



Innovating inequity: if race is a technology, postracialism is the genius bar

Ruha Benjamin

To cite this article: Ruha Benjamin (2016): Innovating inequity: if race is a technology, postracialism is the genius bar, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2016.1202423](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1202423)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1202423>



Published online: 15 Jul 2016.



Submit your article to this journal 



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rers20>

Innovating inequity: if race is a technology, postracialism is the genius bar

Ruha Benjamin

Department of African American Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, USA

ABSTRACT

In this essay I posit race as a kind of technology, one that creates parallel universes and premature death, requiring routine maintenance and upgrade. I suggest that David Theo Goldberg's *Are We Postracial Yet?* is a story of innovation that expertly exposes the trade secrets of the social production of race. I argue that not only are technological and social innovation metaphorically linked; technoscience is also one of the most effective conduits for reproducing racial inequality, and so I extend Goldberg's analysis to address the central role of science and technology in modern statecraft and racecraft. Finally, if postracial innovators are busily refurbishing racism to remake inequality, then those who seek radical transformation in the other direction, towards freedom and justice, must re-examine the default settings, rather than the routine breakdowns, of social life.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 May 2016; Accepted 9 June 2016

KEYWORDS Technology; innovation; postracialism; science; genomics; biotechnology

A police chief, a genome scientist, and an investment banker walk up to a genius bar.¹ Here they find the essential components to the functioning of contemporary racism laid bare. Explicit racial references, previously fixed on to the exterior of racist devices, are no longer practical. Instead, innovators find ways to embed racism deep in to the operating system. Postracialism, in this setting, is more than shiny new hardware that camouflages damaged and damaging interiors. Rather, it is the new killer application,² deadly and disenfranchizing, minimalist and minimizing, and always one-step ahead.

If race is a kind of technology, one that as I suggest, creates parallel social universes and premature death, then it requires routine maintenance and upgrade.³ In this way, David Theo Goldberg's *Are We Postracial Yet?* is, first

and foremost, a story of innovation, expertly exposing the trade secrets of a product (or production) we may call Remaking Racism™. In his words,

Postraciality does not exist today alongside the conventionally or historically racial ... It puts to new uses, to novel applications and impacts as deemed fit ... In this, it is one with contemporary political economy's utterly avaricious and limitless appetites for the new. It makes new of the old. (104)

What, then, are some of the features of NextGen Racism? Homemade nooses are upgraded for state-issued firearms. Violent voter intimidation tactics are replaced with voter ID laws. Government-sanctioned redlining is succeeded by predatory lending. Top-down eugenic policies give way to reproductive technologies that allow consumers to select 'socially desirable' traits. These postracial upgrades appear necessary and even empowering, which is precisely what makes them so effective at exacerbating inequality.

Rigorously tested and retested, so racism can download consistently, *intuitively*: the officer 'felt threatened and ... fired his weapon', even though we later learn after watching a video of the incident that the victim was unarmed and running away, and that the officer planted a weapon on the suspect to fabricate threat (Legum 2015). As Goldberg aptly notes, the impulse to eliminate racial threats is euphemized as 'natural preservation':

This means that racisms are not inevitable or expressive of some transcendental human nature. But it suggests also that their *supposed* inevitability – the self-licensing to purge a racially framed people as a 'natural' entailment of human self-preservation – is politically projected in specific social contexts. (138)

Racial technologies, in other words, are in the business of manufacturing natures. As with the fabrication of urban green spaces, postracial environments are ones in which the pleasure of some is predicated on the misery of others. Like those signs that litter public streets, 'No Standing Anytime', this is an ideology of forward motion, always on the go, no loitering, lest one begin to reflect or remember that you were forcibly dislocated to make space for urban renewal. Those who dwell, whether to assert rights or seek redress, are accused of wrongdoing, of imposing artificial equality onto those who, *naturally*, only want to revitalize the neighbourhood.

These are amnesic-inducing technologies, *No Remembering Anytime*. At the genius bar racist devices are reset with zero megabytes of memory, a 'denial of denial ... the vanishing point of race' (Goldberg 2015, 75). In this way it is a kind of racial minimalism that allows for more and more racist violence to be less and less discernable. Consider the nomenclature around *micro-aggressions*, obscuring as it does the way racism gets under the skin and into the placenta, restricting blood flow so that black American babies are disproportionately born premature due to the accumulation of stress and strain shouledered by expectant mothers (Krieger 2006). These 'micro' chips accumulate in



the seemingly soft wear and tear that exposes black lives to death ... even before birth. The stealthy language of racial minimalism is essential to postracial upgrades, allowing it to penetrate every facet of social life, lethally undetected.

Technology, I suggest, is not only a metaphor for innovating inequity. It is, in fact, one of the most effective conduits for Remaking Race™, and it is on this point that I extend Goldberg's analysis. While the text briefly touches upon biometric surveillance (131) and genetics (93) as two sites of racial reproduction, it does not offer sustained attention to the central role of science and technology in modern statecraft (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) and racecraft (Fields and Fields 2012; Benjamin 2014). Whether in the context of public health or border control, brain scans to test the impulsivity of parolees or genetic ancestry analysis to adjudicate the stories of asylum seekers, postracial racism is itself a kind of speculative fiction-cum-futurism.

Forgetting racial pasts becomes essential to projecting essentialist differences in to the future without the charge of racism. If one forgets the cruelty of the U.S. Public Health Service's forty-year nontherapeutic study of syphilis in black men, then marketing medicine 'for the treatment of heart failure in African Americans'⁴ looks and feels like pharmaceutical charity, not medical racial profiling (Kahn 2014). Cloaked in postracial packaging, racial logics no longer seem backward and dangerous; rather, they are a kind of biological *branding* – think: boardroom not plantation. In Goldberg's formulation, 'Postraciality is committed structurally to expanding new markets and the identities to support them ...' (82). Race resuscitates values, economic as well as altruistic, even when the techniques are dubious and the scientific claims are questionable (Bliss 2012).

Consider historian Lundy Braun's analysis in *Breathing Race into the Machine* (2014, xv), which examines how "cultural notions of race became embedded in the architecture of an apparently ordinary instrument", the spirometer. She discusses the widespread implications of this process from research design to clinical interactions to medical school training to insurance claims. With respect to the latter, in 1999, the world's largest insulation manufacturer tried to limit disability claims in a class-action lawsuit brought by 15,000 asbestos workers, by drawing upon the long-standing belief among pulmonologists that racial groups differed in the capacity and the function of their lungs. Drawing upon the widely accepted practice of 'race correction' – so normalized that there is a button for it on the spirometer, the company made it more difficult for black workers to qualify for workers' compensation. Indeed, postracialism is a kind of social insurance policy against accusations of racism. How convenient it is when black breathlessness can be attributed to an unfortunate biological predisposition, measured by the spirometer, and not to the deadly chokehold of a Long Island police officer who refused to heed his victim's plea, 'I Can't Breath'. As Goldberg reminds us, 'US

Congressman Steve King insisted that Eric Garner's death by police strangulation was caused by his own obesity and asthma ... '(44). The idea of biological race, in short, is the ever-ready 'not guilty' plea of structural racism.

Whether it is in the architecture of machines like the spirometer, or in the architecture of legal technologies, different forms of 'race correction' underwrite a pernicious form of knowledge construction. Consider a recent court decision in the case against one Mr Henry Davis, who was charged with destruction of property for bleeding on police uniforms *after* officers incorrectly identified him as having an outstanding warrant and then beat him in to submission:

On and/or about the 20th day of September 20, 2009 at or near 222 S. Florissant within the corporate limits of Ferguson, Missouri, the above named defendant did then and there unlawfully commit the offense of 'property damage' to wit did transfer blood to the uniform. (Daly 2014)

When Davis sued the officers, the judge tossed out the case, saying, '... a reasonable officer could have believed that beating a subdued and compliant Mr Davis while causing a concussion, scalp lacerations, and bruising with almost no permanent damage, did not violate the Constitution' (Daly 2014). The Judge, in short, 'race corrected' our reading of the U.S. Constitution as applicable to the likes of Mr Davis – a reminder that whatever else we think racism is, it is not simply ignorance, or a *not* knowing. Until we come to grips with the *reasonableness* of racism, we will continue to look for it on the bloody floors of Charleston churches and in the dashboard cameras on Texas highways, and overlook it in the smart sounding logics of textbooks, policy statements, court rulings, science journals, and cutting edge technologies (Benjamin 2016b).

Consider that in 2009, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) initiated the Human Provenance Pilot Project (HPPP) with the aim of using genetic ancestry testing and isotope analysis to vet asylum claims. If, over the course of a standard interview, a caseworker grew suspicious of an applicant's story, they would request samples of saliva, nails, and hair. The primary targets of the project were East Africans. Somali applicants escaping persecution are eligible for asylum so if the tests indicated an applicant was Kenyan – a phenomenon dubbed 'nationality swapping' – the person could be scheduled for deportation. The entire process was, technically, an experiment. Yet over the course of the project, actual cases were vetted using these methods (Benjamin 2015).

Following protests by refugee advocates the project came under public scrutiny and was placed on hiatus. In the process, academic scientists expressed shock and disgust, insisting that the techniques could not be used to diagnose nationality in the way that those implementing the project assumed. David Balding, a population geneticist at Imperial College London, noted that, 'genes don't respect national borders, as many legitimate



citizens are migrants or direct descendants of migrants, and many national borders split ethnic groups' (Travis 2009). Mark Thomas, a geneticist of University College London who called the HPPP 'horrifying', contended that even determining a person's ancestry – as distinct from nationality – is more problematic than many believe.

[Mitochondrial] DNA will never have the resolution to specify a country of origin. Many DNA ancestry testing companies have sprung up over the last 10 years, often based on mtDNA, but what they are selling is little better than genetic astrology, he said. "Dense genomic SNP data does have some resolution ... but not at a very local scale, and with considerable errors" (Travis 2009).

As it relates to isotope testing, a specialist at Durham University, Janet Montgomery, explained that, 'Unless the border between Somalia and Kenya represented some major geological or hydrological division. I cannot see how isotopes will discriminate between people living there let alone living at/on the border'. As Montgomery specified: 'Isotopes do not respect national borders or convey some inherent national attribute. They are not passports' (Travis 2009). Despite such severe criticism from the scientific community, the HPPP did not initially shut down nor did it rule out the possibility that it would reintroduce a similar initiative in the future. Given the swift response from prominent academic scientists criticizing the Project, several of those interviewed say that they suspect that private labs that come under much less regulatory oversight, were involved. And while the UKBA has since tried to downplay the significance of the project, in the words of Pearson, 'it's peoples' lives we're dealing with' (Travis 2009).

The quest for scientific tools to determine ancestry and arbitrate group membership continues apace towards a variety of political and biomedical ends. As Tutton, Hauskeller, and Sturdy (2014) urge,

such technologies of identity do not simply offer more objective means of confirming or disconfirming conventional identity claims. They actually redefine the social categories of identity on which immigration and asylum decisions are based ... The HPPP stands as a salutary warning of the ways in which supposedly objective technologies of identification are increasingly being used at international borders as a way of further disempowering the already vulnerable. (749)

This, in turn, echoes Goldberg's insistence that, 'racisms help to constitute and so are crucial to modern state-making. States become modern – are drawn into the modern world order – in good part by being conceived and conceiving themselves in racial terms' (114). It is also, I contend, increasingly the case that to remain modern and to exercise power in the current world order, states must innovate new ways to police boundaries, and genetic mapping techniques offer a powerful mechanism to re-territorialize the nation as naturally and ethno-racially defined (Benjamin 2009).

Returning to the genius bar, and its root *gene*, I have suggested that the story of racial innovation as rendered in *Are We Postracial Yet?* must grapple with the significance of science and technology, and especially of genomics, in the process of reproducing lethal strains of inequity.⁵ In December 2015, I participated in an International Summit on Human Gene Editing, sponsored by the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, The Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the UK Royal Society. The summit was organized in the wake of powerful new gene-editing techniques that are remarkably cheaper and easier to use than previous approaches to human genetic engineering, and with the potential to make 'changes that could be passed on to future generations, thereby modifying the human germline'.⁶ A major tension throughout the summit was that the same techniques that could be used to eliminate debilitating genetic diseases could also be used to eliminate those traits deemed 'socially undesirable', putting racial fitness in the hands of medical consumers (Benjamin 2016a).

Gene 'editing', for some, may be more akin to getting pushed through a shredding machine. Those who have defined this scientific field utilize language and metaphors that are already seeded with a normative perspective on the biotechnologies in question. That these techniques are now so simple and low cost that it could soon be akin to cosmetic surgery, should give us pause. The analogy leads us to think of the routine and everyday quality of such procedures, but as those who study the complex social meanings of such surgeries reveal, not only is cosmetic surgery itself never 'merely' cosmetic, but even if safety concerns were ever fully addressed, such techniques continue to reinforce notions of beauty and fitness that are often racist and misogynistic at their core. One need only look to the number of people getting double eyelid surgeries and narrowing nose jobs, yet hardly ever the reverse (single eyelids and broadening nose jobs), to understand that discourses of 'personal choice' with respect to altering human bodies obscure the way that dominant ideologies shape the direction of preference. In that way, analogizing genetic modification to cosmetic surgery may indeed be apt, but only if we understand how both sets of techniques invigorate hegemonic forms of whiteness.

To close, if postracial innovators are busily refurbishing racism to make inequality irresistible and unrecognizable, then those who seek radical transformation in the other direction, towards freedom and justice, must continuously re-examine the default settings, rather than the routine breakdowns, of social life.⁷ As Goldberg insists with respect to the social inertia characteristic of those who monopolize power and resources, 'the default is not the only position to occupy or in which to invest. One remains with the default because it is given, the easiest to inhabit, the sociality of thoughtlessness' (159). If we consider the homonym 'default' – a *preset value* automatically assigned to software that requires no additional action on the part of the



user and the failure to fulfill an obligation especially the *nonpayment of a debt* – then innovating justice must surely require that we reboot the system with reparations, refashioning the default settings.

Notes

1. Rather than the setup to a bad joke, this starting point reminds us that the state, science, and the market are implicated in ‘fatal couplings of power and difference’ (Gilmore 2002) – refurbishing and reproducing inequality. ‘Genius Bar’ used here is a metaphor for innovation in the context of racist ideologies and practices that require routine upgrade. It refers to the technical support stations located in Apple stores, which elevate ‘customer service in to a science ... the heart and soul of our stores’, according to a top executive at the company (Heisler 2015).
2. See Hatch (2016) for more on ‘killer applications’ in the context of medical research on metabolic differences across racial differences.
3. See Coleman (2009) for a formulation of ‘race as technology’. But whereas Coleman asks the reader to disconnect race from ‘the biological and genetic systems that have historically dominated its definition’, my approach to race as a technology is concerned with how contemporary technoscientific practices *coproduce* racial classifications (Reardon 2004), often in the name of ‘helping’ the underserved. And that despite the charitable logic and seeming discontinuity with past forms of racial science, analysts must rigorously attend to the normative and political dimensions of technoscience *in situ*, that is, without knowing in advance all the norms and politics which coproduce such techniques.
4. Product Information for Bidil. Access June 6, 2016. http://bidil.com/pnt/about_bidil.php.
5. For a notable exception, see Nelson (2016) for an analysis of how genomics is employed in reconciliation projects and claims for reparations.
6. See the proceedings of the International Human Gene Editing Summit. <http://nationalacademies.org/gene-editing/Gene-Edit-Summit/index.htm>.
7. As Harney and Moten urge, we ‘need to think more strategically about our own innovations’ (2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Benjamin, Ruha. 2009. “A Lab of Their Own: Genomic Sovereignty as Postcolonial Science Policy.” *Policy and Society* 28 (4): 341–355.
- Benjamin, Ruha. 2014. “Conjuring Differences, Concealing Inequality.” Review Essay of *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* by Karen Fields and Barbara Fields. *Theory and Society* 43 (6): 683–688.
- Benjamin, Ruha. 2015. “The Emperor’s New Genes: Science, Public Policy, and the Allure of Objectivity.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 661: 130–142.



- Benjamin, Ruha. 2016a. "Interrogating Equity: A Disability Justice Approach to Human Gene Editing." *Issues in Science and Technology* 32 (3): 51–54.
- Benjamin, Ruha. 2016b. "Catching Our Breath: Science, Knowledge, Technology, and the Carceral Imagination." *Engaging Science, Technology and Society*.
- Bliss, Catherine. 2012. *Race Decoded: The Genomic Fight for Social Justice*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Braun, Lundy. 2014. *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coleman, Beth. 2009. "Race as Technology." *Camera Obscura* 24 (1): 177–207.
- Daly, Michael. 2014. "The Day Ferguson Cops Were Caught in a Bloody Lie." *The Daily Beast*, August 15. Accessed June 6, 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/15/the-day-ferguson-cops-were-caught-in-a-bloody-lie.html>.
- Fields, Barbara J., and Karen E. Fields. 2012. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2002. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 15–24.
- Goldberg, David Theo. 2015. *Are We Postracial Yet?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. 2015. "Michael Brown. On Race and Innovation." *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 42 (4): 81–87.
- Hatch, Anthony. 2016. *Blood Sugar: Racial Pharmacology and Food Justice in Black America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heisler, Yoni. 2015. "Apple's Secret Weapon: Incredible Customer Service." *BGR*, May 26. Accessed January 6, 2016. <http://bgr.com/2015/05/26/apple-customer-service-genius-bar/>.
- Jasanoff, Sheila, and Sang-Hyun Kim. 2015. *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahn, Jonathan. 2014. *Race in a Bottle: The Story of BiDil and Racialized Medicine in a Post-genomic Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Krieger, Nancy. 2006. "If 'Race' is the Answer, What is the Question? – On 'Race,' Racism, And Health: A Social Epidemiologist's Perspective." Accessed January 6, 2016. <http://raceandgenomics.ssrc.org/Krieger>.
- Legum, Judd. 2015. "Everything The Police said about Walter Scott's Death before a Video Showed What Really Happened." *Think Progress*. Accessed January 6, 2016. <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/04/07/3644189/everything-police-said-walter-scotts-death-video-showed-really-happened/>.
- Nelson, Alondra. 2016. *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome*. New York, NY: Beacon Press.
- Reardon, Jenny. 2004. *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Travis, John. 2009. "Scientists Decry 'Flawed' and 'Horrifying' Nationality Tests." *Science*. Accessed January 6, 2016. <http://news.sciencemag.org>.
- Tutton, Richard, Christine Hauskeller, and Steve Sturdy. 2014. "Suspect Technologies: Forensic Testing of Asylum Seekers at the UK Border." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (5): 738–752.