

Race ends here

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Abstract

How do we see 'race' and the symbols of racial difference? Is contemporary theorizing about race complicit in the reification of racial difference? These are the key questions that are addressed in this article, which uses them as the starting point for dealing with important theoretical and political dilemmas about race in the present environment. In particular, it seeks to explore some of the substantive problems that people conceptualize and act upon racial difference. Following on from this discussion, the article discusses some of the contradictions and limitations of anti-racist discourses and calls for a major rethinking of strategies for tackling racial thinking and practices.

Keywords: Race; difference; anti-racism.

This brief and highly polemical presentation might have been more appropriately entitled 'Now you see it, now you don't'. It seeks to question how we see 'race', how the signs and symbols of racial difference become apparent to our senses. It does not admit the integrity of any avowedly natural perceptual scheme. It does not concede the idea of a way of seeing race that remains unmediated by technical and social processes, for there is no raw perception dwelling in the body. The human sensorium has had to be educated. When it comes to the visualization of 'race' a great deal of fine tuning has been required. Underpinning my argument is a desire to link the historical and critical study of raciology and 'racial' metaphysics to the new histories of visibility and perception that are being produced, to connect it with some timely critiques of absolute identity and their associated genealogies of subjectivity and, above all, to link it to an understanding of the technoscientific means that have fostered and mediated particular relations with our race-coded selves in the modern past.

I must confess, firstly, that I came here determined to update some old and overly familiar pleas for the renunciation of 'race' as a critical concept and, secondly, that I do not expect to succeed in persuading you of the rightness of this reorientation. To compound the distaste you will no doubt manifest in response to my argument, let me also say that as a 'community' of researchers, I believe we must consider this course because it seems to represent the only ethical response to the conspicuous wrongs that

Ethnic and Racial Studies Volume 21 Number 5 September 1998

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raciologies continue to solicit and sanction. It is also a useful corrective to the unhelpful squeamishness of some of our past analytical habits. Making the ethical point is doubly significant because students of 'race' have not always been sufficiently alive to the ethical dimensions of our own practice, particularly when faced with the relationship between raciology and evil. This reform of our practice has become imperative as the memory of the Nazi genocide has ceased to form the constellation under which we strive to do critical work in this area. For me, the proposed renunciation of 'race' might also represent a reactivation of political sensibilities in a field from which politics has been banished, and where the easy invocation of 'race' is regular confirmation of the retreat of the political. A rehabilitation of politics, particularly if we choose the testing route towards the evasive goal of multicultural democracy, requires bold and expansive gestures if we are to answer the pathologies of genomic racism, proteophobia and the glamour of sameness, quite apart from the new eugenic aspirations they have nurtured.

To begin, I want to enter the perplexing space where the founding absurdity of 'race' as a principle of power, differentiation and classification remains persistently, obstinately visible. That initial move is, as I do not need to remind you, patently out of season. Pragmatism, the resurgent racial phenomenology for which Fanon's name has recently become a byword, those articulate but brittle travelling nationalisms rooted in African-American circumstances, as well as simple cynicism and opportunism, all agree that the cold, corporeal fact of 'race' cannot and should not be theorized out of sight in the very ways that I propose. I shall try to persuade you of the 'beyond-post-modern' timeliness of this stance.

It helps to appreciate that aspects of 'race', as it has been understood in the past, are already being conjured away by new technologies of self and of species being and that those technologies have significant political consequences. The old, modern representational economy that reproduced 'race' is today being transformed on one side by the scientific and technological changes that have followed the revolution in molecular biology, and on the other by familiar changes in the ways that bodies are imaged. They are routinely opened up to new forms of scrutiny by sound and electro-magnetic radiation as well as light, natural and artificial. Have you, has your body been scanned? Do you recognize its changing optic density? If so, I would like you to consider that development as another sign that we can let the old visual signatures of 'race' go. Having waved them farewell, it is possible that we shall do a better job of countering the racisms, the injustices, that they brought into being if we make a more consistent effort to de-nature and de-ontologize 'race' and thereby to disaggregate raciologies.

This is not the easy option. For a start, it means reconstituting our anti-racist aspirations anew: across the boundaries between text, discourse, spectacle and performance, outside the angles of vision, the

research strategies, the moral and political choices that offer too many hostages to the persistent normative claims of raciology. Raciology becomes vulnerable where we can attack the anachronistic perceptual habits to which it was bound. This basic shift involves additional changes. It demands a frank confrontation with our own professional interests in the reification of 'race' – something that was not possible when the link between anti-racist politics and interventionist scholarship was stronger and closer than it is today. It means identifying and exploring the political technologies at work in mediating our relation to our selves, our humanity and our species. This task takes us beyond the discursivity and the semiotics of 'race' into a sustained confrontation with human sensorium, with spectatorship, visual apparatuses and optics. It asks us to think the development of a racial imaginary in ways that are more distant from the authority of logos and more attuned to the phenomenology of the visual.

I have already alluded to the profound transformations in the ways the body is understood that have followed the emergence of molecular biology. This should be linked to the impact of digital processing and we must be especially attentive to the new ways in which the body is being imaged as part of the new ways of approaching questions of health and disease. These new ways of seeing, understanding and relating to ourselves point to the possibility that the time of 'race' may be coming to a close. This possibility brings new dangers, but it also brings new hope to a situation in which, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued persuasively, a task-oriented relation to the corporeal constitutes the primal scene of post-modernity as an emergent sociological formation in the overdeveloped world. To demonstrate that 'race' has become absolutely integral to that dizzying planetary process would be a major achievement. However, we cannot skip merrily off into the sunset just yet.

I am sure you all know that in 1993 a young black man, Stephen Lawrence, was brutally murdered by several young white men at a bus stop in South East London. His tragic death was the third fatality in a sequence of racial attacks that had been perpetrated in the same area. The others to die were Rolan Adams and Rohit Duggal, who had been killed in comparable circumstances. The whole story of political action around these deaths need not, indeed cannot, be recapitulated here. For these limited purposes, it is enough to say that a small but dynamic movement grew up around these tragedies and that the actions of the bereaved families and their various groups of supporters took place both inside and outside the formal institutions of government, publicity and legislation. Tactical actions were intended to project anger, amplify grief, win support, change consciousness and raise money for legal fees. Political initiatives included a demand for the justice that had been effectively denied, where the police, courts and prosecutors refused to act with speed and diligence against the attackers. They also encompassed a demand for sympathy for the plight of the families in their loss and their grief. These actions articulated a further sequence of supplementary

demands: for recognition of the seriousness of the offence, for acknowledgement of the humanity of the victims, and the distinctively unwholesome nature of the brutal offences that had left them to die on the pavement while their blood drained away.

There are probably solid reasons why this and other similarly bitter episodes should not be used as illustrative material on the way towards a more general and inevitably speculative argument about the status of racial differences. Nevertheless, that is what I wish to do. The British National Party [BNP] – an openly neo-fascist grouplet – had been very active in the area where Stephen Lawrence was murdered. Their national headquarters was close to the spot where he had died and it was unsurprising when the group's presence in the neighbourhood, and its possible role in creating a local climate in which this form of terror was possible and legitimate, became the focus of political activity directed towards the police and the local state. In the names of anti-fascism and anti-racism, the demand was raised that the party's well-fortified headquarters should be shut down. There were divisions within the campaign as to how that might be achieved. A local demonstration was called around this aim. It marched directly to protest outside the building. This demonstration pitted a large number of protesters against a considerable formation of police in riot gear. They had been deployed to protect the neo-fascists from the wrath of the anti-racists.

The details of the violence that followed are interesting but not essential to the points being explored here. Conflict over the behaviour of marchers erupted after the event. This was something more than the routine cycle of mutual denunciation. In particular, the police claimed that anti-racist marchers had singled out black officers and made them special targets for hostility and attack. One policeman, Police Constable Leslie Turner, said he had been attacked because he was black. He told the press: 'It was white demonstrators. There were no black people there that I could see. They singled me out as being a traitor'. Whatever his own thoughts to the contrary, it is possible that PC Turner's plight might well have been worse if there had been a larger number of black protesters around that day. In the measure of human suffering which ends with brutal murder, his experiences may seem slight, even trivial. His story of victimization may even have been fabricated or amplified to win new legitimacy for a dubious police operation. But I want to proceed as if there was, indeed, a measure of truth in what that black officer said about that anti-racist demonstration. What if he was singled out for attack as a traitor? What kind of traitor would he have been? What if he was assaulted by angry people on the basis that by being a black police officer he had somehow violated the political position that they imagined to match his uniformed black body? What is the fatal currency of what we can call 'coconut', 'choc-ice' or 'oreo-cookie' ontologies with their strict and pernicious divisions between 'inside' and 'outside'? What if the anti-Nazi mob was not alive to the irony of his being deployed in defence

of neo-Nazi BNP? What if they, too, had succumbed to the vicious logic of racial typology?

This tale is being told here in order to manifest some of the substantive problems lodged in the way that people conceptualize and act upon racial difference. If the most dedicated of anti-racist and anti-fascist activists remain wedded to the mythic morphology of racial difference, what chance do the rest of us have of escaping its allure? If the brutal simplicity of racial typology remains alive even in the most deliberate and assertive of anti-fascist gestures, then perhaps critical, avowedly 'anti-essentialist' intellectuals are asking too much when we inquire about the renunciation, denaturing and disaggregation of 'race', or when we aspire to polychromatic and multi-ethnic Utopias in which the colour of skin is supposed to make no more difference than the colour of eyes or hair.

I am ambivalent about the fact that it would be inappropriate to assume too much common ground between this audience and those anti-Nazi demonstrators. But it bears repetition that it is not illegitimate to ask about our professional academic interest in this narrative. Are we, too, complicit in the reification of racial difference? And what has happened to the anti-racist assumptions that governed our scholarly activities in previous times? Have they been beaten back by the gains of biological and post-biological forms of determinism that have claimed the right to account for human behaviour back from the social sciences? This should not be misunderstood as an argument that Ethnic and Racial Studies should shut up shop. Rather, it seeks to initiate a period of reflection and clarification about our intellectual, ethical and political projects in the critical scholarship of 'races' and raciologies.

I am alive to all the ironies of my position. I understand that taking antipathy towards 'race' beyond the unstable equilibrium represented by liberal use of scare quotes may be viewed as a betrayal of those groups whose oppositional, legal and even democratic claims have come to rest on identities and solidarities forged at great cost from the categories given to them by their oppressors. But to renounce race for analytical purposes is not to judge all appeals to it in the profane world of political cultures as formally equivalent. I am not Robert Miles. Less defensively, I think that our perilous predicament, in the midst of a political and technological sea-change, which somehow strengthens ethnic absolutism and primordialism, demands a radical and dramatic response. This must be one that steps away from the pious ritual in which we always agree that 'race' is invented but are then required to defer to its embeddedness in the world and to accept that the demand for justice nevertheless requires us to enter the political arenas that it helps to mark out.

To even raise these issues in this setting may be to violate a tacit agreement. The link between anti-racist practice and intellectual work in this area is certainly not what it was twenty years ago, and yet there are precious few reflections on the changes signalled along the path that lead

through municipal anti-racism and beyond it into the barren terrain where work on 'race' is overshadowed by privatized, corporate multiculturalism and its cultures of simulation in which racial alterity has acquired an important commercial value. This may be a suitable time to break the oscillation between biology and culture, to open the closed circuit that analyses of what we used to call the New Racism have become. It will be more fruitful, I think, to trace the history of racial metaphysics or rather of a metaphysical racism as an underlying precondition for various versions of racialological determinism: biological, nation-alistic, cultural and, now, genomic.

It has become commonplace to remark that, however essentially noble the ideal of anti-racism might be, it does not communicate anything affirmative. What, after all, are anti-racists in favour of? What are we positively committed to, and how does it connect with the necessary moment of negation that defines our political hopes and choices? I tried to sidestep these problems in the past by specifying what can be called a tentative anti-anti-racism. But there are substantive difficulties in framing those modest objectives, Utopian and otherwise. I see them as small, nagging symptoms of a larger, chronic condition. The history of racism is a narrative in which the congruency of micro and macrocosm has been disrupted at the point of their analogical intersection: the human body. Biology was only one of many possible ways of addressing this relationship with ourselves. Though it preceded the distinctive quality of sociality we distinguish as modern, the order of active differentiation that gets called 'race' may be modernity's most pernicious signature. It articulated reason and unreason. It knitted together science and superstition. Raciology required that enlightenment and myth be intertwined. Indeed, 'race' and nationality supplied the logic and mechanism of their interconnections. The specious ontologies of 'race' are anything but spontaneous and natural. They should be awarded no immunity from prosecution amidst the reveries of reflexivity and the comfortable forms of inertia induced by capitulation to the lazy essentialisms from which post-modern sages inform us we cannot escape. To cut a long story short. We could begin again by asking what that trope 'race' lodged in the body might mean in the age defined by globalization and digital technologies on the one hand and molecular biology on the other?

Today, we have been productively estranged from the anatomical scale defined at the end of the eighteenth century when natural history gave way initially to biology. We are more sceptical than ever about the status of visible differences in relation to the unseen. On what scale is human sameness, human diversity now to be calibrated? Can a different sense of scale and scaling combine with a new sense of illumination to form a counterweight to the appeal of absolute particularity celebrated under the sign of 'race'? Can a sense of the arbitrariness of scale help to answer the seductions of self and kind projected on to the surface of the body but

stubbornly repudiated inside it by the proliferation of invisible differences that produce catastrophic consequences where people are not what they seem to be? In the instability of scale that characterizes our episteme, how is racialized and racializing identity to be imagined when we know that it has already been imaged? Is there still a place for 'race' when human life and human difference are contemplated on a restlessly sliding scale?

The modern idea of race operated within the strictest of perceptual limits. The shift from natural history to biology prompted changes in the modes and meanings of the visual and the visible. When it appeared to make sense of life and nature biology promoted specific modes of communication and representation that, on the basis of particular technologies, both created and marked out a novel relationship between text and image. Life, fractured along raciological lines, was visualized, imaged in novel and striking ways. Race was intrinsic to this change. Later, the consolidation of physiology as a distinct branch of medical knowledge would be accompanied by a refinement in the technical and instrumental basis of bio-representation. Here, too, 'race' was a primary object of knowledge and power.

For simplicity's sake, let's call that distinctive ratio, the scale of comparative or Euclidean anatomy. The idea of 'race' leaked out of the lofty confines where what Foucault calls the 'chemical gaze' was most fully developed. But it always worked best in the setting provided by those distinctive ways of looking, enumerating, measuring, dissecting and evaluating. More than this, the idea of 'race' defined and consolidated typologies that could not be dissociated from their very specific representational technology and its perceptual and cognitive regimes. The truths of race were produced 'performatively' from the hat that biological science provided, like so many startled rabbits in front of a noisy, eager, imperial crowd. 'Race' became an important means to link metaphysics and technology; it made sense readily within these unprecedented historical conditions.

Our situation is different. The call of racial being has been weakened by a different technological and communicative revolution, by the idea that the body is nothing more than an incidental moment in the transmission of code and information, by its openness to the new imaging technologies, and by the loss of mortality as a horizon against which life is to be lived. Blackness can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection in a global info-tainment telesector, where the residues of slave societies and the parochial traces of American racial conflict must yield to different imperatives deriving from the planetarization of profit and the cultivation of new markets far from the memory of bondage. They had Sartje Baartman, we have a *pas de deux* between the super-human, godly Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny, the *reductio ad absurdum* of hybridized African trixter tale-telling. Can we agree that the eighteenth-century perceptual regimes that gave us 'race' have been superseded along with their epistemological and metaphysical pretensions?

The story of how the one-to-one scale of comparative anatomy and its world of natural light were recontextualized by the advent of the microscopic and the artificial has been addressed by several historians and need not be outlined in detail here. Rather, I would like to leapfrog over the exemplary image of the cinematographically-minded physician Robert Lincoln Watkins peering at tainted blood through his 'micro-motoscope' and turn instead towards the more recent situation in which the microscopic has given way to the molecular. This development means that much of the contemporary discourse producing 'races' and racial consciousness can be identified as an anachronistic and even vestigial phenomenon. Where screens rather than lenses and mirrors mediate the pursuit of bodily truths, 'race' might best be approached as an after-image – a lingering symptom of looking too intently or too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts at home and abroad.

On the journey away from modernity's inaugural catastrophes in the new world, raciological ways of organizing and classifying the world have retained that special baggage of perspectival inclinations, perceptual habits and scalar assumptions. Their anthropologies depended and still depend upon observations that cannot be wholly disassociated from the technological means that have both fostered and mediated them. This was where the anatomical scale was first broken. Optical microscopes transformed what could be seen but the new technologies of seeing on ever smaller and smaller scales moved the threshold of visibility and has contributed to an enhanced sense of the power of the unseen and the unseeable. The eugenic ravings of Francis Crick, the Nobel-prizewinning co-discoverer of DNA, demonstrate exactly how the fateful change of scale involved in the founding of molecular biology and the redefinition of life in terms of information, messages and code was recognized as having cataclysmic moral and political consequences. Rubble from the broken palace of bio-politics provided the foundations for what might now be called 'nanopolitics'.

Let me be blunt: scientific and biological, historical and cultural, rational and irrational, skin, bone and even blood are no longer primary referents of racial discourse. If the modern episteme was constituted through processes that forsook the integrity of the whole body and moved inside the skin to enumerate organs and describe their functional relationship to an organic totality, the situation today is different. The same 'inward' direction has been maintained and the momentum increased in ways that compound the difficulties involved in separating inside from outside. The aspiration to perceive and explain through recourse to the power of the minute, the microscopic and now the molecular, has been consolidated. In a space beyond and below that of comparative anatomy, the whole integral body and its obvious, functional components no longer delimit the scale upon which assessments of the unity and variation of the species are to be made. The naked eye was long ago recognized as insufficient to the lowly

tasks of evaluation and description demanded by the condition of everyday extremity and the eugenic answers to its manifold problems. More than merely technological change makes what was hitherto invisible not only visible but decisive.

Nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy [NMR/MRI], positron emission tomography [PET] and several other parallel innovations in multidimensional body imaging have remade the relationship between the seeable and the unseen. By imaging the body in new ways, they impact upon the ways that embodied humanity is imagined and upon the status of bio-racial differences that vanish at these levels of resolution. Whether it is the IBM logo being spelled out in individual atoms of xenon or the non-specific dream of gaining control over the big world 'by fiddling with the nanoscale entities of which it is composed', the movement is always in one direction: downwards and inwards. Our question should be this: where do these changes leave racial difference, particularly where it cannot readily be correlated with simple genetic variation?

Michel Foucault, whose early work explored useful historical precedents for the contemporary shift towards this nanoscale is an inspiring but frustrating guide to these problems. From my standpoint, he seems to have been insufficiently attuned to the significance of protracted struggles over the unity of mankind that attended the emergence of biopolitics and appears to have been disinterested in the meaning of specifically racialological differences in the context of anthropology's presentation of the species as a unified object of knowledge and power. To put it simply, though he identified man as both the pivot and the product of the new relationship between words and things, he moved too swiftly towards a sense of modern humanity unified in its immiserating passage from sanguinity to sexuality. He, too, failed to appreciate how the fervent belief that Africans and their new world descendants were less than human, might have affected this transformation and its epistemic correlates. Perhaps he was not haunted, as I think we still should be, by the famous image of an orangutan carrying off a Negro girl that comprised the frontispiece of Linnaeus' *A Genuine and Universal System of Natural History*. The central, inescapable problem presented in that picture is the suggested kinship between these sub- and anti-human species rather than the fact that their conflictual interrelation is figured through the idea of rape. The picture's historic setting and the interpretative puzzle presents point to the unresolved issue of how 'race' interrelates with sex, gender and sexuality; something that is further than ever from being settled and which focuses a new and urgent agenda for future work. The picture and its relation to that foundational text raise other uncomfortable matters: the characteristics of the new, post-Vesalian semiotics of the body and the relationship between text and image in the performative constitution of 'races' were not one in which words were simply, automatically or consistently able to dominate images – icons – that went far beyond any merely illustrative function.

The extensive debate as to whether Negroes should be accorded membership of the family of mankind (a group whose particularity was inaugurated, proved, produced and celebrated by the transformed relationship between words and things that crystallized at the end of the eighteenth century) was more central to the formation and reproduction of the modern episteme than Foucault appreciated. I raise this, not to pillory him, nor to reopen discussion of how that process has been reconstructed by historians of science, but rather because his study of that fateful change is an important resource in our own situation where similar processes are observable.

One intermediate example may help to make the argument about scale less abstract. Let me propose that the dismal order of power and differentiation – defined by its intention to make the mute body disclose the truth of its racial identities – can be apprehended through the critical notion of ‘epidermalization’ bequeathed to us by Frantz Fanon. That idea was born from a philosopher-psychologist’s phenomenological ambitions and their distinctive way of seeing, as well as understanding, the importance of sight. It refers to a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing in them qualities of ‘colour’. But the term has a wider applicability than its recent colonial origins would suggest. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze and Christian M. Neugebauer have reminded us recently that Kant’s *Physische Geographie* said more than his contemporary celebrants like to admit about the qualities of Negro skin and the practical problems it presented when pain had to be inflicted with a split bamboo cane. Like Hegel’s better known opinions on the Negro and the limitations he placed upon the African’s capacity for historical action, these sentiments can be thought of as exemplifying epidermal thinking in its emergent form.

In an era where colonial power had made epidermalizing into a dominant principle of political power, Dr. Fanon used the idea of indexing the estrangement from authentic human being in the body and being in the world that colonial social relations had wrought. Epidermalized power violated the human body in its symmetrical, intersubjective, social humanity, in its species being, in its fragile relationship to other fragile bodies and in its connection to the redemptive potential inherent in its own wholesome or perhaps its suffering corporeality, our being towards death. Fanon’s notion supplies an interesting footnote to the whole history of racial sciences and the exclusive notions of colour-coded humanity that they specified. We need to find its contemporary analogs not where he looked, on the surface of the body, but deep within it. Their pursuit may yet yield the anti-toxins capable of silencing raciology forever.

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