The “bad subjects”... on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus. But the vast majority of the (good) subjects work all right “all by themselves,” i.e., by ideology.
– Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”
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Racial Subjects

Joe Lockard, Jonathan Sterne, and Matt Wray, Issue Editors

In our 1993 Manifesto and in many subsequent writings, Bad Subjects attacked different versions of identity politics for having done so much to fragment and disperse progressive left politics, and for too often abandoning class analysis along the way. Our critique of ‘feel good’ multiculturalism’s ideological mushiness, however, was never accompanied by a coherent consideration of ‘race’ or ethnicity, leaving many of our readers wondering where we stood on these questions.

The ‘Race’ issue is an attempt to engage with some of these questions, to which there are no straightforward answers. This engagement grew out of other needs as well: the need to revisit the topic of multiculturalism(s); the need to express the diversity of views on race and ethnicity held by Production Team members and other BS contributors; and the need to reaffirm our commitment to the value of ongoing, internal, self-reflexive critique.

In facing these needs, we experienced several unresolved tensions that, on the whole, seem to us to be productive. Perhaps the most strongly felt tension is the fact that the BS Production Team is entirely comprised of light-skinned folks. Whatever our individual views concerning our own ‘race’ or ethnicity, we are largely viewed by others in the United States as ‘whites.’ How does this experience of our own ‘whiteness’ affect our ideas about race? What kinds of insight and blindness are generated by being placed at (or very near) the top of the social hierarchy of race in the US? These and other questions about whiteness and white ethnicity have sparked interesting and often contentious debates among the editors, with the end result that we are better informed and more conscious about our agreements and disagreements concerning ‘race.’

The quote marks around the ‘race’ indicate one common understanding. ‘Race’ is a social ideology with a history, and ‘race’ is a social construction rather than a human inevitability. But it is also more than these things. Race is a lived dimension of human experience. For all its constructedness, race is a dimension that shapes people’s life chances, their self-understandings, their dreams and aspirations, and others’ perceptions of them. Though countless writers have tried to draw lines between race, ethnicity, and culture (among other terms), hard and fast analytical distinctions are almost impossible: what was race in one time and place is ethnicity in another. Or rather, these distinctions are drawn and transformed in everyday practice and political agitation, and not simply in the minds of those who step back for a moment of reflection. This issue is meant to explore the ways in which race and racism are represented and dealt with (or hidden and ignored) in everyday life. We present here a set of articles that wrestle with the question of how race works, not to resolve the issue of how to think about race, but rather to explore how it already permeates so much of what we think about.

Consequently, the essays in this issue take up ‘race’ in a number of different ways. Colette Gutter, a visual artist, writes about the transit between racialized experience and representations of American technology, as embodied in the 1960s space program. Joe Lockard extends these considerations into social questions of visibility and invisibility as they pertain to America’s racialized histories.

Greg Dimitriadis’ essay about recent African American films considers the limits of social constructivist and anti-essentialist approaches to race by focusing on the lived realities that race and racism create. Freya Johnson’s essay explores the American fascination with fascism through a reading of Newt Gingrich’s novel about Nazis, showing us ways in which our simultaneous attraction to and disavowal of them speaks tellingly of our need to identify as capitalists.

The next two essays take up the question of white racial identity. “Making and Unmaking Whiteness” is a report from the organizers of a recent Berkeley conference which uses media response to the event to help us understand how everyday journalism positions whites in discussions of race. Adam Cornford addresses the normative presumptions of whiteness that shape American cultural life, and suggests that whiteness constitutes a central paradigm of capitalism in the United States today.

Next, we feature two essays which attempt to deal with the question of American Jewish identity. Joel Schalit’s essay critiques conservative Jewish ideologies of victimization and leftist antisemitism. Annalee Newitz writes a personal essay about her own hybrid white/Jewish upbringing, making a case for foregrounding the fluidity of racial categories as a means of combating separatism.

Tomás Sandoval, also writing in a personal vein, reflects on his experiences of teaching Chicano studies to his students, colleagues, and professors. He concludes that consciousness of one’s racial identity can and does change according to context and that racial consciousness is an ongoing process, not a fixed state of awareness. We conclude the issue with Kevin Carollo’s meditations on the geography of racial representation in the recent documentary, “When We Were Kings,” but this by no means concludes Bad Subjects’ meditations on racialized subjectivities. In the atmosphere created by Proposition 209 and anti-affirmative action rhetoric in general, we see a need for continued engagement with the unrealities of ‘race’ and realities of racialism.
Colette Gaiter

May 1994: Mining the Archives, looking through my past

I, like so many blacks, have been trying to pin myself down in history, place myself in the stream of time as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future. To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well. So I have been picking through the ruins of my roots.

--Patricia J. Williams

As an official registered researcher at the new elegantly post-modern marble and glass National Archives building in Greenbelt, Maryland, I could look through drawers of index cards with small photocopied reproductions of photographs in the collection, decide what I wanted to see, then fill out request forms to find the real prints in boxes. Taking the treasure-hunting-on-the-beach approach, I decided to scan everything, and see what turned up that looked interesting. After I filled out request forms, staff people brought me the boxes I needed. Because the pictures are sorted by government agency and date, not subject, there was a wide range of 60s memorabilia.

Jacqueline Onassis had just died in New York that week, and all the news media were full of remembrances of her. I was flipping through photos of her and the President receiving various world leaders and their wives in the White House, or visiting other countries — Jackie’s long-white-gloved hand held out to be kissed or shaken. Glittering in long dresses with sequins and beads, expensive jewelry, and meticulous hairdos someone had spent a lot of time creating, the women looked the most impressive. The men were properly suited or uniformed, standing self-consciously straight, and providing conservative visual contrast to their female companions. Younger than most of their guests, the young President and his wife were a striking couple. It was clear to me, looking at those pictures, how easy it was to construct a myth around such attractive and charismatic people.

I was diverted from my intended research by looking at the White House photographs, but I couldn’t stop. Many of the civil rights photographs that were supposed to be there were mysteriously missing. The worst of it was that none of the staff people seemed to be particularly concerned. At first I was disappointed, but something happened later that made me realize it was just as well. Mixed in with the photos of political figures and official government events, there were pictures of astronauts — some in space suits and some in civilian clothes—that I absentmindedly dismissed as irrelevant. I thought I knew exactly what I was looking for.

I was at the National Archives finding materials to compare with my family photographs and memories of the 1960s. What I really wanted to know was what my life and experience had to do with the events and pictures that were in magazines and newspapers. I decided to start with the civil rights movement because it seemed so far removed from my day-to-day reality, but ultimately changed my life in ways I can only begin to comprehend in retrospect. By doing this research, I would be filling in the gaps in my own personal history.

As a visual artist I want to create work that puts people like me, a middle-class black woman, at the center of a mediated discussion about race. So much information about race that comes from the dominant media is about extreme situation — extreme poverty, violence, discrimination, or success. These stories are important, but they are not they only ones. African Americans who weren’t out marching, protesting, getting rich or famous, going to jail or rioting were also part of the civil rights story. I am the daughter of professional black people who went about their lives, quietly fighting racism every day, and cheering the movement on from the sidelines.

My plan was to find photographs of the civil rights movement that hadn’t been overexposed in the media and put them together with photographs of my family from the same time. Even though we might have been in Germany when a particular march went on, or a speech was delivered, we still were ultimately affected by
it. I wanted to inject some everyday reality into the mediated reality, and give my personal experience historical background.

On my final day in the archives, one of the more helpful staff people informed me that there were videotapes of old newsm preschools that I could look through and even copy with their video dubbing equipment. They were the old Universal newsmreckels that used to be shown in movie theatres before the featured film.

After I looked through a few tapes from the relevant years I started to notice a relationship between stories about the civil rights movement and the space program. A piece about a successful rocket launch or a skeptical report about Russian space achievements almost always followed a civil rights story. The creators of these reels were well aware that people had come to the movies to escape the reality of what was going on in their world, and even in the context of news, needed to have troubling stories followed by positive ones. Using a somber tone when reporting on the most recent civil rights march or obvious denial of Negro humanity, the announcer brightened considerably for the space news, as if to say, “And now, for some good news!”

After seeing this a few times, I felt the cartoon light bulb go on in my head. These huge missions, the civil rights movement and the space program, which seemed to belong to different segments of our society, were happening at exactly the same time and are remembered as if they have nothing to do with each other—not even chronology.

Space and race—they seem divergent and parallel at the same time. I knew that two huge events unfolding together over a long period of time had to share some common elements of our societal character. I started listing them. People hadn’t given up, despite huge setbacks. Each mission had the spirit of religious fervor. Masses of people were involved, although a select few became heroes. The civil rights movement and space program celebrate our most important cultural fantasies as Americans—that no goal is out of reach, that technology will improve any situation, and in spite of vast historical evidence to the contrary, that we are benevolent and moral.

New racial archetypes created at that time still dominate our national consciousness. The white hero/astronauts, the guys with the “right stuff,” had the necessary combination of military and technical skills. John Glenn, who was the most celebrated individual hero of the space program, represented the perfect American male. It was only natural that he would become a politician.

In the public mind, the space program belongs to white men, who have successfully used science and technology to economically dominate the world. The civil rights movement belongs to black people, whose designated job is to feel and express emotion for the entire society. Science and technology are still regarded as rational, emotionless, irrefutably significant pursuits. Emotional speeches and the singing of spirituals by blacks were antithetical to the rational voices of white men giving us news and information through broadcast media. While the white astronauts were being technically capable, black civil rights leaders were being saintly. It was not a coincidence that most of the leaders were ministers. In exchange for basic civil rights, the black man had to promise the magnanimity of Martin Luther King. When he could not do this, he was branded incorrigible, dangerous, and violent.

I just watched a recent movie that did not have a single black person visible in it as a character, but had a soundtrack by mostly black popular artists from the 1960s and 70s. I realized that few white people who saw this film would notice the irony. As the nation did during the civil rights movement, white filmmakers borrowed the “soulfulness” of black people, and used it as background music.

Thirty-five years later rational, scientific thinking still drives our societal systems, and African Americans are still required to prove our worthiness for equality. I would challenge the idea that scientific thinking is always rational. The decision to go to the moon was an emotional one, a lofty goal set by a president who posthumously came to represent American idealism. A truly rational discussion of the pros and cons of the Apollo mission would show that a strong case could be made against it. Had John Kennedy lived, partisan politics alone could have killed the space program. All of the emotional appeals on the legislative floors would have been viewed as the rational discourse of intelligent and powerful people.

Boosters of the space program appropriated a crusading righteous spirit from civil rights leaders. They told us that going to the moon was something we had to do, for the future of the world. Neil Armstrong’s “One small step...” statement had just the right amount of spiritual brotherhood in it to tap into the country’s newly discovered emotional self.

An assumption of the right to explore partly motivated the space program. Media accounts of the moon mission made endless comparisons to Columbus’s voyage, which in the 1960s had not yet been widely reconsidered as imperialist. The civil rights movement challenged white Americans to prove their professed love of freedom by extending the rights they took for granted to African Americans. I don’t remember seeing much on TV about protest marches and events. My family lived in Germany from 1962 to 1964, and we could only watch German TV, so we didn’t watch much. My father said that after the March on Washington, he bought a recording of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and played it on Sunday mornings. He said it was his church. I don’t remember that. Maybe he did it while we were still asleep. I do remember the rocket launches and the moon walk. When I was in fifth grade, at a black elementary school in Washington, D.C., the teachers brought a TV into a classroom so we could watch
one of the space launches.

When I look at video tape of civil rights speakers, protesters, and marchers, it is clear to me that there is something fundamentally human about what those people did that is connected to me, one individual black woman. The cruelty of white police officers and the hatred in the eyes of white hecklers and anti-protesters is chilling. I think about what it must have been like to experience that level of hatred and abuse of power, like my parents both did when they were growing up in Louisiana. I would never know what that felt like any more than I would know what going into outer space was like.

I don’t have specific memories of my parents talking to me about race when I was young. Maybe they did and I have conveniently forgotten. Maybe I learned it from listening to their adult conversations and from picking up inferences in what they did tell me. Studies have shown that American children understand our racial hierarchy by the age of three. I had been breathing our cultural air that is contaminated with racism. That is what I had in common with those black people in the South, who were insulted daily and decided it was time for it to stop.

**July 1997**

**Space and race: the final frontier**

Paradoxically, the black American has served as a kind of barometer of what is most American about America. --Fabre and O’Meally

Most people don’t know that the Mars rover vehicle is named after the freed slave and abolitionist, Sojourner Truth. When I first heard the vehicle’s name the thought entered my mind that there might be some connection with Sojourner Truth, but within a few seconds I decided that it was too progressive for NASA to name a space vehicle after a 19th century black woman activist. Sojourner Truth was probably best known for declaring at a women’s rights convention in 1851, “Ar’n’t I a woman?” to dispute the idea (at that time reserved for white women) that women are fragile of body and mind and need to be taken care of by men. Previously she went to court to win back her five-year-old son, who had been illegally sold out of state.

A 12-year-old African American girl won an essay contest to name the Mars rover by making parallels between Truth’s mission and the Mars Pathfinder mission. The word “sojourner” means traveler. This story seems like an essential “I Have a Dream” moment—the merging of scientific exploration and humanity, brought together by a young black girl.

“It’s only logical that the Pathfinder be named Sojourner Truth because she is on a journey to find truths about Mars,” Valerie Ambroise wrote in a contest to name the chunky vehicle, the star of NASA’s landmark exploration of the planet.

Truth, the girl wrote, was “a heroine to blacks, slaves and women. . . . She went on many journeys and told many truths. She spoke with such eloquence that she moved people with simple words and understandings.”

The research I did years ago in the National Archives has developed into an interactive multimedia computer piece called “SPACE|R A C E.” I have created an environment for looking at the complex relationships between events in the 1960s, particularly the space program and civil rights movement.

As part of “SPACE|R A C E,” I asked people, through a survey, what comes to mind when they think about Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and the first moon landing. I chose those two events because they seem to be the mythological high points of both endeavors. The responses, hundreds of them, can be read by viewing the piece. I was surprised by the sense of melancholy longing in so many of the responses, especially in terms of race. People also mourned the loss of bravado in the space program. Others expressed pessimism about our ability as a nation to accomplish anything great anymore.

This sense of disappointment is the expected fallout from a barrage of unrealistic expectations. Americans have been set up to believe that any inability to reach goals is always a failure. The simple act of making progress too often gets dismissed as insignificant. Our mythological memories of transcendent moments in space exploration and the noble and pure heroism of the civil rights movement are stuck in grief in our collective consciousness. Good memories of these events have become part of our societal mind’s white noise as we adamantly refuse to take a critical look at what they mean to us now. These quintessential
moments have become icons of America at its best and are trotted out regularly in advertising, our most accessible form of mythology. Microsoft uses sound and video bites of the first moon landing and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech to sell a software program. MTV uses the white-suited astronaut and King’s face and voice to evoke an era that belongs to the parents of its viewers. Variations of the “One small step...” speech proliferate in ads as testament to the power of a simple metaphor.

I am as tempted as anyone else to accept the mythology as it is presented. American culture-makers are so good at making the stories seductive, easily digestible, and memorable. The images and sound bites from the 60s are still incredibly strong to those of us who lived through them. After hearing Martin Luther King’s voice say “I have a dream” probably hundreds of times in the course of making “SPACE|R A C E,” I can still cry when I hear it. Is that because it is so moving, or because I have been taught that it is so moving? I don’t think it really matters. Mythology is working just as it is supposed to, as long as we remember the purpose of it.

Mythology’s function is to explain the unexplainable in any given culture. In the United States, it naturalizes the constructed reality that we operate from and reinforces the values that prevail in our society. The writer Toni Morrison refers to this constructed and inherently biased mythology as “The Master Narrative.” In this story, Martin Luther King had to be martyred to remind people that they are “good” because they respond to his mastery of rhetorical argument and insistence on the moral high ground. White people are especially pleased that they can do this in spite of his race.

The space program reminds us that we value science, technology and power. There is also a kind of spirituality associated with space exploration. We are hoping to find, out there in the universe, some clues to the reasons for human existence. Race and space have occupied so much of our attention in the latter part of this century because their mythologies are tied up with our fundamental beliefs about human nature and explanations for our presence on earth.

Over the years inferences have been made by a number of people, from John Glenn to science fiction writers, that space exploration offers humans an opportunity to erase racial differences by seeking a common goal, or less overtly stated, meeting a common adversary. Like a scenario in a Disney movie, we hope to take a complex and fundamental problem of our national character and accidentally solve it in the course of accomplishing something else.

In spite of seeing the space program as an expensive and deliberate diversion from pressing human problems in our own country, I am connected to it by the simple fact of being an American. I was there, watching the launches, the moon walk, and being unexpectedly excited by the first space shuttle landing I saw on TV. I hadn’t planned to watch it—the network interrupted my program. A vehicle had been projected into space by a rocket and landed on the ground like an airplane! I have been trained all my life to be impressed.

I am comfortable having ambivalent feelings about the space program. It seems legitimate to question the government’s motives and priorities, while at the same time being in awe of what we have accomplished. African Americans are now an integral part of the space program, working in facilities around the country, and traveling into space as astronauts. I personally refuse to be written out of this story, the same way I have claimed a fundamental connection to the civil rights movement.

Even though I spent two years of the 1960s out of the country and surrounded by white people, I have been able to connect my experiences to those of African Americans in the South who were on the front lines of the fight for civil rights. We have more in common than experiencing racism. We have a shared history as black people.

Two years of living in Germany as a child gave me a window I could look through with some objectivity about race. As a military child in a foreign country, I had to identify with being an American. I grew up in the 1960s as a colored person, a Negro, a black girl, and a U.S. citizen. I am creating my own story that considers the relationships between all those identities.

I made “SPACE|R A C E” to challenge the idea that any
Invisible Race Wars

Joe Lockard

He says, “I ain’t a racist but Aristitle Onassis is one Greek we don’t need. And them niggers, Jews and Sigma Nus, all they ever do is breed. And wops ‘n micks ‘n slopes ‘n spics ‘n spooks are on my list. And there’s one little hebe from the heart of Texas — is there anyone I missed? Well, I hits him with everything I had right square between the eyes. I says, ‘I’m gonna gitcha, you son of a bitch ya, for spoutin’ that pack of lies.

If there’s one thing I, I can’t abide, it’s an ethnocentric racist; Now take back that thing you said ‘bout Aristitle Onassis.’

— Kinky Friedman. ‘They Don’t Make Jews Like Jesus Anymore’

There’s a race war going on in the men’s bathroom downstairs. In Wheeler Hall, the seat of Berkeley’s English department, the public bathroom walls filled all summer long with racial insults, and there is no separating this phenomenon from larger campus trends that have led to a renewed, increasing and enforced invisibility for people of color at this public university. If ethnicity no longer appears on university admissions forms, it most certainly has not disappeared from the bathrooms; if there is no honest narration allowed in official narratives, then there will be a frank exchange of views in those less official but vital forums where we pee and crap.

This particular exchange started off with the modest declarations of “Mexican Power” and “Free Chiapas” in red magic marker above the mirror where I check to see if I look sufficiently neat before teaching classes. The political assertions of these graffitis could have found better and more creative outlets than on freshly painted walls, but the mere presence of an ethnicized counter-voice brought an ugly graffiti cycle soon enough. Bold “White Power!” slogans followed by “Kill Whitey!” responses criss-crossed the bathroom walls, together with anemically scrawled suggestions that indulging our inter-racial libidos was the True Answer. An alleged Cal Aryan League made its crayoned appearance several times above the sinks; the Crips left their territorial markings on the toilet stalls. The sexual mores of brown, white and black men were alleged in brusque, graphic detail, as well as the singular purpose of all white women.

There is nothing especially perceptive in observing the symptomologies of American race war, whether in bathrooms, urban streets, or official rhetoric. No less mainstream a commentator than Carl Rowan last year published a book with the apocalyptic title The Coming Race War in America: A Wake-Up Call. The urgencies are clear, but what remains little discussed in this conflict is the idea of ‘race’ as an obscurantist holdover, as the misbegotten child of ‘race science’ that emerged from the Enlightenment. Rowan, an African-American, came of age during the early Civil Rights Movement, when such issues were defined as ‘the race problem.’ Yet this merged syntax of racial specification has become blatantly inadequate: race is the problem, and desperately needs problematization. Race, invented within an extraordinarily traumatic history and inalienably invested with cultural hierarchies, can only lead to race war.

Given this history, the essential ugliness of ‘race’ is so strong that in language we search for propriety more often than peace. At a very early age my mother made it clear to her child that if a certain word that other people sometimes used for black people were ever to be heard issuing from his mouth, he was going to find himself sucking a bar of Ivory soap like a lollipop. This idea of unmentionable-word-as-abomination led directly to one of my worst moments in fourth grade, when assigned to stand and read aloud a Weekly Reader article on African geography, I found myself confronted with “the Niger River” and knew only the hard ‘g’ pronunciation. I halted and strained audibly while the class (all-white) held its breath, then went ahead and pronounced that damned word the only way I knew how. The class exploded in laughter; the previously half-attentive teacher called for silence and corrected me, decently, as I stood mortified. That laughter came in part because we knew that a barrier of propriety had been transgressed, a word had been said that must never be uttered, and it was a dirty word for the bathroom wall and not a classroom.

Civil and Uncivil Histories

“We see the black clouds furling, one by one....”

— James Russell Lowell, “New Year’s Eve, 1844”

Such propriety is relatively new to American society. The history of ‘race’ in twentieth-century America can be described as a transit from the overt to the covert, both in words and policies. An unstated, ambiguous and porous system of racialized power has replaced the clear, blatant and legally-sustained system of apartheid at the century’s opening. At the beginning of the century Woodrow Wilson inveighed against “the damnable cruelty and folly of Reconstruction,” praised the “English race” of the South for its resistance and insistence on white supremacy, and in his History of America (1908) expressed outright admiration for the Ku Klux Klan’s positive achievements. Fifty years after Wilson’s presidency, Richard Nixon devised his infamous ‘Southern strategy’ that employed a covert and deniable but patent reliance on white animus and solidarity against blacks, a strategy designed in part to court George Wallace supporters. Where Wilson indulged in pseudo-scientific public statements about black inferiority, Nixon spoke public pieties about race relations and in private talked about blacks “who just climbed down from the trees.” The shift lies not in racist thought paradigms, but in permissible civil speech.

The difference between the spatial permissions of classroom and bathroom, or the temporal domains of Wilson and Nixon, constitutes the difference between covert and overt color lines. Repressed antagonisms that are unacceptable in the classroom or...
public rhetoric find an ineluctable expression elsewhere; racisms that cannot be admitted without personal discredit shift to hit-and-run expressive anonymity or the unguarded moments of foul-mouthed Exxon executives who could use a bar of Ivory soap. Color lines exist today no less than a century previously, only contemporary America reproduces its color lines under camouflage of nominally ‘colorblind’ policy or through forms of social privatization whereby racial exclusions gain legal protection. The segregated parochial Catholic schools that I witnessed as a child in Philadelphia have been integrated, but an entire national network of all-white private Christian academies arose in the wake of school desegregation. The consistent pattern of de facto resegregation a generation after segregation’s supposed legal defeat has lent impetus to the current ‘why bother trying?’ discussions within the black community, especially in the NAACP which dedicated its organizational soul to integrationism and the defeat of color lines.

Pretending that American color lines do not exist does not make them any less real, and only insulates the intelligence of those who are expected not to notice them or credit that low melanin levels are just part of the suburban lifestyle. This pretense has become stronger in recent decades, as racism has become increasingly covert. In the current language of euphemisms and attempted concealment of color lines that cannot be concealed, the agencies and mechanisms of racism have almost disappeared. Direct responsibility — beyond the current fad of impossible historical apologies — is an increasingly rare commodity. But consider the directness of these lines: “What white Americans have never fully understood is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” This indictment is not from a Farrakhan tract. It comes from the 1968 Kerner Commission national report, drafted and signed by a bipartisan elite of elected officials. Thirty years later a neutered political rhetoric reigns and these words appear almost radical; but now the problems are worse, and solutions and opportunities appear to diminish constantly.

Such avoidance has their antecedents in the likes of Lowell’s hopeful antebellum social metaphors, where the above-quoted “black clouds” were supposedly disappearing, but of course were gathering year by year. American racial history has never emerged from its preferred shadow realm of invisibilities. In Albion Tourgee’s neo-abolitionist novel Invisible Empire (1880), an enlightened protagonist ineffectually exhales against “the prejudice-blinded multitudes who made the Policy of Repression effectual” and argues that under its terms the political racializations of the era “are all alike the harvest of ignorance. The Nation cannot afford to grow such a crop.” Tourgee referred to the same character, now dead and buried, when he concluded the novel with the cynical line “Time smiled grimly as he traced anew the unsolved problem which had mocked the Fool’s heart.”

The Invisible Empire remains today, only differently constituted. Proposition 209 is far from the first time that Tourgee’s “unsolved problem” of racism has been proclaimed solved through public refusal to grant its existence (‘racism’ being the ideology of race and ‘racism’ being race prejudice, following Tzvetan Todorov’s distinction). The ignorance of racism relies intrinsically on a refusal of manifest knowledge, on an analytic absenteeism, on an invisibility steadfastly imposed despite visible counter-evidence.

Unlike the late nineteenth century, though, contemporary anti-affirmative action arguments base themselves on an assertion of pseudo-equalitarianism. When Senators Hatch and McConnell recently protested a Department of Education investigation of discriminatory effects from race-blind admissions policies at the University of California, charging that it is wrong “to investigate whether schools are discriminating by refusing to discriminate,” they coopted the language of equality to perpetuate inequality. Right-wing politicians now indulge in the social rationalizations propagated by such as Clint Bolick, who writes in The Affirmative Action Fraud (1996) that “What many of the civil rights policies of the past three decades have done... is to reinforce the propensity of individuals to define themselves in terms of their race,” thereby defeating the purposes of the same legislation to create a color-blind society. According to this school of political deceit, policies generated by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 acted to solidify racialism and self-contradictorily defeated true racial equality.

Bald falsifications like these have used a new formulation of ‘close our eyes’ invisibility to maintain the status quo of an old American racial hierarchy. They have divorced language from content, and misappropriated civil rights language to drive a prolonged movement of reaction against minority advances, tracing their recent intellectual lineage most notably from Nathan Glazer’s Affirmative Discrimination (1975). Slavoj Zizek argues that these arguments based on misappropriated terms of equality have created an era of metaracism, where racism assumes the form of a fight against racism. The old-style racism exemplified in the Kinky Friedman quote that opened this essay has given way to a far more sophisticated racism, a new racial hegemonism based on superficial equality-by-declaration in a society where gross inequalities prevail. Friedman’s ‘slam-em-in-the-mouth’ approach, while offering a certain imaginative gratification, instances an antiquated and ineffectual heroic individualism far more than a recognition of postmodern racism within nominal anti-racism. It remains preoccupied with the visible where the invisible has become paramount.

One of the most egregious and counter-historical attempts at justifying selective color-blindness lies in the contention that a new era has arrived in American history, as where California governor Pete Wilson hails Proposition 209 for ushering in “a new era of equal opportunity for all of the people.” Historical dividing lines between old and new dispensations are a descriptive excuse, an argumentative and untenable disaggregation of history’s continuities. Under Wilson’s declarative re-ordering, ‘race’ disappears as a social barrier, leaving only cultures of dependency and presumed excuses for non-performance. This mythology, counter-factual by every measure of economic and social data, underpins the efforts of university regent Ward Connerly and Connerly-wannabes leaping into public life to assault policies that remain conscious of the history and effects of the concept of ‘race’ (noting the irony of Connerly’s catapult into national recognition as an affirmative action opponent who derived public legitimation from his own blackness). Their argument holds that an historical dividing line has been passed between Old and New, and that some fresh dispensation has been granted under which a discontinuous and new history may be estab-
lished without reference to prior and current conditions. Historic American color barriers never disappeared. As increasingly black urban school systems — and now the newly blackless Boalt Hall first-year law class, together with other medical and law classes in California and Texas — evidence, they have only grown firmer in the three decades since the end of the King-led civil rights period. What has increasingly disappeared instead is a willingness to acknowledge those barriers.

Too, ‘race’ itself has become part of the trap. Even as we accept the social construction of ‘race’ and trace its social features, the concept remains the most solidly realized legacy of national intellectual history. Without race, America would not exist. Minus its race history, the American nation is literally unimaginable. And more, the country cannot imagine a deracinated future even while it confronts the demographic awareness that no racial majority will prevail two generations hence. Clinton formulated his new “Initiative on Race” in precisely this inherited, increasingly discredited language of racialism rather than a specification of the tragic ethics of ‘race’ as a social rubric. What imaginatively different politics of anti-racialism might have emerged if Clinton had announced an ‘Initiative Against Race’? When he stood in front of an audience at University of California-San Diego in June to announce that “Over the coming year I want to lead the American people in a great and unprecedented discussion about race,” just what did he suppose had been under discussion all these long years? Unlike Wilson/Connerly’s denial of racism’s social existence and a need for counter-measures, Clinton addresses the historical specificities of ‘race’ and its effects; he speaks of segregated swimming pools and movie theaters, using them as metaphors for past troubles and without direct identification of white supremacy.

In the end, though, this presidential initiative lends validation to race-as-unalterable-fact, one that invests itself in an unfounded hope that open national discussion will dissolve accumulated evil effects. “[I]f ten years from now people can look back and see that this year of honest dialogue and concerted action helped lift the heavy burden of race from our children’s future, then we will have given a precious gift to America.” What this sentence proposes as a national goal — the elimination of ineffable memory as a strategy for social unification — relies on openness to achieve closure. Centuries of history have been racialized, however, and that ideological act cannot be undone. It is the specific idea of ‘race’ that needs public dissection in order to create an eventual anti-racist social environment. Failing a direct and antagonistic address to ‘race,’ the bathroom walls at least have the advantage of rhetorical realism compared to Bill Clinton.

**Left Ghosts**

I am black, but comely...
— Song of Songs 1:5, King James translation

I am black and beautiful...
— Song of Songs 1:5, corrected translation

Difficulties in wrestling with issues of ‘race’ are not limited to any one portion of the political spectrum. Bad Subjects, in a reverse irony created by its opposition to the prevalence of racial ideology, has participated after its own fashion in the erasure of ‘race.’ In its 1993 ‘Manifesto, Bad Subjects staked out an intensely critical position regarding multiculturalism’s identity politics “based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual preference” (note the rank order suggestive of diminishing negativity) and its common failure to neglect or obscure class identities. Such failures, the Manifesto argues, led to a fetishization of marginality “as in the multicultural celebration of the cultures and identities of oppressed peoples, [which] leaves the offensive center largely untouched: the price of a marginal identity is political marginality.” Implicit within this position lies an advocacy of assimilationism, one where knowledges of racialized, ethnicized or gendered histories — the involuntary epistemologies of daily life — must be severely demoted in favor of economic class self-cognizance and the pursuit of radical non-marginality. Tellingly, the Manifesto’s final coda on utopianism refers unspecifically to “human communities” and, inadvertently following the reductionism of French social theorist George Devereux, thereby erases *ethnos* as disposable dysfunctionality.

For anti-ethnic levellers, human difference is an enemy, not a friend. Indeed, a long tradition of American progressivism has treated ethnicity as a source of retrograde factionalism and chauvinistic particularism, as an imposed paradigm must be discarded, except for a few songs and savory recipes. The Manifesto participated in this tradition, for while rejecting the inadequacies of multiculturalism’s separatist essentialism it evidenced a discomfort with intense ethnicity and rejected ethnicism as an impediment to liberationist thought. Calls to transcend ethnic or racialized culture groups are a staple of both left and right political platforms, albeit the former towards class and the latter towards nationalistic ideology. But for this difference, how little might separate left-wing ‘ethnic transcending’ from the neo-conservative cries of Jack Kemp at last year’s Republican Party convention for “An America that transcends the boundaries between races with the revolutionary power of a simple, yet profound idea — love thy neighbor as thyself.” Utopian chimeras of a non-ethnicized social singularity represent searches for an unrealizable exemption from intercommunal dialectics, an exemption that seeks to privilege singular ideological standards.

Human communities exist within ethnicized specificities, not an indeterminate universalism, and plural histories of race and ethnicity cannot be dismissed by easy fiat. When black abolitionists met at a convention of the American Moral Reform Society in 1837, their manifesto for the occasion voiced a spirit similar to the Bad Subjects Manifesto when they declared “We shall aim to procure the abolition of those hateful and unnecessary distinctions by which the human family has hitherto been recognised, and only desire that they may be distinguished by their virtues and vices.” However, they lodged this social faith — for their experience of the African diaspora gave them no alternative — within the particularism of a black liberationist political program. A realistic and egalitarian politics cannot sidestep particularized group histories, nor afford to denigrate all identity cultures but that of assimilationism. Whatever its uses or abuses, ethnicity is constituted at its core of the human right of free association.

Political climates such as have propelled Proposition 209 demand a rethinking of implied alliances. Some Bad Editors gradually transformed their positions towards one they termed ‘critical multiculturalism,’ prompted by a recognition that the social antagonisms that continue to condition life for communities of color in California and elsewhere require more comprehensive, affir-
Dueling Narratives: Some Thoughts on Menace II Society and Boyz ‘N the Hood

Greg Demetriadi

Academics today are all-too-satisfied, it seems to me, to simply proclaim that race is a social construction and end the discussion at that. But, like any social construction—including capital itself—race is experienced in particular and real ways for all and must be faced as such. If nothing else, the so-called “hood” films of the early to mid 1990s point to the reality of race as an entirely lived category. I would like to look here at two of these films—Boyz ‘N the Hood and Menace II Society. Read together, the films counterpose traditionalist notions of race and racial politics with nihilistic ones. I want to point out the limits of this common opposition, and suggest a way we may look beyond it.

Menace II Society (1993), the Hughes Brothers’ first film, begins with a subtle but striking scene. It is the last day of school and the main character, Caine, sits in a class room, looking particularly bored and distracted. His mood, however, is interrupted and soon animated by a call from his beeper, which he acknowledges with a nod. The beeper, of course, marks Caine as a drug dealer. Its call interrupts and shatters the placid school scene and his neatly defined role in it. Caine is, quite clearly, now outside of the schoolroom, in spirit if not in body. The scene would be fairly unremarkable, except for a series of seemingly discrepant images—an African American woman heads the class, while African sculpture is featured prominently on her desk.

The environment, it seems, is not the obviously oppressive Eurocentric schooling environment portrayed in Boyz ‘N the Hood (1991), perhaps the first of the so-called “hood” films. Here, the main character (Tre) attends a classroom headed by a white woman, a woman who seems wholly unable to see her students outside of narrow stereotypical—i.e., “pathological”— confines. For example, this seemingly concerned teacher calls Tre’s mother at home early on in the film. She explains that Tre is “highly intelligent” but has “a very bad temper.” She suggests therapy and then asks “is there some problem in the home? Are you employed?” She is surprised that his mother is “educated” and that there is a father in the picture. The teacher is an obviously foreign and hostile pres-
Boyz N the Hood

Concurrently, Boyz places a lot of hope in the opposition racial narrative of Afrocentrism. Towards the beginning of the film, for example, a young Tre takes over his teacher’s history lesson on Thanksgiving, asking the class, “Did you know that Africa is the place where the body of the first man was found? My daddy says that makes it the place where all people originated from. That means everybody’s originally from Africa. Everybody.” Of course, such theories resonate with a long history of Afrocentrism—from Marcus Garvey through Louis Farrakhan. For those who embrace such beliefs, Africa is the cradle of civilization, making all Africans original peoples. This is a racial narrative with a long history, one which has provided hope for many in an often hostile United States.

In many ways, Menace offers us no narratives— including Afrocentric ones—to cling to. The film does not provide the viewer with a clear story line (i.e., rising action, climax, resolution) to follow. It unfolds in a series of sporadic and impressionistic images. In one key example, the film opens with a brutal murder of a Korean store owner and his wife. Traditional realist film making would dictate that Menace bring this event to clear resolution. But no resolution comes. It is one brutal image among many, some of which link together, some of which don’t.

In fact, while one feels some closure after watching Boyz N the Hood—the main character goes off to Morehouse College—one can easily feel paralyzed after viewing Menace. The film leaves the viewer with little to cling to. The main character is murdered in a drive-by shooting, a shooting prompted by a seemingly small event in his life and in the film. Caine has sex with a woman and denies responsibility for her pregnancy. He then has a fight with her cousin who returns—entirely unexpectedly—at the end of the film. It is a disconcerting moment, one made all the more poignant by the fact that Caine is literally in the process of moving out of “the hood” at the moment of his murder.

Indeed, Menace perhaps more than any other film of its genre—embodies the nihilistic spirit which critics such as Cornel West have explored. In a series of influential commentaries, West notes that black America is facing a “nihilistic threat to its very existence,” marked by the breakdown of traditional “black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support” (West 38, 40) Such support systems—it is crucial to note—are absent in Menace. The ideals that older people hold here (including racial ones) do not entirely resonate for these young people, as evidenced by the school scene noted earlier. This film indexes the very forces which West calls attention to and critiques here.

As I noted earlier, academics seem all-too satisfied to simply proclaim the death of meta-narratives and affirm that race is a social construction. However, this is a starting point, not an ending point, for discussion. We must begin to understand exactly how race is lived on local levels for those most marginalized in this era of late capitalism. Further, we must do so while avoiding traps. The first trap is nihilism—the idea that all meta-narratives, including racial ones, have died and we can say nothing meaningful about them. The second is the trap of traditionalism—the idea that we should cling to the older narratives which have sustained past generations and this will be enough. We need new ones. Old paradigms of race cannot be drawn on to explicate these problems as these older notions of race no longer hold for young people. So where—once again—does this leave us? The solution is not to decry the lack of such narratives but to do the hard work involved in understanding what narratives do hold for young people.


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See Bad Subjects online at <http://eng.hss.cmu.edu/bs>
Newt’s Nazis: Pop Culture’s “High Other”

Freya Johnson

Capitalism has made it this way
Old-fashioned Fascism will take it away
—Marilyn Manson, “The Beautiful People,” Antichrist Superstar

When I saw it on a remaindered book table this summer, I couldn’t resist shelling out $1.50 for Newt Gingrich’s briefly talked-about alternative history novel, 1945 (written with co-author William R. Forstchen in 1995). Although as a leftist I frequently indulge in the intellectual exercise of imagining Nazis both past and present, literal and metaphorical, I’d never really paused to consider what the right might think a Nazi looked like, ideologically speaking. So now I had a chance to see how Newt imagined an invasion of the United States by Nazis in 1945, an invasion that the book’s jacket assures us would have occurred had Hitler not prematurely declared war on the United States.

Actually, it’s not surprising that Newt chose this cultural moment to publicly imagine Nazis on American soil. According to the bi-partisan Anti-Defamation League, 1994 political campaigns of both Republicans and Democrats more frequently than ever before employed the rhetorical conceit of comparing one’s opponent to a Nazi, and such references have been mounting up ever since. Nazis, it would seem, are appearing on American soil with increasing regularity.

Everybody knows, after all, that Nazis are the “ultimate evil”; and that shared knowledge can be used to evoke an emotional response. We on the left often compare right-wingers to fascists, while the right complains of “feminazis” and fascist Big Government social engineering, like school lunch programs, which suppresses individual freedom. As the film Contact reminded us this summer, when it turns out that Hitler’s 1936 telecast of the Olympic Games in Berlin (the first TV signal beamed into space) is the message that alerts the friendly aliens to our technological progress, representations of Nazis can mean anything at all. The irony here, the film points out, is that even the ultimate evil, sufficiently divorced from its context, can be used to represent something good. But as always, the understanding that Nazis are the ultimate evil is explicitly assumed. Yet the question arises, aside from “that which is very very bad,” what do Nazis actually mean in American popular culture?

In the 1980s we learned from Raiders of the Lost Ark that they have very fashionable boots and a fetish for antiquarian artifacts. We also learned that their motivations are ideological, not material. They seek the Ark of the Covenant (a fetishized commodity if ever there was one) in order to ensure that their “Armies of Darkness” can march unimpeded toward world domination. Indiana Jones, on the other hand, although seeking the Ark for the forces of good, makes no bones about the fact he expects to be materially rewarded for his efforts. If one’s motivations are not material as well as ideological, it would seem, they must be far more nefarious.

Newt’s novel (no surprise here) also imagines Capitalism as antithetical to Fascism. During the novel’s climax wherein the Nazis invade Oak Ridge, Tennessee’s nuclear facility (and are only thwarted, by the way, thanks to a well-armed civilian militia which spontaneously assembles itself during the invasion), Newt inserts a scene in which a young Nazi commander, “Radl,” before dying melodramatically, has a sudden revelation about the difference between the American and the German national character:

The Americans, though, were something different. Strange they were, almost amusing in their innocence. Would they use that new bomb of theirs the way Germany would, without hesitation?

Radl thought about it. Doubtful. Anything the world had that the Americans wanted badly enough they would simply buy. We Germans have been taught to see this as a wolf age struggle of ethnic nations; the Americans simply didn’t care about such notions, could hardly comprehend them. Oh they were willing enough to fight when forced...the Americans were much tougher than a bunch of free-enterprise degenerates had any right to be.

And look at the aftermath of that war [the war against Japan]; the fallen enemy was coddled, and carefully converted to a civic philosophy designed to make future war between the two nations nearly impossible....When it came to world conquest, Americans just didn’t
The American “free-enterprise degenerates” are not interested in world domination or nuclear war simply because they have the power to buy anything in the world they want—economic domination, clearly, is “coddling” rather than Imperialism. In essence, Capitalism is not concerned with, in fact is an antidote to the ethnically motivated “wolf age” struggle between nations.

From Schindler’s List we learn not only that Capitalism is antithetical to Fascism, but that it can even be used as a weapon against the Nazis—Schindler is able to save thousands of Jews by employing them in his factory. The Nazis in the film are not only evil, sadistic, sexually perverted, and well-dressed—all the things we have come to expect from them—they are also wildly counter-productive; they would rather kill off their workforce for the sake of ideology than merely exploit it as Capitalism dictates they ought.

But Nazis are not your typical hairy-knuckled anti-capitalist thugs, as Communists are often figured in the American popular imaginary—there are those oh-so-fashionable boots which must be accounted for. As Newt’s protagonist says, “his own blood was set racing by the sense of power and glory” of a Nazi military spectacle: “It was like being aroused by a woman one despised. No matter the revulsion, despite the inner certainty that never would one yield, beneath all moral rectitude there lurked a dark, compelling attraction.”

Hector Babenco’s film Kiss of the Spider Woman, in which a gay transvestite in an Argentinean prison consoles himself by fantasizing about being the female lover of the male lead in Nazi propaganda films, shows us how the “dark compelling attraction” of Nazi storm troopers noted by Newt is explicitly sexual. And of course there is Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, in which the ultra-sexy blonde female lead who seduced both Indiana and his father turns out to be a Nazi. Clearly part of the Nazi mythos in America revolves around the sexual attractiveness of the Teutonic Ubermench (or Ubermaiden), an attractiveness that we are deeply conflicted about—since it does, after all, involve being aroused by the “ultimate evil.”

Luckily for our collective consciences, the sexually appealing nature of Nazis is undermined, or at least punished, by the fact they frequently turn out to be perverts. It’s not enough that they be ideologically revolting, the nature of their evil must play itself out on the psychosexual level as well. Newt obligingly provides us with a Nazi commander who likes to rape and sexually torture teenage girls with knives before killing them in a particularly grisly fashion. This monster, incidentally, trained by the superlative Nazi war machine and hardened by battling Bolsheviks on the Russian front is afraid of only one thing—“Southern Good Ole Boys,” who eventually capture him (the civilian militia again) and do unspeakable things to his testicles. (Newt appeared to really enjoy writing this—the prose becomes uncharacteristically boisterous at this point). Similarly, in Stuart Heisher’s 1961 film Hitler, we see Hitler’s genocidal politics explained as a symptom of his psychosexual disorder—(gasp!) an Oedipus Complex. Throughout this otherwise resoundingly unmemorable film, we see Hitler lasciviously eyeing his niece (the spitting image of his mother) and then deciding to burn the Reichstag; he writhes in impotent rage as each woman who arouses him morphs into his mother, then orders a few thousand Jews killed. Then there’s also Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS(1974), one of the underground Ilsa porno series, in which a very literal feminazi (blonde of course) who runs a stylized concentration camp has graphic sex with and then castrates Jewish men, dressed only in her Nazi cap and boots. And of course the use of Nazi regalia by the S&M/Fetish subculture has left us little doubt as to just what those shiny black boots mean.

What these representations show us is that Nazis are both attractive and compelling yet deviant and revolting at the same time, and that above all they must be constantly disavowed. All these depictions continually underscore how different Nazis from us, differences that are so repeatedly emphasized they must not be immediately obvious. While they can exist as an outlet for sexual fantasies, they must also be invested with sexual pathologies that we can claim are not our own but instead the property of some foreign, “evil” nature. For instance, in 1961, when Hitler was produced and Freudian pop psychology was still just entering the mainstream, only psychopaths had Oedipal Complexes (as Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho reminds us); nowadays when everybody knows that everyone’s got one you would have to share the sexual tastes of John Wayne Gacy to be truly deviant—and Nazis have changed accordingly. Hence Ilsa.

So what is at stake in our construction of Nazis as anti-capitalist sexual perverts? Certainly there is the usual use for the construction of the “Other”—to distance and protect the self from uneasy similarities between oneself and the reviled object—yet in this case it takes a slightly different twist. Unlike how the “Low Other” is traditionally figured, with representations of Nazis what always strikes one first is that they are attractive, well-dressed, well-disciplined, and well-equipped—they constitute the “High Other” of culture, if you will. Only later comes the necessary revelation that they are in fact slathering maniacs with alien motivations and deeply twisted psychologies. While Low Others are also sexualized (volumes have been written on this), their sexualization is generally arrived at after passing through revulsion; in fact often it is the Low Other’s lowly status which confirms that deviant sexualization. In other words, with Low Others their exteriority is thought to match their interiority—lowly aspect equals lowly sexuality, even if it turns us on. With Nazis, on the other hand, we are told repeatedly how different they are on the inside from how they seem on the outside—they may be attractive, but boy are they evil.

So Nazis as the High Other actually serve as an alibi for our own cultural and sexual desires. We all know they stand for perilous elitism and racism run amok—thankfully they are actually so different from us. Not only can we admire their shiny black boots, we can even wear those shiny black boots ourselves, secure in the knowledge that so long as we are Capitalists, we must not be Nazis, and if we are not Nazis, then we must not be racists.

One can only wonder, since Nazis look so different to Newt, how he feels about the fact he doesn’t look all that different to Nazis: Austria’s right-wing populist neo-Nazi party leader calls himself the “Austrian Newt Gingrich.” The crux of his campaign?—the “Contract with Austria.” Hmmmm...

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Is there such a thing as “white culture?” First answer: depends on what you mean by culture. If the word is used in the usual sense of a rich and interdependent body of language (including dialects and idiolects), belief, symbology, iconography, behavior, ritual, kinship structure, and so forth, the answer is mostly no. Rather, the culture of the United States, to the extent that it can be said to have one, is a complicated amalgam of various traditions adapted to American circumstances. The uppermost elements in the amalgam are northern European (English, Scottish, German, Dutch), but it also includes — and ever more so — Irish, Italian, and central European Jewish as well as numerous others, including Mexican. The ‘secret’, or often-unacknowledged element in this amalgam of traditions, supremely influential, is African and African-American. As Albert Murray says in ‘The Omni-Americans,’ “American culture . . . is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, uncontestedly mulatto.”

Mulatto or creole cultures exist wherever slavery imported by European settlers resulted in long-term cultural and genetic exchange and intermixture between the European-descended and the African-descended. In this sense, the US is part of an archipelago of societies that stretches from the Caribbean up and down the Americas and also includes such diverse places as Cuba, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Atlantic Nicaragua. These societies are all caste-stratified by skin tone and more broadly by the degree of ‘African-ness’ as opposed to ‘European-ness’ that an individual or family exhibits. The US manifests the pathology of stratified mulatto societies in an extreme form. Here, unlike in some other mulatto countries, an apparently rigid marker of whiteness exists — the color line — which is used to divide society into two groups that are by definition exclusive, ‘whites’ and others. If you are white, you are not non-white, and vice versa.

The awkwardness and inadequacy of all existing blanket terms for these others, such as ‘minorities’ or ‘people of color,’ stem from the repression and confusion involved in the very notion of whiteness. Nineteenth-century writers sensed this repression, so that whiteness often becomes an emblem of terror in their work. Ishmael in Moby-Dick speaks of whiteness as a “colorless all-color of atheism, from which we shrink.”

Who is white in the US? Today the simple answer might be someone who shows no physical trace of African, Asian, or Native American ancestry. The privileges denoted by whiteness have only been fully extended to some European-descended groups (Jews, Southern Italians, Portuguese, Poles and other eastern Europeans) in the last half-century or so. Distinct traces of racism toward all these groups still persist in the dominant culture (the Jewish case is obviously unique and I want to leave it aside here). Complicating the picture still further is that a sort of honorary whiteness is being extended to culturally assimilated nonwhites, especially Asians but also some middle-class and usually light-skinned African-Americans and Latinos. All this suggests that whiteness does have a cultural component, which is difficult to define.

To some extent, cultural whiteness in the US, as in other mulatto societies, is Europeanness. It is northern, Protestant European-ness rather than the southern, Catholic European-ness that dominates most of Latin America. Whiteness originated in seventeenth-century English Atlantic colonies as a marker denoting those who could own African slaves (though telltale images of blackness-as-contamination are already present in Renaissance plays like Webster’s ‘The White Devil’ and, of course, ‘Othello’). In the United States, as in Spanish-speaking mestizo societies like Mexico or Peru, color hierarchy has also been redefined in relation to native peoples, with an important difference. In Mexico, for instance, the original colonial marker, ‘Christian-civilized’ as opposed to “pagan-savage,” was retained over centuries of colonial history, allowing Christianized Indians to interbreed with the Spanish and to create a predominantly mixed population. In the United States, by contrast, a combination of the phobic, deeply dichotomous culture of New England Puritanism and the pressures of emergent slave-holding capitalism undermined any possibility of such an accommodation. The Christian/savage dichotomy gradually merged into the white/black one during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and faded in independent significance as native populations were slaughtered and their remnants penned up in reservations.

Whiteness had to keep recreating an absolute binary division of the human world, paralleling and growing out of the Calvinist division between the Elect and the Damned. As recently as the 1920s, ‘Christian’ in the US meant Protestant; ‘Catholic’ was a separate category; and European-descended working-class Catholics in eastern cities remained ‘ethnic.’ Arguably, the final full acceptance of these ethnicities as white was a strategic political decision made by the 1968 Nixon campaign, based on an understanding of their tendencies to racism and dislike of the anti-war movement.

American whiteness, then, is at root an adaptation of the Protestant ethic and accumulationist social personality that emerged in the merchant classes of Germany, Holland, and England during the seventeenth century. Whiteness has everything to do with capitalism and, more specifically, with adapting to the evolution of the capitalist mode of production and the social hierarchy it generates. It is also a denial of original crime — genocide and slavery — and of the fact that, as Harold Cruse put it in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, “the white Protestant Anglo-Saxon in America has nothing in his native American tradition that is aesthetically and culturally original, except that which derives from the Negro presence.” This is obvious from the way ‘race’ is de-
fined in the US. Race is still mainly based on the slavery paradigm, with an implied shadow of Christian-colonialism — visible today among genteel bigots of the Bill Bennett stripe — suggesting that non-whites are less moral than whites.


White (not European) American accumulationist culture is defined by its blandness and avoidance of controversy or risk, by its cleanliness-as-absence. This blankest-common-denominator culture is the behavioral and stylistic norm of the suburb. It is, besides, the ambiance of the modern corporate office, where niceness rules — or rather, is the means of rule. In the white-collar workplace everyone must act white: quiet, polite, cheerful, emotionally masked, sensually numb, perpetually busy, willing to tolerate any humiliation as long as it’s done with a smile.

One might say, then, that contemporary whiteness is, to use a phrase from Roland Barthes, the “degree zero” of culture, the suppression of culture as local, specific, traditional, kin- or community-oriented, non-rational, or non-capitalist. Non-white is all that resists smiling self-adaptation to one’s assigned yet ever-changing role as a component in the smooth flow of capital.

This suggests that whiteness is ceasing to be a property-defined quality allocated by the northern European-descended Protestant elite that has ruled the US since its founding. Rather, whiteness is a complex of unquestionable (because invisible) assumptions, behavioral norms, and power relations reproduced by and within all the major institutions of US society: the workplace, the school, the mall and other shopping/consumption sites, the private automobile/highway system, the suburb of detached single-family houses, and of course the mass media. All these institutions teach possessive individualism; anxious competitiveness; rigid emotional control through ‘niceness’; narrow or instrumental rationality; ready acceptance of isolation, boredom, and meaninglessness; the sacrifice of a lifetime for merchandise and security. Most of them also implicitly associate these qualities and attitudes both with white or light skin, and with success and self-esteem.

Running apparently counter to these trends is the fact that the workforce as well as the consumption force of the US is ceasing to be predominantly European, as a century ago it ceased to be predominantly northern-Protestant. This demographic fact, as well as the black, women’s, and gay movements, has forced non-white (and non-masculine, non-straight) identities into cultural visibility. However, my guess is that the more farsighted sectors of the US corporate class, while they may share a personal racist and phobic revulsion from this upsurge, see it as inevitable that these identities become part of the cultural mainstream. As Bill Clinton would say: “It’s not just the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do.”

There is still plenty of vicious resistance to this upsurge on the part of those whose privileges and values are threatened, and not only from upper middle-class elements like the National Association of Scholars, the New Republic, Charles Murray, or Pete Wilson. Apply the whiteness association test to poor rural areas, frayed inner-ring developments, and collapsing Rust Belt cities. Mountain Dew. Budweiser long-necks. Dented Camaros, vintage vans, and old pick-up trucks. Acne. Bad teeth. Nicotine fingers. Long hair under John Deere caps, or shaved heads with tattoos. On women, cheap blonde dye jobs and too much mousse. ‘Outlaw’ country and western. Hard rock. Crystal meth. Shock radio. Wal-Mart. Trailer parks. First Southern Baptist. Assembly of God. Confederate flag decals. Burning crosses. The world as it appears on ‘Married . . . With Children,’ or the ‘white trash’ segments of ‘Cops’ and America’s Most Wanted.’ We associate these images with places where black, brown, yellow, red, or visibly queer people don’t go after dark, and middle-class whites tread cautiously. This is the other whiteness, the embattled, dirty whiteness of fading skin privilege.

Skin privilege is fading at the lower end of the European-American working class. Over half of all welfare recipients have always been white. Now, a much larger majority of the working poor are white too. Nearly half of all high-school graduates without college degrees today work in jobs that pay scarcely more than the minimum wage. The fact that the underclass now consists at least as much of white as of black and brown people is concealed not only by habitual racism but by the fact that the white poor, owing to the history of government-sponsored segregation since World War II, mostly inhabit different zones than the black and brown poor. This is not to say that poor whites do not continue to receive considerably better treatment than poor blacks, nor that middle- and even upper-income blacks are not still subject to police harassment and to subtler forms of prejudice as well. But the media have begun to treat poor whites with the same sort of half-hysterical, prurient scorn once reserved exclusively for African-Americans and Latinos. The editorial-page frenzies of sanctimonious snobbery — sometimes masked as condescending compassion — over ‘trailer trash’ figures like Tonya Harding or Paula Jones are the latest examples.

One might argue that there has always been a significant minority of economically successful black people, just as there has always been a significant minority of ‘white trash.’ What has changed? The answer is twofold: first, the breakdown of the mostly-for-whites income ladders between unskilled and skilled/supervisory jobs, and between blue-collar parent and white-collar offspring; and second, the organized visibility, outside the old ghettos, of a much larger black middle class. These facts have dealt a crippling one-two punch to the old whiteness. Many European-Americans who cannot appropriate the new whiteness because they languish in wage-stripped areas, where public schools almost as bad as inner-city ones, are intent on drawing the color line ever more starkly. For them, pale skin is the last barrier against the realization of their utter disposability, their exclusion from the magic circle. Hence the appearance of Patriot militia-men and Nazi skinheads, who continue to define whiteness and its privilege in old, skin- and religion-based terms. The anxious, threatened suburbanites, still better-off but facing longer and longer work hours and diminished security as they
struggle to maintain their position, are not yet ready to go all the way. But they are electoral fodder for the likes of California governor Pete Wilson, whose couches his appeals to racism and xenophobia more respectfully in pseudo-commonsensical economic terms.

These two rival definitions of whiteness, the behavioral-elite and the Euro-plebeian, constitute vital fault lines in US politics today. The 1996 Buchanan candidacy represented the emergence onto the national electoral scene of this embattled plebeian whiteness alongside its organic counterpart, economic nationalism. Since 1968, adhering to the Nixonian Southern Strategy, the Republicans have been able to mobilize this constituency for their quite contrary agenda (which is in nearly all respects identical with that of the New Democrats). To the extent that Republicans fail to deliver skin privilege, they will be abandoned by this group. As white working-class people actually validate through experience that not all black people live either like those on the ‘Cosby Show’ or on true-cop shows — that the great majority are like them — these working-class whites will move politically and culturally either right hard, toward openly fascist white nationalism, or left, toward class-based coalitions and creolism.

Of course, corporate or elite whiteness must still dominate social behavior and values; in fact, it must do so more thoroughly than ever before. Factory workers in the mass production era could be thoroughly non-white in most respects as long as they could perform mechanical tasks under close supervision or under the discipline of the assembly line. As noted already, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who took the mass-production jobs opened up by Taylorism and Fordism in the ’twenties were not accorded full whiteness until well after World War II. The new forms of work, being substantially cognitive and/or emotional, require a much closer adaptation of individual personality and workplace culture to the tasks involved. But all that this requires — as the experience of any downtown corporate office shows — is that workers be bicultural. They must be able to act white by muting or even shedding their cultural difference as far as possible while at work, putting it on again like sweats and jeans when they get home. More precisely, on the job workers can retain whatever aspects of their cultural identity are not disruptive to the unquestioning accomplishment of the work unit’s goals, however abstract, vacuous, or even destructive these may be. Far-sighted corporations encourage such diversity because it both provides individual workers with an identity that can console them for the dreariness of their tasks, and functions as shared decoration for the work unit, like potted plants, cute posters, and so forth.

The allowable level of non-whiteness or ethnicity increases as one moves down the hierarchy from managerial decision-making and symbolic analysis toward the more routinized, supervised tasks of processing and service. Below these levels are the ghetto workplaces — the minority-owned small businesses and enterprise zones favored by the current administration. Here, whiteness can approach the necessary minimum, and ethnicity becomes a vital part of business strategy. The long-term unemployed, of course, need not be white at all. In fact, the threatening Other of the new whiteness is the unemployed, presumably criminal underclass — still ideologically figured as mainly, though not exclusively, black and Latino. This Other, like all the racially-defined Others in US history, plays the role of symbolic terrorist in reinforcing whiteness (and color stratification) among the rest of the population. How this will play out as ‘trailer trash’ are reconfigured as not-really-white remains to be seen. My guess is that the unassimilated Euro-American poor will start to be subject to the same kinds of surveillance and harassment in ‘really white’ areas as are blacks and Latinos, and will increasingly face subtle discrimination in employment and housing.

The realm of merchandising and consumption mirrors the new cultural strategy in the workplace. The segmentation of markets made possible by the multiplication of broadcast channels, demographic computer modeling based on point-of-sale data collection, and automated production techniques allows capitalism to become multicultural. As each major ethnic or identity group develops an adapted (not quite assimilated, in the old sense) middle class, commodities can be tailored to the values and traditions of that group to the extent that said values and traditions do not conflict with commodity consumption. Alongside the historic black media, there are Hispanic, Chinese, and Japanese radio stations and cable and satellite channels. Popular music markets already reflect age and lifestyle as well as racial and ethnic segregation. This relatively crude segmentation will become ever more precise and diverse as information technology develops and to the extent that neoliberalism wins out as corporate strategy. Meanwhile, universalist appeals will continue to be made to the more educated segments of the population, as in the recent MCI Internet service ads that proclaim “No race... no age... no gender... only minds.”

From this perspective there is no long-term incompatibility between whiteness and at least some versions of multiculturalism. If the version of multiculturalism we promulgate (or accept) as teachers, artists, or activists rests solely on the assertion of culture as identity, or as a lifestyle one can own and can therefore be merchandised, we indeed risk advancing ‘white culture’ in its newest, most sophisticated, and most insidious form. We are doing no better if we pander to the cruder versions of ethnic nationalism and Afrocentrism that mythologize, sanitize, and essentialize their regions and cultures much like those white New Age realtors who were all royalty in their past lives. The Situationists wrote: “Culture is the commodity that sells all the others.” Thirty years later, they could hardly have imagined how true this would become.

The history of black people in the United States teaches European-Americans that their whiteness is not an ethnicity but a dominance category and a denial mechanism; in other words, that it is empty of everything but power and forgetting. This forgetting really only benefits the few at the top of the social pyramid, and must be reproduced by a constant blizzard of ‘white noise’ in the mass media, as well as by every mechanism of geographical, educational, and economic segregation the system can bring to bear. Whenever whiteness starts to break down, as it did during the ‘Sixties,’ danger looms for the system, because new forms of order, involving the refusal of work and the direct assertion of collective need, tend to appear. I would qualify this by adding that whiteness also comprises the defensive adaptations of subaltern European ethnicities to the American racial divide (an obvious case is what it means to be ‘Italian’ in Howard Beach).
Our task as radicals, then, goes much further than centering the European-derived cultural and social perspectives and versions of history associated with ‘whiteness.’ Rather, we must draw from all traditions, including radical European ones, the means of destabilizing and subverting whiteness in practice, for whiteness is the central cultural form assumed by capitalist domination in this country.

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Conference Report: The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness

Irene J. Nexica, Birgit Rasmussen, Matt Wray, Kellie Stoddart, Pamela Perry, Eric Klinenberg, and Jillian Sandell—Conference Organizers

On Monday, April 7, the Nationline section of USA Today ran the following blurb, with the headline “On Being White”:

Scholars at the University of California at Berkeley are hosting a three day conference this week titled The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness. They say its the first major academic gathering of its kind, reflecting a growing interest in the critical study of white culture. “People have been studying people of color as if white wasn’t a color,” political science professor Michael Rogin said. “Let’s treat white as a color.”

That short and confusing blurb sparked a minor media frenzy. As conference organizers, we received 30 media calls over the next two days, most of them from news reporters in search of the white-pride, white-backlash conference at UC Berkeley. When we patiently explained to journalists that this was an anti-racist, multi-racial event, many of them dropped the story, apparently not interested in something as boring as anti-racism. Those who did continue calling and interviewing us, consistently sought to position the conference as the work of guilty white liberals.

For us, the current media frame of race relations became crystal clear: whites who attempt to speak about whiteness as race are either 1) denying white racism and feeling defensive and/or prideful about being white, or 2) feeling guilty about white racism and being white. When we forcefully rejected both of these descriptions of our motivations, reporters often seemed at a loss to make sense of the event. It was as if, since the conference did not fit into either of these poles, its meanings were unintelligible. Yet neither of these positions really does anything to help us understand whiteness and white racism, which was what our conference, in its own modest way, was trying to do. The result of this framing was that few readers got a sense of what the conference was actually like. Our brief comments below are an attempt to clarify some of the intentions behind the event.

* * *

Attended by over one thousand scholars, community organizers and concerned citizens from around the country and around the world, this multiracial conference, held at the University of California at Berkeley, investigated “whiteness” as racial identity and explored how it relates to the divisions that plague American social life. For all the media frenzy and controversy, the weekend turned out to be, in the words of a CNN anchorman, “just a serious academic conference”! And that is what the weekend was mostly about: a serious analytical engagement with the forms and meanings of whiteness as a racial identity and a historical and social structure of privilege.

Following the lead of African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, and White social critics, conference participants insisted that Americans will never understand, let alone lift, America’s curse of race until we all study how white people experience and maintain their social positions in a nation deeply fragmented by inequality. Conference participants argued that the social ramifications of the relatively privileged position of whites need to be better understood and that new insights may lead us to find ways to change the systems that perpetuate social injustice.

The conference featured over 35 presentations from academics and activists who are presently conducting research in this field. Presenters and moderators included Norma Alarcon, Allan Berube, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Michelle Fine, Ruth Frankenberg, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Patricia Penn Hilden, Aida Hurtado, Eric Lott, Walter Benn Michaels, Annalee Newitz, Michael Omi, Fred Pfeil, David Roediger, Michael Rogin, Jose Saldivar, Mab Segrest, and Howard Winant. Troy Duster delivered closing remarks.

The conference, originally intended to last a day, grew into a major, three day event because it addressed a need for probing assessments of the relations that sustain and reproduce advantages for some and disadvantages for others. An important starting point, participants agreed, is to acknowledge that the color of your skin, your gender, and the status of your job (or lack of one) largely determine your place in our society. All too often, whites fail to recognize that their whiteness is a racial category that carries with it a number of unspoken and largely unchallenged social benefits. As recent debates around affirmative action, immigration, and cocaine sentencing make clear, race continues to be a central aspect of American culture and society, even though its significance is not always made explicit. When we do talk about race we rarely talk about whiteness.
As a racial group, whites, even those who are not actively prejudicial or discriminatory, are the passive inheritors of a system of privilege and wealth. That the reality of these privileges is often not accepted or understood is due partly to the fact that this uneven distribution of privilege has been around for so long that no one can be held directly responsible for making it. It is also difficult to understand because not all whites share equally in that privilege and wealth. For many whites, their whiteness is simultaneously an identity of racial advantage and of class or gender disadvantage. Those whites who are homeless or working in a dying steel mill experience their racial privilege differently than do Wall Street bankers or female lawyers. In this way, whiteness is a complex and fragmented identity. Yet, due to the historical legacy of institutionalized racial injustices, all whites derive some benefit from America's racial divisions.

Accordingly, the conference sought to bring together scholars studying whiteness to consider how such work was best done, where it could go and how it connects to anti-racist work inside and outside the academy. We were taken aback by the press attention (which was, like the above, often misleading and sensationalist) and by the massive attendance of activists critical of an academic conference format. But all in all, the tensions and questions that came up were both provocative and productive.

Most presenters seemed to agree that a key issue in studies of whiteness must be the critical and analytical understanding of how whiteness underpins racial division and inequality in the US and in the global economy. Thus, the study of whiteness is both comparative, in that whiteness is understood as one specific race among others, and critical, in that whiteness is generally viewed as a socially-constructed identity which has historically helped to perpetuate social inequalities. It is also decidedly political, as many anti-racist activists speak to issues around whiteness as they appear in community organizing, coalition building, and other forms of political movement.

It is clear from the current social impasses that whites need to find new ways to respond to a world which has historically granted them racial preference. But, what motivations could whites have to forfeit their racial privileges? We believe that one benefit of understanding and researching whiteness is that it can lead whites of all classes to conclude that the social and psychic tolls of social inequality are too costly for whites to sustain. Even the privileged pay for inequality and the psychic and emotional costs are rising. If we too often try to pretend that racial and class inequality does not exist, it is because those divisions are too painful to look at. But, clearly, ignoring or dismissing race and class is not the answer—withdrawal gets us nowhere. Another and more productive option is to reject both guilt and denial and instead make space for ongoing public discussion about the social relations that divide us all.

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Shoah’s What Jew Got:
Religion and Race In America Today

Joel Schalit

Sufficient social order within the gentile world is supposedly achieved through their adherence to the seven commandments specifically given to the heathen, meaning gentiles....Beyond this minimal list of seven laws, the gentiles—“Noahides” or “Noahites,” the descendants of Noah—are not supposed to go in their inquiry into the ethical requirements of Old Testament law, which belongs exclusively to the Jews.... Rabbi G.N. Johanan said a heathen who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written Moses commanded us a law for an inheritance, not theirs. Resh Lakish (third century A.D.) said that a gentile who observes the Sabbath deserves death. The ethical goal of both Masonry and Talmudic Judaism is the same: to keep gentiles from reading and applying Old Testament law in society.

Gary North, Political Polytheism, Institute For Christian Economics, 1989

Below The Borscht Belt

The critique of antisemitism has been emptied of its utopian content. This is supposed to be a good thing, because the rationale for that critique has largely been dismantled by the successful Jewish struggle for equal rights in North America. To decry antisemitism today is to engage in an act of deliberate self-marginalization because the economic and cultural prohibitions which once denied Jews access to equality and power in Europe and America have now been eliminated. Just look at how much has been achieved since the gates of Auschwitz were shuttered and the corridors of power in North America were opened.

Nevertheless, many American Jews allege the persistence of antisemitism because it is a crutch that they cannot live without. To be discriminated against is to remain authentic. Remaining marginal means that despite the fact that Jews have become structurally equal to their gentile peers, they are still somehow different. This is supposed to make Jewish culture a distinct commodity in the pluralistic and tolerant world of capitalist multiculturalism. Such an ideology of discrimination, with its soft nationalist undertones based on self-victimization, lives in direct contradiction with the material truths of Jewish life in the other Zion. You don’t have to wear a yellow star anymore, you can wear a Polo or a Patagonia icon instead.

But many Jews still yearn for the old signifiers of holiness because the new ones are so empty. Somehow there is something far more compelling about projecting Jewish identity through the lens of discrimination then through symbols of assimilation, like expensive wrist watches, country homes in Colorado, pleasure yachts and BMWs. For one thing, assimilation is never complete. No matter how hard Jews try to straighten their hair, learn how to sail, play golf, or god forbid, go backpacking, the gentle symbols of racial equality which Jews have adopted as their own cultural signifiers have no serious precedent in Jewish history because there are no corresponding archetypes in the Jewish historical unconscious. This creates an identity crisis. Conservative Jews need to appeal to an eternal racism because it gives them the right to claim the kind of moral autonomy snatched away from them when they assumed the responsibilities of social equality and class privilege. Remaining eternally victimized becomes a form of collective denial, a symptom of Jewish inability to accept having become members of the class that they once hated.

This identity crisis makes Jews into a people without history. This partially explains the appeal of Deconstructionism, particularly that of Derrida and to a lesser extent Judith Butler and their anti-essentialist critique of ontology. As much as leftists criticize such positions for reifying the persistent instability of the commodity form in capitalist culture, the post-modern Jewish rejection of identity profoundly articulates the Jewish experience of domination, and the alienated ways in which many Jews have sought out strategies to avoid being religiously interpellated by that experience in the way ultra-orthodox Jews have. But history always has a habit of sneaking through in the backdoor because without it we would lack an unconscious. So secular Jews try to reject interpellation in every possible form, even if they end up reinscribing identity onto themselves by identifying with other forms of cultural marginality. Or, conversely Jews fetishize the only things that they can remember about themselves before they were assimilated, and that means they fetishize racism, if not genocide, in the manner that the ultra-orthodox do.

Those Jews who have sought to reconstruct their religious identity in response to the secularizing challenges of assimilation have done so in order to deny the fact that they have become integrated. Like the strategy of turning to deconstructionism as a means of escaping the burden of history, the strategy of resurrecting Jewish religious culture is alienated. Because it also denies the importance of history in identity formation, it assumes that like Evangelical Christians, Jews can adopt personalities and worldviews which were created in response to persecution. What they don’t seem to realize is that becoming historical in a religious manner is also form of denial, because it implies that the historical process which brought Jews out of the ghettos and the concentration camps is now terminated. And it also denies the present. Instead of expressing how assimilation has eliminated the possibility of maintaining a traditional identity, the ultra-orthodox insist on reinvigorating the historical process by returning to a sectarian way of life in order to experience history all over again. That means preparing to experience the possibility of another Holocaust in all of its sado-masochistic, self-inflicted glory.

However, there are even more profound reasons for turning the Holocaust into a historical commodity. Genocide also allows a guilty conscience to transcend its own class bound-
aries. If you want to deny your newly acquired class status, there’s no more powerful or coercive symbolic means with which to annihilate it with than by invoking, like a shaman, the constant specter of potential annihilation. By turning the Holocaust into an eternally returning creation myth, conservative Jews are allowed to live with the fact that they were only emancipated because they were forced to join the ranks of an economic system and a corresponding cultural framework which naturally sought their destruction. Logically speaking, in order to live with that kind of compromise you have to find a way to repress all of the accumulated collective knowledge about capitalism which that kind of persecution instills in you. So you begin to identify with your own culturally over-determined death wish. By recycling the Holocaust, by claiming that the potential for its repetition lies dormant in the present, conservative Jews are allowed to construct identities which are necessarily incommensurate with the hollow and empty symbols of assimilation because they can’t accept the fact that they’ve been forced to identify with what they once were able to discern as something radically evil.

This kind of pathological identification with invasion and optimization is the only way Western civilization's most highly publicized scapegoats can cope with the horror of denying the reality of what they were forced to become. This reality can be traced from the early right-wing Zionists such as Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Josef Trumpeldor to their self-destructive, homicidal contemporaries such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Cabinet Minister Ariel Sharon and the various ultra-orthodox political parties which inspire young Russian immigrants like Tatyana Susskind to intentionally incite Muslim rioting in the former Occupied Territories by making posters that depict Mohammed trampling on the Koran.

Eretz America

This is why when American Jews cry discrimination, many of us on the Left tend to dismiss it as either being strategic or paranoid. We have good reason. It’s hard to trust Hasidic cries of antisemitism when Lubavitchers inspire Jewish immigrants to shoot Palestinian civilians in the West Bank with their Uzis, despite the fact that those immigrants have settled on land that was forcibly expropriated from families that had lived there since well before the birth of Christ. Analogously, it’s hard to give credence to cries of antisemitism when Jews occupy some of the most important and powerful positions in the American economic and political establishment. Consider Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve Bank, Richard Rubin, Secretary of Labor, former Treasury Secretary Robert Reich and countless others.

Despite the new Jewish power, the rhetoric and thoughtfulness of 19th and early 20th century Jewish socialism continues to live on in feel-good-despite-the-pain Clinton-era liberals. One such figure is Tikkun’s rabbi-cum-publisher Michael Lerner, who claims to espouse pluralist values but at the same time subscribes to neo-Evangelical communitarian ideologies which propose that the only practical solution to the destructive effects that assimilation has on minorities is to create traditional communities that are separate but equal. Talk about an oxymoron. What intellectuals like Lerner seem to forget is that solutions of this sort to the decline of tradition in modernity are the same ideologies being espoused by right-wing Christian nationalists who feel polluted by any minority presence in the American moral community. But this kind of abstraction is always difficult to see through, particularly when many of the most outspoken and erudite secular proponents of the new conservatism are also Jewish, such as the Israeli immigrant philosopher Amitai Etzioni, as well as one of the most famous contemporary American critics of welfare state liberalism, Irving Kristol.

Scholars and politicians, bureaucrats and publishers from Greenspan to Kristol, to Lerner and beyond are among the most important economic and intellectual architects of the new conservatism, one which sides with the old gentile establishment in maintaining the racist and classist divisions which once held Jews back. This cruel logic of assimilation is the only way Western civilization's most highly publicized scapegoats can cope with the reality of their complicity in the establishment's own racist economic and cultural policies. The new anti-Semitism has on minorities is to create traditional communities that are separate but equal. Talk about an oxymoron. What intellectuals like Lerner seem to forget is that solutions of this sort to the decline of tradition in modernity are the same ideologies being espoused by right-wing Christian nationalists who feel polluted by any minority presence in the American moral community. But this kind of abstraction is always difficult to see through, particularly when many of the most outspoken and erudite secular proponents of the new conservatism are also Jewish, such as the Israeli immigrant philosopher Amitai Etzioni, as well as one of the most famous contemporary American critics of welfare state liberalism, Irving Kristol.

This is why the American Left ought to rid itself of the residual after effects of its old Leninist antipathy towards Judaism. Leftist antisemitism is a legacy of Communist anti-clericalism, one which made use of the same ethno-cultural scapegoats that the ancien régime in Europe always made use of, first during the Inquisition and the Pogroms, and then during the Holocaust. Leftist antisemitism is racist, not anti-religious, because instead of criticizing religious ideology for being an inverse of consciousness of reality, it targets a whole ethno-cultural group of people as though it were a hegemonic social formation. This is wrong. It represents an enchanted form of historical materialism because it replaces religion with class while claiming to still be scientific. Leftist antisemitism epitomizes the kind of idealism which its own vulgar Marxist proponents have always railed against, one which mistakes reality for ideology, or in this case, victim for executioner.

The Left has to rid itself of its anti-Semitic tendencies because it cannot have a universal program for human liberation that fails
to take into account how minorities have to struggle with their own socialized death instincts. It is these death instincts, acquired over centuries, that make “invisible” minorities like Jews culpable in their own marginalization. This is what Gershom Scholem wanted Hannah Arendt to understand when he criticized the lack of mercy in her coverage of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem for The New Yorker in 1961. Only Scholem put it in terms of having a naive love for one’s people which allows one to remain empathetic as well as critical, all at the same time. However, what Arendt understood that Scholem did not was how extremely complex and hypocritical the moral dilemmas are which accompany a persecuted people’s adaptation to normalization, particularly when that people has found a way to punish those individuals who were responsible for one of the most morally repugnant acts of barbarism in human history.

Roll Out The Gun Barrel

But as astute as Arendt was in anticipating the moral inconsistencies of Jewish nationalism, she probably never contemplated how reactionary the Left’s critique of Zionism would become after the Six Day War, and later, during the Intifadah. That is what is missing here. One of the primary reasons the Jewish Question has been excised from the Left’s imaginary is its hatred of Israel. Simulating with the plight of the Palestinians under the yolk of Israeli military domination is one thing, but making world Jewry responsible for their plight is an entirely separate issue. Not every Jew is an Israeli, nor is every American Jew a Zionist. Unfortunately, since the Six Day War the American Left has conflated Judaism with nationalism, made it very difficult for Jews to feel comfortable participating in Leftist political circles. That is the cruel irony of the situation.

On the one hand, many American Jews fought valiant American labor and civil rights struggles to expand the political scope of American democracy, not just for themselves, but for everyone. On the other hand, under the weight of the anti-Semitic purges of the late forties and early fifties, Jews were singled out by the American political establishment for their complicity in spreading the gospel of international socialism. The establishment was partly right. Socialist politics helped American Jews analyze the structures of domination which prohibited them from having any kind of social and economic mobility. Subsequently it played a major role in the emancipation of American Jewry. However this was not viewed as an exclusively ethnocentric task. Socialist politics also helped contextualize the Jewish struggle for recognition and rights in light of other people’s struggles in this country. This partially explains why there was such a predominance of Jews in labor unions and civil rights organizations which dedicated themselves to all kinds of political conflicts.

But the Jewish affinity for socialism also made Jews obvious targets for Cold War-era American conservatism. Aside from the obvious, one of the main reasons why Jews were re-elected as communal scapegoats during the early years of the Cold War had to do with the kind of propaganda that the State Department used to combat Communism. Always portraying the conflict as though it were a struggle between the forces of God and the power of Satan, the American government relied on extremely religious rhetoric which portrayed America as a Christian nation fighting the forces of fascist atheism. This translated itself into covert government funding for Christian broadcasting organizations headed by fiery right-wing Evangelical propagandists like Billy Graham and Pat Robertson who provided the struggle against Communism with a particularly parochial culture, a struggle that emphasized the exclusively Christian character of American political institutions and citizenship. This kind of religious characterization of the conflict between American and the former Soviet Union transformed what was essentially an economic conflict between two competing imperialist nations into a religious war between the forces of light and the powers of darkness. Once again we were sent back to a Manichean world of polar opposites where the metaphysical basis for classical antisemitism could be nurtured and reinvigorated. This is precisely what happened, and why Jews, with identification with revolutionary politics, became emblematic of that Satanic other which clings to this world instead of renouncing it in favor of a non-existent heaven.

Gentile On My Mind

Sandwiched first between a new Christian Right, and then an anti-Semitic Left, were left with very few choices as to who they could politically align themselves with after the Six Day War. But that is not what concerns us here so much as the cumulative psychological impact of racist stereotyping upon the collective psyche of American Jewish people. First, European Jewry gets nearly exterminated by the Nazis. Then, it gets marginalized by both the Left and the Right in America, beginning with the trial and electrocution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for stealing nuclear secrets on behalf of the Russians. Jews are blamed for being religious nationalists, blamed for undermining American democracy on behalf of atheism, denied symbolic membership in the American polity because Jewish culture is antithetical to the Christian culture which gave birth to American democracy. It’s enough to make you want to commit suicide. You’re permanently homeless no matter what you do. So you develop highly self-destructive complexes which involve the worst kind of self-loathing possible. You begin to identify with the worst of your own suffering.

It all boils down to one common cultural denominator: religion. American political culture is Christian just like Robert Bellah and his school of so-called “public philosophers” said it was in the late sixties when they started to trace the
presence of a civil religion in American politics, beginning with the way Americans mourned the loss of President Kennedy. The problem with Bellah’s analysis and the Communitarian one which he and his disciples like Amitai Etzioni developed out of it during the eighties was that, while it recognized the persistence of religion in American politics, it never recognized the destructive effects of that religious influence. Its sectarian character simply eluded them. The lesson Bellah and his sentimental colleagues from Habits of The Heart seemed to forget was that you can’t have religion in a democratic society without there being an official religion which safeguards the legitimacy of the state. In that kind of neo-theocratic cultural environment, you can’t make much room for people who are different, particularly when religion, like any other kind of cultural commodity, is only friendly to monopolies.

New Clear Jerusalem

In such an environment it becomes impossible for those who do not espouse the official doctrine to ever feel at home. The only way that they can accommodate their own cultural difference in such a perpetual national climate of ideological homogeneity is to fetishize it. They just have nowhere else to go. This became extremely problematic for a people with an overwhelming instinct for survival, who had just survived a war of genocide. To be faced with being marginalized yet again in the Enlightenment’s Zion right after the death camps were liberated must have been the straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak. It provided the impetus for a mistrust in the possibility of pluralism and democracy, a mistrust which in turn transformed a centuries old survival instinct into its opposite, an ideology of death. It should therefore come as no surprise that Jews would come to theorize and administer the legitimacy of the establishment. It’s a symptom of the kind of sado-masochism which comes from identifying too closely with authority.

Nevertheless, resources of emancipation are still there. They lie in the terrible and yet potentially utopian double consciousness that Max Horkheimer once said Jews have always had to live with as “outsiders within the bourgeoisie.” What Horkheimer meant by that insightful turn of phrase was that Jews are caught in a double bind. On the one hand they are allowed membership in the gentile middle class. On the other hand they are rendered permanently marginal within it because middle class culture remains culturally exclusive. No matter how it appears on the surface, deep down it is sectarian. It is Christian, more specifically Protestant. As a consequence, Jews experience this strange sense of displacement, one which perpetually renders them culturally marginal at the same time that they have achieved economic equality.

This, Horkheimer suggests, is why so many Jews are potential leftists. Their cultural marginalization remains a metaphor for identifying with economic inequality. In fact, it even provides access to the kind of “privileged” class consciousness which allows for identification with labor, the kind that American Jews, for the moment, seem to have lost. The point now is to exploit that cleavage once more, to get inside it and thematize it in social and economic terms all over again. This is the only way to combat a loss of memory and imagination which has allowed American Jewry to dissociate material reality from cultural equality and thus identify with the external sources of its own historical oppression.

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Sexual Mutants of the Multiculture

Annalee Newitz

Miscegenation: marriage or sexual relations between a man and a woman of different races.

—from Webster’s New World Dictionary

My parents grew up in segregated neighborhoods. Cynthia was raised in a small Texas town where everybody she knew was white and Christian. Marty lived in a Jewish section of the San Fernando Valley in California. His school was so Jewish-dominated that the team chant was “Hit ‘em in the kischkes!” At some point during their courtship, which began during their days at a less segregated high school, my mother decided to convert to Judaism. And so she did several years later, studying Jewish history and culture with a reform rabbi and professor at UCLA where she was attending college. But her ethnic transformation, although legal under reform Jewish law, would never be complete. To my father’s parents, she was still an interloper. It was as if Christianity were written into her very DNA, as unchangeable as blue eyes and blonde hair. And, I must admit, I have never thought of her as Jewish either. She is my WASP mother.

So I have come to be an ethnic hybrid: half-WASP, half-Jew, the product of two supposedly segregated identities. Such a condition lends itself easily to jokes. If you combine my heritage with that of my partner, you get one Jew and one Christian. If you combine my heritage with my partner and our friends up the street, you get 1.2 Jews, 2 British, .5 Scots-Irish, .5 Italian, .01 African American, and of course the inevitable imaginary .0001 Native American.

What this tongue-in-cheek laundry list of ethnicities manages to explain—in a quite serious way—is the extent to which all racial identities are already hopelessly miscegenated. Nevertheless, the terms “race” and “ethnicity” grow out of the old-fashioned idea that there are measurable, anatomical differences between such groups that make them obviously distinct. Even “multiculturalism,” a concept which suggests racial plurality, takes for granted that racial groups can co-exist peacefully only by maintaining cultural separations and particularities. But I would argue that the “multiculture” might more aptly be understood as a series of cultures that are being experienced all at once, often in a single individual or group. The racial logic of multiculturalism should be conceived of as “multiple and hybridizing,” not as “separate and plural.” To acknowledge this, in my opinion, would simply be to admit what we’ve known all along.

Jewish Sandwiches

Fetishes are only symbols, highly compacted stories that subliminally signal their fuller meanings.

— Robert Stoller

For my parents’ and grandparents’ generation, being Jewish meant being part of “the Jewish race.” They were part of a not-quite-white racial category, caught between assimilating into dominant WASP culture and finding themselves cast out of it. Although most Eastern European Jews could “pass” as white, their religious and cultural heritage made them a breed apart, a group that would have to be taught the ways of American Christianity (implicitly, American whiteness) whether they liked it or not. Although my father’s elementary school was 99 percent Jewish, they were forced to have a Christmas pageant every year. My mother’s parents called Jews “clannish,” accusing them memorably of “eating greasy food.” Telling me this story, my mother bursts out laughing. “A Southerner saying that someone else ate greasy food!” she snorts, still incredulous after more than three decades. “I’m always amazed that Marty was able to like me,” she adds, “because he hated Christians so much.” Once, when they were first dating, my mother referred to Brazil nuts by the only name she knew, a name she had learned in Texas: nigger toes. Marty claims he intended never to speak to her again.

I used to ask them all the time what brought them together into the unlikely union that made me. It all came down to a sandwich. “I saw Marty eating these gigantic sandwiches for lunch. I’d only ever had these white bread sandwiches, with one slice of meat and mayonnaise. Maybe there would be a layer of lettuce, but I don’t think so. I had to find out why this guy was eating such huge sandwiches.” It’s so American, that fetishization of the “other” through food. We avoid thinking about the way “difference” often means “subjugation” by trying to convert social identity into tasty, consumable objects. Foreign identities become synonymous with the restaurants immigrants build (or through their simulation). We come to know the other literally by consuming them.

But my mother was consumed. They come to visit me, and I ask her about it.

“I had always assumed, not knowing that there could be any other alternative, that Marty would convert to Christianity,” she explains to me as my father watches her from across the room.

“But I would never have done that. Never,” he cuts in, “That just wasn’t an option. Christians were the enemy.”

“But why did you want to be Jewish?” I ask Cynthia. “Was it a way of escaping your family?”

“Yes, my family was very . . . narrow-minded. Jews seemed cosmopolitan, sophisticated. In Marty’s family, people talked out loud, and spoke their minds. And they were a handsome family, not the stereotype of the wrinkled, hunched people my mother imagined.”

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“But why did you want to be Jewish?” I ask Cynthia. “Was it a way of escaping your family?”

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“Cynthia’s father thought that since I was a Jew, I must be a communist,” my father remarks drily.

“No, and I didn’t want you to grow up with religious conflict. So I converted.”

“You know, I don’t think of you as Jewish,” I remind her, “and didn’t you think I might wonder why your mother celebrated Christmas?”

“Well no, I never thought of that,” she replies, gigglng. Then, seriously, “But I feel like a Jew, as if I have more in
common with Jews. People see me as Jewish. Maybe being Jewish did allow me to see my own culture, Southern Christian culture, as somewhat alien. It seems alien to me now."

My partner enters the conversation. “People would definitely think you are a Jew,” he says, “most Jews would.”

It’s true. Cynthia has been Jewish for more of her life than she has been white. I, on the other hand, have been white and Jewish for exactly the same amount of time. In fact, I have been white and Jewish simultaneously. One could argue that such an experience is the very essence of being Jewish in the United States today, especially if you have pale skin and blue eyes like I do. Looking at me, and many Jews, most people would think “white” rather than “Jew.” Yet the not-quite-whiteness of being Jewish has never gone away. When I declare myself Jewish, or part-Jewish, people do respond to me differently. Because being Jewish is not usually something people see immediately, they can’t prejudge me the way they would an African-American or Asian-American. But once they know that I’m Jewish, many of their preconceptions shift, and I seem suddenly strange. They have to gather more data to feel comfortable. “Are you kosher?” they’ll ask, or, “Are you religious?” Then there’s my favorite, “Do you speak Jewish?” I wouldn’t describe any of these questions as anti-Semitic, only as indicative of the way being Jewish somehow marks you as “other,” as needing some kind of an explanation. When you’re white, it’s far more rare that you’re asked to explain your identity. Most people don’t regard whiteness as a race, only as the absence of it. However wrongheaded this attitude may be, it’s the kind of “common sense” that constitutes our first impressions of one another.

**Williamsburg**

I go out to breakfast with my partner’s family in Long Beach. His grandmother Dorothy, from the Jewish side of his family, is there with her boyfriend, Charles. We talk about the past.

“I’m from Williamsburg. Do you know it?” Charles asks me. I don’t. He is shocked, then amused. “It’s the Orthodox section of New York.”

“C’mon Charles, they don’t know about that,” Dorothy teases him. But I’m interested; I’m always interested to hear about the past. I ask to know more.

“My father wanted me to be a rabbi; he was very religious,” Charles says, “But I rebelled because I wanted to be an engineer.” I try to imagine a scenario in which a Jew becoming an engineer would constitute rebellion. It’s like watching someone eat a sandwich stuffed with some bizarre form of vegetable. You want to get up close and find out what it is.

“Wasn’t it hard for Jews to get into college in those days? Didn’t they screen you to make sure they weren’t admitting too many Jews?” I ask, remembering my Ethnic Studies courses.

“Yes, that’s what they did,” Charles says, “so I became a teacher.”

Several months later, we go out to dinner with them in Los Angeles. Charles and Dorothy have just been to see me give a book reading in which I talk about whiteness, and stereotypes of whiteness.

“I never had to deal with white people when I was growing up,” Charles says. “It was Williamsburg. Do you know it?” He looks at me. This time I do know it, and I remember.

“Yes, I know Williamsburg. What you had to deal with was really horrible,” I say, referring to anti-Semitism in the early twentieth century. But in retrospect, I realize what I’ve said is ambiguous. Charles takes me to mean that growing up in a restrictive Orthodox environment was horrible. He couldn’t agree more.

**Miscegenation Blues**

I think I must have tried, like every kid, to imitate my parents’ relationship. When I started dating, I developed a predilection for people who came from a biracial or biethnic background. I also dated outside my race, usually ending up with Asian-Americans, who enjoy the dubious privilege of having inherited the “model minority” label once reserved for Jews. My first true love was Korean-American, and I was his ultimate “other.” His Christian, traditional parents were more than a little reluctant to allow their only son to date a Jewish white girl. They referred to me as “that American girl.” When I came to visit his family once, I was filled with shame when I awkwardly took off my shoes inside the door, nearly stumbling in my effort to demonstrate cultural sympathy. What was ridiculous was that I took off my shoes to enter my own house. I did it every day. And when we visited my parents’ friends’ houses, we did the same—Asian customs were ordinary to me. But I felt suddenly, stupidly white in that long-ago boyfriend’s house. I was an invader, a son-stealer, grubby-fingered and clumsy. Later that same year, his older sister, a church-going woman, came home late one night to find him in bed with me. That clinched it. I was a slut, just like all the other white American girls.

Being Jewish was easy compared to that. It made me interesting, gave me a special angle on things. I knew how stupid Christmas was several years before the other kids knew it. As a Jew, I could do things in the name of Judaism that would have gotten someone else in trouble. I gave a book report to my ninth grade class on Philip Roth’s novel *The Ghost Writer*, about a young man who is sexually obsessed with Anne Frank. Dressed as “the writer,” I read a long soliloquy from the novel which praised the erotic magnetism of a dead girl, the seductiveness of the ultimate Jewish victim. What kind of teacher would risk forbidding me to read erotica out loud to a ninth grade class when I was doing it for Judaism? Anti-Semitism was not allowed at my high school, at least not out in the open. Once some boys in the hallway yelled, “Dirty Jew!” at me during lunch. I wheeled around, glowered, and screamed “FUCK YOU!” at the top of my lungs, giving them the finger too, just for good measure. A teacher tried to upbraid me for yelling obscenities in the hall. “They called me a DIRTY JEW!” I said. “But is that how you should respond?” he asked condescendingly. “Yes,” I replied, and never heard another word about it.

When I think about race, fucking—even the word “fuck”—just seem to come to mind. And I think of family, which most psychologists would agree is a fairly typical connection to make. My sense of my own racial identity always comes back to my parents’ miscegenated romance, which has isolated our family from their families for most of my life. Fucking, and worse, breeding, is what made their union scary during the early 1960s. Although there were other conflicts between my parents and their families, I know—having seen the way those purebloods looked at me, the
mutant offspring of Jews and hicks—that they were disturbed by what I might represent. I was the hybrid corruption of their own segregated cultures, proof that Jews and whites could mate and even produce something pretty, something smart, something that could yell “FUCK YOU!” and not be sorry at all. I was the living embodiment of their racial and sexual transgression. And I knew it.

As I grew up, my racial identity blurred and changed as I moved from one romance to another. I fell in love with whites who fetishized my Jewish “otherness,” women who fetishized my gender-bending butch “otherness,” Asian-Americans and blacks who fetishized my white “otherness,” and biracials like myself who fetishized my ability to pass as white, my bourgeois “otherness.” I was everybody’s “other,” just as they were mine. Even when I dated nice Jewish boys, I was fascinated by the idea of making it with one of those purebloods, somebody whose Jewish genetics had never been thinned by whiteness. Difference was my fetish; it had to be.

For years I articulated my racial politics by fucking. In fact, that’s how I articulated all my politics: no one was too strange, too ugly, too different for me to fall in love with them, even if it was only for a day. I had to keep reiterating that fundamental difference I saw inside myself, to make every racial relationship sexual, and every sexual relationship racial. Families and couples that were monoracial upset me; they were a personal rejection. When I would see two Asians walking hand-in-hand down the street, I would wonder, “What non-Asian person have they each rejected to get there?” A white family made me ask, “Why did they need to make their children into little racial versions of themselves?”

Later, I turned to theorizing. “You know,” I told my students one day in the midst of a discussion on race, “we could eliminate a lot of racial problems in the United States right now if everyone would just agree to breed with people of a different race. Then, the very next generation would have a totally different racial makeup.” Everyone laughed. But I was only half-joking.

**The Multicultural Mutation Tree**

The Mutation Tree . . . lets you see random variations (or “mutations”) of your sphere. Clicking on any of the balls in the mutation tree will produce a new sphere, with randomly determined properties. The higher up the mutation tree you go, the more variation you will see . . . — from the instruction manual for Kai’s Power Tools 3

We are always in the midst of a vast social mutation that could lead us into new ways of being racial, and forming racial identity. Indeed, it’s fear of the changing racial character of the United States that has motivated the recent outbreak of dysgenic hysteria books like The Bell Curve and Emotional Intelligence, and Darwinian horror movies like Species and the forthcoming Alien Resurrection. These books and movies all take as their central premise one basic problem: there are “others” out there who are breeding, and they want to breed with “us.” The really scary part is that if “they” breed with “us,” then it will be a lot harder to separate the “good” races from the “bad” races (whatever you might think those are). People who identify as more than one race or ethnicity challenge the old, separatist ways of doing things. Since racial separatism is founded on the idea that the races can, in fact, be sorted out into easily defined categories, it is virtually impossible for hybrids like myself to maintain such a system. Even the US census has acknowledged this, and is debating whether to change its categories to include “multiracial.”

But what does this mean for us in our everyday lives? Finally, I think, it suggests that progressive social transformations are possible in one lifetime. My mother lives as a Jew, and Charles lives outside Williamsburg. What strikes me about the distance they’ve both come is how their identities haven’t just moved toward idiosyncratic personal goals, but towards a society which is actually capable of recognizing the choices they’ve made. For my mother really does pass as a Jew, whatever I might think, and Charles can choose from a whole range of Jewish practices that will not restrict him to Orthodoxy. The changes they made in their identities did not take place in isolation, but were part of large-scale social movements. Charles’ generation broke away from the old world traditions of Judaism to find less constraining cultural identities in the melting pot. Cynthia’s generation reinterpreted their ethnic heritages and embraced a multicultural ideal where each racial and ethnic group could celebrate itself. And I, the inheritor of their unmade traditions, will have to climb the mutation tree myself and aim for a more just and egalitarian variation on the culture I live in today. I hope this culture will have a place for people whose racial identities are multiple and compounded.

It’s possible that multiculturalism could give birth to divisiveness, warfare, and separatism. Certainly, it’s a system that has, at certain points, discouraged political and economic coalitions between racial groups; it can lead to a fetishization of difference to the point where any move to emphasize human commonalities seems like oppressive homogenization. Spike Lee, one of the black community’s most visible advocates in the US media, argued for the benefits of multicultural separatism in Jungle Fever, a movie about why interracial sex easily gives rise to violence and hurt. But the fact is that multiculturalism, in spite of its many drawbacks, does mean that people of different races are going to get thrown together more often. And they are going to fall in love, and fuck, and have children. Perhaps Spike Lee, like my parents’ families, would view me and my polyracial peers as mutants of the monstrous sort. Like Godzilla or something from The X-Files, we represent the end of all that was once called “civilization.”

If that’s true, then I welcome the end of civilization. I want to see race get weirder, harder to define, more and more like a cheesy movie rather than a melodrama. I look forward to a future when “miscegenation” is no longer possible, because it has become clear that everybody is already miscegenated. In fact, we’ve been miscegenated for thousands of years. I hope my peers, and their children, will generate a new language and iconography to describe my current condition. Biracial, transracial, multiracial, polyracial, pseudo-racial, post-racial—maybe through our experiences these terms will acquire meaning.

I’d rather be a mutant than a separatist.

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On the Merits of Racial Identity

Tomás Sandoval

As a teaching assistant at UC Berkeley, I have had the rare opportunity to work with students who are at a crucial intellectual point in their lives. In their first or second year of college education, at a time when their identity is beginning to take concrete and passionate shape, they encounter me in the discussion section of some history class dealing with the intersection of race, culture, class, and politics. What they learn, I hope, is to think critically of the world around them and to strive for an intellectual position that questions the simplistic notions that dominate this world. Especially with issues concerning race, I tell them, it is all too easy for us to fall into the essentialist constructs of past generations of minority activists and further impede their well-intentioned goal: progress for all people of color.

What I learn, however, is something even more profound. They remind me that you can’t overlook the obvious in your quest for intellectual growth, even if it turns out to be a little limited or even wrong. Sometimes, just sometimes, we acquire a strength that can be used for a greater good if we understand race in ways that go beyond or even contradict the skills we develop as scholars. Ultimately, there is still a difference between the “real” world and the intellectual one. What makes sense in one doesn’t always make sense in the other. No matter what intellectual constructs come from academia, however persuasive and sensible they may seem when applied to observations about the world outside the university, people living in that world continue to hold fast to their own belief systems.

In a race-conscious world, this is still true today. More and more intellectuals agree in their criticisms of essentialist identity politics. The notion that people of a certain ethnicity must conform to certain political ideals, maintain some specific cultural standard, and be “true to their race” is too simplistic when considered with a complex understanding of how “race” itself is a social construct. But the experiences of many of my students and myself suggest that sometimes it is good to be too simplistic. Often, these experiences suggest a need for holding onto some of the simplistic notions of the past for the purpose that they serve. I can make this easier to understand with the example of my own story.

I am a Chican. The second of three children born to two second-generation Americans, I grew up in a typical Los Angeles suburb of tract housing and strip malls. Perhaps not so typically, people of my ethnicity all but dominated the landscape. Whether in our schools, supermarkets, malls, or playgrounds we always seemed to be surrounded by people of Mexican descent. Of course, people of other ethnicities shared the same spaces with us. Yet, undoubtedly, in the greater Los Angeles region of the 1980’s I was part of a Mexican majority.

Then, in 1990, I began my undergraduate career at a small, liberal arts college in a place called Claremont, California. While it was only about fifteen miles further east from LA than the town in which I grew up, Claremont seemed like an entirely different planet. Tree-lined streets, classic well-maintained homes, and a small shopping square in the town center which closed every evening after sunset characterized this “little bit of New England out West.” While Claremont was completely different from where I grew up, it only took me about five minutes to acculturate myself to a city whose careful development over two generations produced a neighborhood where Beaver Cleaver himself could have lived. I mean, you could walk barefoot on the streets without fear of stepping in, or on, anything that might seriously ruin your day or worse. Yet, the population of that town, or more specifically, my microcosm within it, was quite another thing to get used to. For you see, at Claremont McKenna College I was part of a small Mexican minority in a primarily wealthy, Anglo student population.

In actuality, that’s when I became a “Chicano.” That is to say, that’s when my ethnicity began to take a more developed, precise, and political meaning for me personally. The name Chicano became the name that I, like the politicized generation of Mexican Americans before me, chose to reflect that change. Before that, I (like all of the people around me) was a “Mexican.” At times we were “Mexican Americans,” some of us were even “Hispanics,” but the terms rarely served to describe more than our historical nationality and, at times, level of acculturation. Of course, even those qualities have a very real political aspect to them. The difference was that those names for our identity, at that time in my life, didn’t have to be political. When people used one of them to describe themselves, they didn’t necessarily mean to say something about their racial politics.

No matter what we called ourselves, we related to our ancestors in different ways and at different levels. My Mexicanness differed from that of my second generation friends as it did from others who were racially mixed or immigrants. We were not being cultural relativists. We lived in a world of cultural standards. In the eyes of many of the Mexican adolescents around me some of us were more Mexican than others. Sometimes being too Mexican or too American caused some social anxiety. Still, we all shared some ambiguous connection to each other, perhaps best expressed through our cultural practice, our speech habits, and the foods we all ate.

The bond between us became more clear when we joked around with our Filipino and Anglo friends. Because we lived in a mixing ground of cultures, race became the topic of running jokes among my group of friends. Any cultural stereotype was free game as we took the opportunity to break up into ethnic teams and make fun of each other. Of course, the Mexicans rarely lost. We were the majority. In some ways, our status produced a culture to which other students had to acculturate themselves. On some level then, acceptance was gained by assuming some level of a Mexican American culture. (And all of this still existed within
a greater society which acculturated all of us to a confused “Americaness” too!) Yet, whatever we called ourselves, whatever that meant to us individually, my Mexican friends and myself always had our common and free-floating status as Mexicans all but secured.

In Claremont, however, there were very few of “us.” I suddenly found that my views in the classroom, particularly on issues concerning race, produced a different effect than they had previously. I, like my twenty or so other college mates, represented the “Mexican view.” White students, many of whom had surprisingly never had much contact with Mexicans of any sort, listened to our views on these matters not as merely another opinion but as the “Mexican opinion.” In some respects this new aspect of classroom learning inspired confidence in my own beliefs. Who I was and what I thought were more than the mere product of what I had learned in books or through my parents. They were products of my culture and other life experiences. By observing how others considered my views, I was able to grow in my understanding of what made me different from the students around me and what did not.

Even more striking were the few opportunities where “our” views were actually desired. Whereas before in my education teachers never avoided race in their lessons, probably because it was all around them, I now found that professors rarely included it in their discussions except as some sidenote or special case. How can one teach about the welfare system and not include some discussion of the way race seems to interplay with the realities of class? How can you discuss civil rights and not include Mexican Americans and their struggles of the sixties and seventies? Sim-

ply put, my professors didn’t teach many of these things because it was not part of their experience. Because of that, few of my non-Mexican professors and classmates exhibited a strong inclination to learn these things on their own.

It was at Claremont that I first began to truly appreciate the way that societies can mask their acknowledgment of the racial “other” and, at the same time, portray a knowledge that is as singularly complete as any. I came to accept that most people approach the learning of what they don’t know through the gaze of what they do. For people who never had to experience strong emotions because of their race or ethnicity, ignoring those aspects in other aspects of their life was a natural consequence. That didn’t mean that their learning was flawed compared to mine, just different. So, what rang “true” to the majority of students in a class seemed increasingly flawed through my eyes because my past made me see things in a different light.

The journey these frustrations led me on is one I continue today. Feeling that my experiences and views were absent in many of my classes, I not only tried to assert them more vociferously in discussions, I also began to feel some sort of obligation to make sure that they were as right as they could be. Unexpectedly, I began to feel some sort of weight upon me when I realized that when I shared my views in class, I spoke for those whom I had never met yet were tied to me by blood and history. What once was only a loose association with other Mexicans whom I didn’t know, now became a firmer and more political bond in an environment which took my views and the views of my other Mexican classmates as indicative of all “our people.”

The way that my views indicated the views of all Mexicans to my classmates naturally contributed to my cultural nationalism. Not only because they were willing to invest in me the authority to speak for my community but because I, as one of the few who even tried, became perfectly willing to do so. By trying to understand how my views and experiences were different from others I was naturally learning more about who I was and where I came from. I was also increasingly becoming aware of how all of that fit into society as a whole as well as in the smaller world of university life. My ethnicity produced a clash with the world I encountered in Claremont. That world reduced it to a reflection of my “race.” I quickly realized that politically, and personally, it was more advantageous to go with the flow rather than to fight it.

In short, I began to study Chicano history. If professors wouldn’t include the information in their classes, I made a point to speak up with the information I had learned on my own. Every opportunity I had to write a term paper, I tried to focus it on some aspect of the Chicano experience. In discussions where race and culture naturally fit in, and at my school they rarely did. I made an effort to at least try to make others consider discussing them. A major preoccupation of my classroom demeanor became to insert Chicanos every place that I could both to satisfy my own standards for the “truth” and to complicate everyone else’s.

As I moved onward in my studies, both my educational environment and my own self-education produced a person who was more critical and balanced than many of my fellow students. I began to feel advantaged not only because of the body of knowledge I accumulated on the Chicano experi-
ence but because I lived in a society that made me learn it in order to feel normal and content. I felt that the world that ignored my race was hardly race-blind. Instead, it was a white, upper-class social environment. In that respect I felt that I had the upper hand. By ignoring race altogether, the majority was failing to fully grasp the way that they themselves were racial beings.

These intellectual changes also made me closer to many of the other minority students at Claremont. We all shared feelings, both of marginalization and of the burden of being representative of our larger communities, at least in the eyes of many of our classmates. We all also shared an experience of cultural withdrawal as we found ourselves missing what we had previously been used to on a daily basis. As these sentiments met with the frustrations of higher education, the meanings of our minority identity became more public and the way in which those meanings were conveyed became even more significant to our peace of mind and feelings of solidarity. In the process, ethnicity became political, not simply as culturally essentialized.

It’s difficult to explain but that’s how I became a Chicano. The title that I now ascribed to my ethnicity suggested much more than culture to me and, I hoped, to the people who knew of it. It meant that I was conscious of the history of my community. It expressed a strong pride in who I was and a commitment to making sure that those aspects of myself would not be ignored or devalued. Furthermore, it meant that I shared the views of those political activists who first began to use the title widely during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the late sixties and early seventies. By calling myself Chicano, I was telling the world not only who I was culturally but what that meant to me politically and professionally.

The meaning of this identity has continued to evolve for me during my studies at UC Berkeley in the department of history. As before, the classroom has helped to transform me. Except this time it has not been as the student but as the instructor. What I have learned is a product of the conflict between what I have increasingly come to accept on an intellectual level and what I have come to hold increasingly dear on an emotional one.

In graduate school we are taught to be critical thinkers who can challenge the simplistic notions of the past. In areas of culture and cultural history, this has produced a revolution in thinking. The more I learned in this new environment, the more intellectually sophisticated I felt. My own experiences already suggested some of these new currents. Since I had become more conscious of the political aspects of my race, I had also become more conscious of the ways that my varied environments helped to build them. I knew that there wasn’t anything essential about being Mexican. The more that I learned about Chicano history the better positioned I was to see the variety of experience and culture within my own community. In fact, my life in a “white” college had done more to narrow down the meaning of my Mexicanness than anything else, as it helped me to understand the way that whites, who are typically assumed to belong to a non-race, are also racial.

Once these loose beliefs took concrete shape in classes, I wanted others to appreciate the complexity of these common assumptions we make about race in our society. When I stood before my students, I sought to lead them down the same path that I now walked. By complicating what it meant to be “Chicano,” by trying to make them understand that we shouldn’t have to conform to society’s ideas about who we are or the ones imposed upon us by our own communities, and by emphasizing that our goal should be to form a multiracial, inclusive movement rather than a narrow, nationalistic one, I hope that I have been at least partially successful. But recently, I have realized that it is important not to lead them down this path too rapidly.

It is me that has changed. It finally hit me this past semester that my students are going through what I did at Claremont. Instead of providing them with an environment where they were free to develop and express some form of nationalism so that they could draw their own conclusions, I was trying to make them bypass where I had been so that we could begin from the same place. I wanted to spare them what I went through, but I couldn’t.

Every person of color in this society will have to confront many of these emotions at sometime in their life. Society sees and acts through race. Eventually, we all have to make sense of our ethnicity and its place in our lives. We must become somewhat culturally nationalistic. Now I don’t think that all of the assumptions underlying cultural nationalism as a political stance are true. I’m not sure that in the long-run cultural nationalism will be the best tack to take for achieving a better society. But it is necessary on two levels: as part of the process of becoming culturally (and politically) aware and as a means of survival. On some level, because the world works from simplistic beliefs about race and culture it is vital that we make sense of our place in that world from within those beliefs before we deconstruct them into oblivion.

In the so-called “real world” members of my family call themselves everything from Mexican to Hispanics. Happily, more and more of them use the term Chicano or Chicana and in so doing accept many of the political beliefs that I have. But no matter what my cousins or aunts or uncles call themselves, they, like all Mexicans in the United States, will come to some realization of how their race affects their experiences in this nation. The conclusions they draw and the strategies they choose for survival may not be all the same, but they will not be void of political significance.

And they should not be. To separate the two is to place oneself at a disadvantage. In my classes, I now encourage strategic simplicity along with a critical appraisal of race. I do it for my students, so that they can gain confidence in knowing who they are and where they came from. It is important for those of us who are Chicoan and Chicana and are in graduate programs to acknowledge our race to show our students that they are not alone and that they too can do what we have done. I do it for class dialogue, so that none of our discussions will ever be limited to the intellectual at the expense of the experiential. But I don’t do it just for my Chicano and Chicana students. Everyone I teach can better learn
about themselves when all of our pasts are told and appreciated.

And, when all is said and done, I do it for myself. I’ve learned that I can’t separate my politics from my race or from my profession. The personal is truly political. But so is my profession as a scholar and teacher. The most important thing that I’ve learned, though, is that the political development of my students is as worthwhile to them as their critical understanding of race. To fully understand race we must understand it in all of its manifestations and, on some level, we must learn to accept why people situate themselves where they do. It is their right to make that decision. And it is my responsibility as an educator to come to terms with it.

Tomás Sandoval is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the history department at UC Berkeley. He loves movies, the Dodgers, and mole enchiladas, but he would have gladly given all of them up for a chance to play guitar for Elvis in 1972. He’d love to hear your comments on this article: spody@uclink2.berkeley.edu

The Sticky Film of Race

Kevin Carollo

“He can’t represent African-Americans — he’s too ugly.”
—Muhammed Ali on George Foreman

This is a tale about the racial geography of Otherland, a mysterious island far, far away from America, somewhere in Asia, Africa, or South America — it doesn’t really matter. American media thrive on the race of Other, and 1997 has proven to be another disappointing year for mainstream filmings of race. Here are a couple of examples. I decided to turn the TV on at a friend’s house to discover that I am once again behind the times, perpetually ignorant of the latest travesty of alleged entertainment, generically referred to as the situation comedy. In reality, sitcoms reflect the absurd and tragicomic inability of American mainstream media to comment intelligently — or, for that matter, comically — on any “situation,” especially that of race and class. I discovered this on that fateful day in late July when I randomly volunteered for the experimental torture of the latest abyss of despair, Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper.

Witness a young doctor who is finally offered a job in New Guinea. His fiancée, Vanessa, though distraught at the prospect, agrees to go with him. But first, through the wonders of sitcom flash forward, she envisions her life on the wild island, always on the verge of heatstroke. Meanwhile, the exuberant nouveau docte enters their thatched hut with the miraculous shipment of supplies. He offers Vanessa some soybean paste, and excitedly tells her that they can make her wedding gown out of the parachute that dropped the supplies. Ha ha. Because we have so much sympathy for these characters we’ve come to know and love, we may even shed a virtual tear at Vanessa’s prenuptial self-sacrifice. She has, after all, agreed to go to Otherland. Later, she somehow learns that she and hubby-to-be will have to spend three months “on opposite sides of the island,” in separate huts, of course, all because of a “purification ritual” the natives require before marriage. Ha ha again. Those primitive people and their archaic island geography. But we’re not through yet. Fiancé brings home a language book, and babbles “thank god we have survived the monsoons” in, we assume, the language of New Guinea (probably Indonesian — it doesn’t matter). Just kidding, honey. Do the jokes never stop? Those primitives and their inclement weather. Couldn’t they have something more chic and civilized, like an earthquake?

Or a volcano, maybe. . . . the movie Volcano depicts a white cop and a young black upstart about to re-enact the standard scene of “taking the black rebel to jail.” By the good grace of the film’s eponymous natural disaster, however, the two learn that maybe there are more important things to do than process racial tensions. At heart, both the cop and the youth want to “save the neighborhood.” Later on, a montage of ash-laden survivors coaxes the wisdom and innocence of a child, who comments that “everyone looks the same.” Awww . . . if we could see the world through the eyes of a child . . .

Just as Volcano suggests that the red (Red?) horde of enemy lava might be just the thing we need to overcome our racial (and class) differences in LA, so can mainstream, unfunny sitcoms perpetuate the myth of Africa and Asia as Other, primitive, and undifferentiated, regardless of which side of the island you happen to imagine. The fact that Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper is supposedly about African-Americans is disheartening. It suggests that the moral of Volcano comes true on American TV. We Americans are really all the same race, i.e. modern human, rather than inhabitants of Otherland. Even New Jersey is better than New Guinea. Or Guinea, for that matter. Or Guinea-Bissau. Are we laughing yet?

Of course, the lack of humor and intelligence in sitcoms today should come as no surprise. Nor should the lack of incisive critiques of race and class on TV, African-American or otherwise. A step off the beaten racetrack can be found in the film When We Were Kings, a documentary on the legendary Muhammed Ali and George Foreman fight in Zaire in 1974. The recently ousted Mobutu Sese Seko offered Don King ten million dollars way back when to host the fight, ostensibly to promote Zaire somehow, and thus provided the African-American celebrity participants a closer encounter of their African kind. It proved to be an intriguing and bizarre experiment in racial identification.

When We Were Kings neither ignores nor resolves the sticky filming of race, blackness, and Africa. It does not assert that the fight is meaningful simply because it takes place in Ali and Foreman’s (as well as Don King’s, James Brown’s, et al.) ancestral homeland. What, and where, would that mean exactly? Instead, When We Were Kings offers a curious configuration of race, in which George Foreman actually comes to represent White America for Africans, and Ali stands as the genuine article of Pan-African black brotherhood. Ali gets thousands of Africans to chant “Ali, kill him [Foreman]!” He also gets to embrace Mobutu himself. His leadership ability persistently resolves to the good that he can do after whupping Foreman. Needless to say, it is difficult for us to look at Foreman as white. The film plays on this ambivalence, and thereby reiterates the impossibility of truly coming home in a world obsessed with racial identity, a world in which our heroes
cannot always distinguish between the dictators and the dispossessed.

*When We Were Kings* mostly contains footage from 1974, but integrates it with nineties narrative from Norman Mailer, George Plimpton (both were there), Spike Lee, Thomas Hauser (Ali’s biographer), and Malick Bowens (an African artist who remembers the fight). Norm and George are comfortably and stolidly white when they revisit their distant past as observers of the Rumble in the Jungle. Their commentary seems to indiscriminately fluctuate between interesting and irrelevant, whether Mailer explains a right-hand lead, or Plimpton muses that he always preferred the Conradian majesty of “the Congo” to “Zaire.” Bowens, as native informant, represents the African adoration of the African-American who refused to go to Vietnam. Mailer and Plimpton legitimate the match as an amazing journalistic phenomenon. Bowens establishes Ali as political idealist first, boxer second. For him, Ali’s victory over Foreman takes on the significance of a blow in the name of Pan-African civil rights.

We should remember that Ali is the one who refers to the fight as the “Rumble in the Jungle.” The description puts Africa as way over there in Otherland, but still allows Ali to repeatedly present himself as the true black African. When the fight has to be delayed six weeks because of Foreman’s sparring injury, a distraught Ali says that Foreman is “in my country to start with.” Then he proves this by inciting the masses to chant “Ali, Bomayé!” Now that’s a troublingly funny use of race. Ali’s ability to get the message of Africa to American blacks always hinges on winning the fight. If he beats George Foreman, then he can bring back the muted history of African identity to the ghettoes of the U. S. Ali is both endearing and frustrating — he speaks with an arresting musicality, but the aggravating chorus seems rather Mobutu-esque. The 1974 footage of *When We Were Kings* foreshadows the nineties lack of solidarity and understanding between Africans and Americans of all races. It’s a time capsule opened up to make us long for the brilliance and charisma of Ali, and regret the compromised result of his political ambition. And the song remains the same with Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper’s use and abuse of New Guinea.

Bowens’ commentary on Foreman is both fascinating and problematic. According to him, Africans were overjoyed by Ali’s “homecoming,” just as they had believed that the world champion Foreman is white. Foreman embodies the slippery character of transcontinental racial identity. With great pleasure, Bowens recounts how Ali did kill Foreman in 1974, just like in the prescient chorus. Cut to Plimpton, who tells of Ali’s visit to Mobutu’s feticheur. Ali learns of about a “woman with trembling hands,” a succubus, who would en-

**Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper** will attest, that’s what we Americans seem to expect from Otherland, that island where black magic determines how the race is won.

Despite (and because of) these investments in a mythical Africa, where a witch-woman helps Ali win the fight, where George Foreman is a white devil, and where Mobutu Sese Seko is the stoic-yet-vicious representative leader of Otherland, *When We Were Kings* succeeds in presenting a timely vision of race its makers could not have anticipated. The best response to the moment of contact between America and Africa belongs to George Foreman. After a young kid says “Foreman, kill him!” in a gesture of solidarity, Foreman solemnly expresses his dismay at the oratorical revolution started by Ali. I nearly cried in the theater when Foreman wishes people would say “George Foreman loves Africa, George Foreman’s happy to be here,” and that “George Foreman, kill him!” is just not to his liking.

*Why?* Because too often in America African-Americans continue to represent the “bad race” in mainstream media, and the world we know as Otherland is not on the itinerary. If it is, it leans toward the representation found in *Hangin’ With Mr. Cooper*. New Guinea is Guinea is Guyana is whatever. The politics of race open up the possibility of looking to Africa for African-Americans. I hate to see that desire for knowledge undermined by the easy and sleazy American media imagination, in which a continent of reality boils down to an island of myth. The funny thing is that such rumbles in the jungle really are island fantasies brought to you by the sponsors of big time boxing or boring television.

This past spring Mobil took out a big ad in the *New York Times*. It expounded on its commitment to “build markets and help those nations develop their raw materials.” They chide other companies for not having the courage, or accepting the challenge, to infiltrate “different lifestyles and cultures.” The moral of Mobil seems to suggest that we’re basically different, but we’re also all the same. I mean, even Africa wants to be like us. Mobil entitles their parable “Africa — a capital idea.” Obviously, The message goes like so: whether through a TV sitcom, an excessive amount of lava, or a capitalist machine seeking crude oil, we can overcome those sticky racial difficulties. And everyone in America may one day finally be able to dream about the rest of the world they would like to see stay way over there. Unfortunately, we’ll be unable to laugh off the sticky film of race when that day dawns.

Kevin Carollo is a comparative literature student at the University of Illinois in Urbana, currently writing on narratives of home and homelessness. His professional boxing career was cut short on the playgrounds of the late seventies, but rumor has it that he is planning a series of impressive right leads for the upcoming millenium.