has been reduced to a cliché, both in Du Bois’s thinking and in that of his contemporaries. Second, he challenges scholars’ habit of appealing to Du Bois’s phrase in lieu of evidence for the existence of a generic racial consciousness among Afro-Americans.

24. Michael R. West develops this argument in “The Education of Booker T. Washington: The Negro Problem, Democracy, and the Idea of Race Relations” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2000). West dates the origin of *race relations* as a tactful formulation of the Negro Problem to the era of Booker T. Washington, who was its most talented and successful popularizer.

25. Roediger illustrates its mystical hold when he chides me for analyzing the installation of wage labor relations between former slaves and former owners as the installation of wage labor relations between former slaves and former owners. Presumably, once people of African descent are concerned, the issue can only be race relations. See *Wages of Whiteness*, 7–8.