

RACE IN A “POSTRACIAL” EPOCH

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It was the most postracial of times, it was the least postracial of times. A Black man occupied the White House—but huge numbers of Black citizens went homeless. Thurgood Marshall’s successor and a Latina Justice sat on the Supreme Court—yet justice continued to be denied to record numbers of African Americans and Latinos languishing in prison. Elite Black and Latino access to economic opportunities was unprecedented—but so too was the disturbing degree of disproportion in the ratios of median White household wealth to median Black and Latino household wealth. There was a multiracial national consensus that racial discrimination was wrong—and a White consensus that Whites were the race most likely to be discriminated against. In sum, race was widely denied—while race was everywhere present.

These are the times in which we find ourselves—and, as such, what better time for a special issue of the *Du Bois Review* on “Race in a ‘Postracial’ Epoch”?

We are philosophers and, as co-editors of this issue, we wish to highlight for the readers of the *Du Bois Review* the relevance of political philosophy and political theory to ongoing debates about postracialism. Over the past decade, an exciting body of work considering race from the perspective of political philosophy and political theory has begun to take shape. But, unfortunately, it is little known outside departments of philosophy and political science (in the latter case, awareness of this work is largely limited to the political theorists who have contributed to it). Accordingly, we suggested to the *Review* editorial board that they publish a special issue in which philosophers and political theorists who work on race would offer their reflections on the peculiar historical moment in which we find ourselves. Our hope is that this issue will become not merely an intramural landmark, but a text that achieves a crossover success in the larger field of critical race studies, showing audiences outside of political philosophy and political theory that these disciplines have a valuable contribution to make in illuminating what has long been America’s oldest and most intractable problem.

The ubiquitous postracial hyperbole of the period immediately after Obama’s election may have subsided somewhat. After all, even mainstream commentators are beginning to acknowledge the racial undertones to a significant amount of the anti-Obama rhetoric in the increasingly polarized America of recent years. But the

basic national trends underwriting the postracial narrative have not changed. So even if the triumphalism has been toned down, the story remains substantially intact. The old exclusionary laws and structures of Jim Crow have been repealed and dismantled, their legacy has been largely eliminated, and the 2008 election of an African American to the presidency only put the final seal on a process long underway. The majority of White Americans now believe that racial justice has either been fully or almost fully achieved. Thus, there is no further need for measures of preferential treatment and affirmative action, let alone any more radical policy like reparations; and it is diversity, rather than racial justice, that is typically invoked to defend whatever weak programs of corrective reform remain operational.

The facts speak differently. Across a wide range of social indicators—income and wealth disparities, incarceration rates, health problems, life expectancies, and patterns of residential and educational segregation—huge discrepancies between Blacks, Latinos, and Whites remain. Indeed, in some areas—for example, resegregation in education after the partial desegregation of the 1970s and 1980s, the racial composition of the prison population, and a widening of the wealth gap as a result of the 2008–2010 mortgage crisis—things have actually gotten worse in recent years. The symbolic victory of having a Black man in the White House has yet to turn itself into a substantive improvement in the national condition of African Americans. Moreover, Latinos, now the nation's largest ethnoracial minority, constitute a growing and disproportionate percentage of the so-called underclass, and promised immigration reform has yet to materialize. Instead, record numbers of deportations (nearly two million) have been enforced under a Democratic presidency. But “facts” never speak unequivocally, so that even when these social realities are conceded (not always the case), they are attributed by most Whites to cultural deficiencies rather than structural disadvantage. Racial inequality may still exist, but it is explicable in terms of bad values and poor choices, not social domination.

The nine essays collected here tackle some of these issues from the distinctive perspectives of political philosophy and political theory, thematizing, for example, the concept of postracialism; the demand for rectificatory reparations; the analysis of racism and its relation to postracialism; the racial achievement gap in education and the role of education itself in making race; and, finally, the significance of aesthetics and autobiographical allegory for theorizing political representation and the hope for racial justice. As such, these essays from seven philosophers (one of whose contribution is jointly written with an organizational sociologist) and two political theorists examine a number of topics critical to a rethinking of race that would undercut narratives of postraciality.

Paul Taylor's opening essay, “Taking Postracialism Seriously,” sets the theoretical stage very well for the discussions that follow. Taylor warns of the dangers of constructing a straw-man postraciality (“idiot postraciality”) whose easy demolition is likely to blind us to the challenge posed by more sophisticated versions. As he insists, postracialism does get something right; the problem is to pin down exactly what that something is, and to develop targeted rebuttals accordingly that track its truth carefully, rather than rushing to facile victories that leave its essential insights unaddressed. In a subtle and nuanced discussion, Taylor demarcates different variants: the aforementioned idiot variety, which takes any watershed racial event to constitute a definitive closure of the racial past in all its possible manifestations; a descriptive version, which concedes that racism still exists, but which understates its extent, misconceives its structural centrality, and so slides ideologically from the normative to the actual (“We ought to get there. . . so we're already there”), whitewashing racial history along the way—as, for example, Chief Justice John Roberts did when he morally equated

discrimination under Jim Crow with corrective, race-conscious public policy in the notorious *Seattle* decision; a prescriptive and visionary version, where postraciality is represented less as an accomplished reality than a process underway, requiring an ethnoracial vocabulary shift to register this change; and an “experimentalist” postracialism that is insufficiently alert to the possibility that its strategy for achieving a racially-just future may be self-undermining. Taylor cites other examples of “post-” prefixing—including “postmodernism,” “postcoloniality,” and “post-Blackness”—whose dubious plotting of historical time and questionable periodizations have likewise drawn criticism. But the language of postraciality is distinctive, he argues, for its vision of the Civil Rights Movement is obscurantist in its denial of the breadth and working-class base of the movement, reductionist in limiting to “protest” what was actually a liberation struggle for fundamental change, and counter-democratic in its refusal to allow that dissenters from the triumphalist narrative had a more expansive picture of American possibility. He calls for an end to this “Whitely” perspective on our racial history—a kind of distinctively racial Whiggery—that assumes away structural racial subordination in the name of progressive enlightenment, unmoored from vested material interests.

Taylor’s piece segues nicely into Charles Mills’s and Lawrie Balfour’s essays, which insist in different ways on the political significance of the retrieval of the racial past. In his “White Time,” Mills, like Taylor, challenges the implications of postracialism’s schematization of the past, arguing that its dubious plotting of historical time is implicit in mainstream political philosophy’s and, especially, John Rawls’ use of “ideal theory” (a notion that Rawls introduced more than forty years ago in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971)). Mills begins by noting that racial injustice is underpinned by a “White temporal imaginary” analogous to the “white spatial imaginary” postulated in George Lipsitz’s recent book, *How Racism Takes Place* (2012). Drawing on the work of Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) on “time maps,” he further suggests that the idea of a “White time” geared to the needs and interests of the White “mnemonic community” is a generally useful concept. The past can be cut up in different ways, so that conflictual relations between different social groups are likely to manifest themselves in competing periodizations. “White” time will then reflect the favored chronology of Euro-domination, requiring contestation by the “Black” time of Afro-modernity. In political philosophy in particular, Mills claims, White time is transmuted through the discipline’s pretensions to racelessness and timelessness into an always-already atemporal postraciality that makes the representative human the colorless (i.e., White) contractor creating society. Rawls’ work authorized the influential view that ideal theory (an account of distributive justice in just societies) is methodologically prior to non-ideal theory (an account of corrective justice in unjust societies), or, in other words, that the latter must take its bearing from the former. But Mills argues that the radical social differences that race introduces into modern societies are incompatible with Rawls’ ideal-theoretic understanding of those societies as cooperative ventures for mutual advantage, an understanding that is tacitly predicated on the intra-White, consensual social contract and its sanitized White time. Acknowledging the history necessary for theorizing corrective reparatory justice requires that the radically different non-White temporality of racial oppression—the time of structurally unjust, non-cooperative, exploitative societies—be admitted into Rawls’ theoretical apparatus. But more than forty years after the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, the failure to incorporate this subversive temporality testifies, Mills contends, to mainstream political philosophy’s determination to maintain the dikailogical topography and chronology of the White time map that underwrites unjust White racial privilege.

In her “Un-Thinking Racial Realism,” Lawrie Balfour also takes up the theme of reparative justice, though from a different theoretical angle than Mills. Conceding that the reparations activism of the past decade seems to have hit a dead end—defeated by the courts, derailed by Barack Obama’s election, and opposed, not merely by the vast majority of White Americans, but by some Black egalitarians worried that any grudging compensatory measures would inevitably be inadequate—Balfour boldly proposes that we approach reparations not as a question of justice, but as an essentially democratic idea. The “unspeakability” of reparations within contemporary, postracial, democratic discourse, far from enjoining our silence, should provoke us all the more strongly to speak up, and to transgress the boundaries of the discursively acceptable. Not only does the language of reparations link current protest to a living past of color-conscious speech, it defies the routine disregard for equal Black citizenship that is at least as old as the “fatigue” with race that Whites were already expressing in the immediate postbellum, post-Emancipation period. Race-blind narratives that seek to sequester or deny the past must be challenged for their tendency to naturalize contemporary racial inequality, and opposition to that tendency must be joined to other efforts around the globe (more developed in other countries than in the United States) to redress the failures of democracy. For Balfour, the shift from a justice-centered to a democracy-centered appraisal of reparations permits us to avoid a host of questions relating to sovereign immunity, statutes of limitations, the identification of perpetrators and victims, and the competing claims of distributive and corrective justice. At the same time, the shift permits us to focus instead on the many ways in which racial subordination has breached democratic norms, denying the promise of equal citizenship. Through a language of shared political responsibility for correcting the past (rather than imputed collective White guilt or Black victim-blaming), citizens could begin to reconceive that more perfect union always promised, yet always receding over the racial horizon.

Postracialism tends to imply post-racism, so it is natural that the analysis of racism should be one of the present issue’s key themes, explored in one essay by Tommie Shelby, and in another by Kathryn T. Gines. Deftly deploying the tools of analytic philosophy, Shelby contributes to an ongoing, disciplinary debate about how best to conceptualize racism in his “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism.” Specifically, he targets Lawrence Blum’s well-known and important book, *I’m Not a Racist, But . . .* (2002). In that work, Blum claims that personal morality should be our starting-point for understanding racism, and that the term “racism” has undergone an unfortunate, conceptual inflation that has obstructed, rather than facilitated, the clarification of its meaning. “Racism,” he argues, has become an accusatory conversation-stopper, and so we would do well to restrict its use and develop a more nuanced, supplementary vocabulary sensitive to less serious racial wrongs. Shelby demurs, however, replying that unhappiness with being labeled “racist” can stem from prudential rather than moral reasons, and that everyday race-talk is not, in general, a good source for making the requisite conceptual distinctions. Shelby defends the view that racism is best conceptualized as an *ideology* (in the left, “critical theory” tradition that ultimately derives from Marxism). Rebutting Blum’s earlier objections to this view, he argues that his analysis provides a richer explanation than Blum’s for the peculiar wrongness of racism, particularly the wrongs entailed by racist beliefs. While Shelby does not at all want to deny the importance of moral philosophical insights in this area, he insists that political philosophy—which, following Rawls, Shelby regards as focusing on the justice of society’s “basic structure”—should have theoretical primacy. A political philosophical framework, Shelby proposes, better situates racism’s distinctive wrongness—that is, its key role in helping to reproduce unfair social arrangements.

Like Shelby, Gines favors an institutional conceptualization of racism. In "A Critique of Postracialism," she additionally argues that claims about postraciality need to be confronted for their disingenuous assumption that ours is a post-racist society. Drawing on the taxonomy that Howard McGary sketches in *The Post-Racial Ideal* (2012), she distinguishes between assimilationist, racially eliminativist, and color-blind versions of postracialism (all broadly assimilationist, for her, and all to be rejected). She likewise identifies and endorses a non-assimilationist, antiracist version of postracialism (eliminate racism, keep race) that is prefigured in W. E. B. Du Bois's famous essay, "The Conservation of Races." Following the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Gines reminds us that racism changes form over time, and that what faces us today is a new racism for which "color-blindness" and a shift from traditional biologism to culturalism are in fact crucial. In addition, she emphasizes the need to repudiate the Black-White binary that has historically framed discussions of racism in the United States, and to recognize the distinctive features of anti-Asian American and anti-Latino/a racisms. Retaining the binary will not only disable the theoretical effort to understand the evolution of race and racism in the United States, Gines argues, but present a practical obstacle to the task of building antiracist coalitions. In a related vein, Gines also stresses that nonracial differences among Blacks are no less politically significant than racial differences among non-Whites, noting that Black America is divided by class and wealth, and that it includes post-1965 immigrant newcomers (African, Afro-Caribbean) and their descendants, as well as Black Americans with a generations-long history in this country, going back to slavery. Similarly, we need also to take into account the divergent identities of Afro-Latino/as and Afro-Anglo/as. Gines concludes by reiterating the importance of rejecting any form of postraciality that is predicated on the claim that the United States has ceased to be a racist nation; rather, postraciality of this kind must be exposed as racism in a new guise.

While the aforementioned essays look at race, postraciality, and justice in fairly abstract terms, the two that immediately follow them examine the concrete implications of these notions for a particular institution; the educational system in the United States. Derrick Darby, a philosopher, and Argun Saatcioglu, an organizational sociologist, combine their talents and disciplinary expertise in their essay "Race, Justice, and Desegregation." Darby and Saatcioglu begin with a depressing itemization of statistics documenting the continuing Black-White educational gap, the ramifications of which include not only radically divergent life-prospects (jobs, wealth, and life-expectancies, etc.), but disparate chances for equal, democratic citizenship. Such racial disparities might seem uncontroversially impermissible by the norms of egalitarian justice. But for the dominant variety of contemporary egalitarianism, "choice egalitarianism," the crucial distinction between circumstantial (unchosen) inequalities and inequalities stemming from bad decisions, opens the conceptual door for such inequalities to be attributed to choice, and thus to a person's own responsibility. Far from being merely an abstract logical possibility, such an attribution is precisely what prevails in a society where a racialized, commonsense "postracial" political morality denies the causal impact of long-enduring structures of institutional disadvantage for a more ideologically convenient picture of feckless Black agency. Darby and Saatcioglu document the changing pattern of Supreme Court rulings, from *Brown's* concession that Blacks were an oppressed group, through freedom-of-choice plans that facilitated the evasion of desegregation, to the more recent 1990s rulings that retreated from the goal of racial integration, all culminating in the earlier-mentioned 2007 *Seattle* decision that made race-blindness the normative equivalent of non-discrimination. The authors identify the Reagan Revolution as pivotal to the emergence of a racialized individualism that rationalized the rollback of social welfare programs, and that invoked the notions of

personal responsibility and self-sufficiency to stigmatize Blacks as far more prone than Whites to gaming the system. In political philosophy and social theory alike, important conservative works by Thomas Sowell, Charles Murray, and Robert Nozick provided an ideologico-political framework for contesting the norms of the redistributivist welfare state. With that framework in place, choice egalitarianism has generally served to justify the status quo. For in the absence of a dominant narrative about the powerful, constraining effects of racial “circumstances,” disparities tend simply to be ascribed to African Americans’ poor choices. Darby and Saatcioglu end by rebutting some common criticisms of desegregation, and calling for its reinstatement as a necessary ideal for a more just society.

A different kind of educational racial injustice is explored by Sally Haslanger in her “Studying while Black,” namely, the creation of race itself. Through a series of anecdotes about non-White student/White teacher interactions in a well-funded urban public school, Haslanger demonstrates how even relatively affluent minority pupils are systematically shaped for subordinate racial locations outside the knowledge economy by such micropolitical encounters. Drawing on Miranda Fricker’s recent work on “epistemic injustice,” Haslanger tracks the cumulative long-term effect on students of color of seemingly minor episodes, through the creation of patterns of epistemic mistrust, ego depletion, the undermining of effort optimism, testimonial injustice, and the overarching logic of racial semiotics. Norms of productive epistemic cooperation are routinely breached, reinforcing the confidence of dominant Whites and undercutting the confidence of minorities, thereby reducing minorities’ chances of success and—through feedback loops—perpetuating anti-minority bias. The self-control necessary to restrain expressions of frustration and anger takes its toll on the willpower of students of color, and may even affect their executive functions; not seeing a correlation between their effort and success, they will be more likely to give up. Racialized testimonial injustice will have the effect not merely of excluding Blacks and Latinos from cooperative participation in our knowledge communities, but affect the very formation of the self. Apart from conscious and unconscious bias, and the effects of cumulative disadvantage, collective social understandings generate a racial semiotics that legitimizes differential and harmful treatment of males of color in particular. Citing the classic feminist claim that gender is the social meaning of sex, Haslanger recommends analogously that we see race as the social meaning of color (“color” including eye shape, hair texture, etc., as well as skin tones), where “race” locates one in a social hierarchy determined by the extant collective meanings. Some races are destined to occupy white-collar roles, others to do menial labor. Haslanger offers the sobering conclusion that an objective examination of the patterns of treatment of males of color in primary and secondary education makes clear that they are being prepared for the latter. Racial justice demands that we find ways to disrupt these processes of racialization and the differential fates they foreshadow.

The last two essays turn, in very different ways, to the politics of racial representation and justice, with Cristina Beltrán choosing the register of the aesthetic, and Robert Gooding-Williams examining autobiography as a genre of political narrative. The increasing heterogeneity and class fragmentation of the Latino population puts into question the mythic *nuestra comunidad* and raises, more sharply than ever before, the issue of what counts as adequate political representation and representativeness. How should we understand racial “presence” in a supposedly postracial polity? Canvassing a wide range of theorists, from Hanna Pitkin and Crispin Sartwell to Carol Swain and Elaine Scarry, Beltrán makes a provocative case for the relevance of aesthetics to adequately answering this question in her “Racial Presence vs. Racial Justice.” Attending to the dissonance between our sensory preferences and our ethical and/or political

values, she elucidates different ways of reading racial presence, as when Latinos/as are elected to office but pursue conservative politics. The visible race of an elected official may sympathetically engage our feelings, but what should our political judgments be? Beltrán repudiates as inadequate and undertheorized a facile anti-aestheticism, arguing that we need to understand better the complex interrelations of beauty and justice. Pitkin’s work on the different forms of representation—descriptive (*a* being like *A*) and substantive (*a* acting in the interests of *A*)—underestimates the political significance of descriptive representation, especially in a racial polity where it has historically been denied to people of color. But mere racial presence cannot by itself suffice for racial justice, even if it is a key element—a point that Beltrán illustrates through her critical examination of two recent works on Latinos in politics. In both books, albeit in different ways, descriptive representation becomes substantive representation, a slide that is made possible by the vagueness and indeterminacy of the characterization of Latino interests, where heterogeneity is, initially, nominally acknowledged, but then quickly subsumed under a supposedly unifying *Latinidad*. At the other extreme, Swain is, for Beltrán, too dismissive about the political import of having faces like your own representing you in office. Beltrán argues that Scarry’s treatment of the relation of aesthetic and moral imbalance provides a more enlightening account of the politically significant aesthetic power of racial presence, though she thinks Scarry understates the possible dangers of conflating our political and aesthetic values. Beltrán closes by emphasizing again the political importance of cultivating our judgment in learning to read the meaning of raced bodies in the White body politic.

Finally, and appropriately, we conclude with Robert Gooding-Williams’s “Autobiography, Political Hope, Racial Justice,” that gives particular attention to a book whose author is typically taken to personify America’s putatively postracial transcendence of race—namely, our President, Barack Obama. Specifically, Gooding-Williams compares Obama’s autobiography, *Dreams From My Father* (1995) to W. E. B. Du Bois’s autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940). According to Gooding-Williams, these books merit comparison because they present two radically different narratives of the possibilities for achieving racial justice in the United States. Obama’s *Dreams* tells the story of a biracial child, first tempted to dissociate himself from Blackness, then drawn in the name of authenticity to a militant Black nationalism, before coming to reject its anti-White bitterness in the name of raceless, universal values, which he also comes to regard as expressing the ethos of his Chicago, South Side church, and community. *Dreams* ultimately resolves Obama’s inner racial division through an appeal to the common ground of universal values, yet without sacrificing his identification with a particular Black community. *Dusk*, by contrast, tells a less sanguine story of a “race concept” that has historically functioned to rationalize White domination and exploitation of Blacks. Not just conscious economic interest but unconscious, entrenched habit have reinforced this concept’s shaping power over White belief and behavioral patterns. In addition, Du Bois’s book is skeptical of appeals to the common ground of universal values, for the interpretation of these values through a White racial lens tends to resolve any putative “American dilemma” in favor of continuing White advantage. In the final part of his essay, Gooding-Williams turns to two works—an essay and a later book, both jointly authored by Desmond King and Rogers Smith (2005, 2011)—in order to underline a shift from an earlier, more Du Boisian analysis to a later, more Obama-like account in King’s and Smith’s descriptions of modern, post-Jim Crow racial politics. Thus, what were originally depicted as competing transformative and anti-transformative “racial institutional orders” later become “rival policy alliances” that agree on the goal of racial equality but disagree on the means and appropriate public policy measures for realizing it. King and Smith

assume a widespread commitment to racial progress, a common ground on which both sides concur. But as Gooding-Williams emphasizes, they adduce no convincing evidence for such an assumption and, ironically, provide reason to doubt it in their own earlier essay. Whereas the earlier essay presented modern racial politics as an ongoing struggle over racial hierarchy and unequal racial standing, the 2011 book obscures the larger demands of racial justice, exchanging the robust hope of radically reforming the nation's formative institutional structure for the not insignificant but deflated hope of reducing racial inequalities. Gooding-Williams suggests that the earlier essay is more discerning than the book, and that, following Du Bois, the point of an ongoing, progressive racial politics is to continue the "long siege" required to dismantle racial hierarchy.

In this special issue of the *Du Bois Review*, devoted to the work of philosophers and political theorists writing on the disciplinarily unorthodox (non-"philosophical," non-"theoretical") subject of race, it seems fitting that our concluding essay highlights the insights of the eponymous American giant of critical race theory, whose thought has yet to be properly appreciated by mainstream philosophers and political theorists. We trust the old man would give an approving nod, and we look forward to the discussions we hope and expect this collection to stimulate.

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