

TAKING POSTRACIALISM SERIOUSLY

From Movement Mythology to Racial Formation

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Abstract

This essay reconsiders the prospects for postracialist discourse. Critics tend not to take seriously enough the strongest case that can be made for viewing contemporary U.S. racial politics through the postracial lens. As a result, some important criticisms—the ones that survive postracialism’s reformulation in these stronger terms—have yet to be fully developed. It is important to develop a critique of the strongest form of postracialism, because this form of the view shares, or exemplifies, certain problems in garden-variety liberal antiracisms. Clarifying these problems in the more extreme conceptual environment of postracialism may help clarify their implications for the much more widespread commitments of mainstream post-civil rights thinking.

Keywords: Postracialism, Racism, Race Theory, Racial Formation, Race, Anti-racism, Civil Rights Movement

INTRODUCTION

At one time, not that long ago, one could easily get people to entertain the thought that the United States had become postracial. The thought spawned a kind of euphoria that surely reached its zenith as 2008 gave way to 2009, around the time of Barack Obama’s election to the U.S. presidency and his subsequent inauguration. As journalist Farai Chideya (2011) points out, “‘post-racial’ was the most popular term in the 2008 election, after ‘hope’ and ‘change’” (p. 243).

Since that initial burst of euphoria, though, committed postracialists have become increasingly rare. This may not be surprising. For one thing, the emergence of a sizable contingent of such people was itself a rather sudden and fairly shocking development—surprising if for no other reason than that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 seemed likely to cast a pall over our racial politics for some years to come. For another, invocations of postraciality tend to run rather swiftly into some knotty difficulties that its critics have been only too happy to expose.

In what follows I’d like to reconsider the prospects for postracialist discourse. I fear that the critics have not taken seriously enough the strongest case that can be made for viewing contemporary U.S. racial politics through the postracial lens. As a result, I fear that important criticisms that survive postracialism’s reformulation in these stronger terms have yet to be fully developed.

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In light of the recent decline in postracialism's fortunes, reconsidering the view may seem like an odd undertaking. If vanishingly few people are willing to defend it, why bother trying to take it more seriously? An easy, general, philosophical answer is that the critics should earn their victory, and cannot rightly claim to have done so until the strongest case has been made. A harder answer is that postracialism gets something importantly right, and there is some value in identifying and insisting on this insight. An even harder answer is that the problems that afflict the strongest postracialist arguments also afflict liberal modes of antiracist thought and activism. Clarifying these problems in the more extreme conceptual environment of postracialism may help clarify their implications for the much more widespread commitments of liberal anti-racism.

BUT RACISM STILL MATTERS: FROM CRUDE UTOPIANISM TO CAREFUL DESCRIPTION

I mentioned above that postracialist discourse tends to have some rather sizable initial problems. These problems are not insurmountable, and can be overcome by more complex and subtle appeals to postracialism. But these improved appeals lead to still more problems, which seem somewhat harder to solve.

The first problem for postracialism is of course the ease with which it lends itself to claims about the end of racism, or about the approaching or accomplished obsolescence of race-thinking altogether. This first grade of postracialist discourse is common enough, especially in the blogosphere and among journalistic commentators on contemporary politics and culture. The argument is usually simple enough. Some watershed event occurs—the election of a president, the confirmation of a Supreme Court justice, or the hiring of a high-profile CEO—and it happens to involve someone who happens not to be a White man. The event would not of course have been possible in the bad old days of racial injustices like Chinese Exclusion Acts and Jim Crow segregation. So the occurrence of the event proves that we've consigned race-based injustice to the dustbin of history. And since there's no other reason to talk about race except in advancing some program of unjust discrimination, the watershed event reveals that race-thinking itself is obsolete, thereby demonstrating, as one *Wall Street Journal* article on postracialism puts it, “the pointlessness of dwelling on race” (Taranto 2009).

This argument of course goes by much too quickly, and provokes the obvious objections. *Racism still exists*, the objections begin. *True enough, we now frown on explicit acts of discrimination and open avowals of racial animus. But there's quite good psychological evidence that we still harbor implicit biases that belie our conscious affirmations and shape our immediate responses to each other. What's more, even if racism were no more, it shaped society deeply enough when it was around to leave us all sorts of racial 'gaps'—the achievement gap, the wealth gap, and so on—that we still have to contend with.* In light of considerations like these, *Wall Street Journal*-style triumphalism seems unwarranted and ill-advised. In deference to just how ill-advised it is, and to the speed with which most advocates of postracial discourse point out that this is not the sort of view they endorse, I will here and there in what follows refer to this view as ‘idiot postracialism.’¹

This criticism pretty successfully undermines the crude first version of postracialism, but a more complicated version takes up the argument and fares considerably better. As John McWhorter (2010) points out in a widely circulated piece from *theGrio.com*, the criticism of simple postracialism is a roundabout invitation to affirm the lasting salience of racism, and one can reasonably accept this invitation while still insisting

that our racial practices have changed in significant ways. One might even think of the language of postracialism as a way of insisting on these changes, and of highlighting their depth and magnitude.

David Hollinger (1995, 2011) deepens this line of thinking in a recent extension of his famous early reflections on post-ethnicity. Hollinger (2011) points out that many serious and thoughtful people have appealed to notions like ‘postraciality’ and ‘post-ethnicity’ in recent years, and have done so without daring to deny that “racism continues to be a problem... in the United States” (p. 175). After pointing out that “a discursive Grand Canyon” (p. 174) yawns between what serious postracialists claim and what critics of postracialism tend to deny, Hollinger goes on to explain more carefully what the claim actually involves for him. His explanation goes something like this—race, of course, has mattered historically and still matters, but the ways in which it matters have changed and continue to change. These changes have in general to do with a kind of decreased “intensity” (p. 175), which registers for us (if we’re paying attention) in the form of at least these three realizations: (1) that our social affiliations—including our ethnoracial affiliations—are not natural and fixed but contingent and can be chosen, *or not*; (2) that ethnoracial politics and affiliations are not obviously the best resources for addressing social ills; and (3) that our main ethnoracial categories have never been and cannot be as pure and inviolate as we once pretended they were.

In Hollinger’s view, anyone who takes these realizations seriously while remaining interested in the states of affairs that race-talk purports to track should also take seriously the thought that ethnoracial vocabularies are theoretically and ethically inadequate. These vocabularies don’t do the political or social-theoretic work we demand of them, and they are in tension with certain of the ethical norms relating to individuality and freedom and so on that we claim to endorse. For broadly existential purposes, we might still choose to identify with ethnoracial categories, as indicated above. But we ought to choose these identities, if we choose them, in a voluntaristic way that is playful, spirited, and free from any social requirement to do so, and free from the burdens of boundary-policing. For the purposes of political and social analysis, by contrast, even this limited openness to ethnoraciality seems unwarranted. In Hollinger’s post-ethnic, postracial world, there is no bar against affiliating with ethnoracial groups. But a proper reading of that world shows that approaching our social problems through the lenses provided by these affiliations seems to obscure more than it reveals, and to block potentially useful affiliations of other kinds. We have reason, then, to turn away from talk of races and ethnicities and toward other analytical and ethical frameworks—even in our attempts to understand our racial histories and to deal with the very real problems of (what we refer to as) racial injustice.

If McWhorter and Hollinger are right, then serious postracialists need not talk about race in the dismissive, grandly optimistic terms of the *Wall Street Journal*. They can instead begin with a point that most of us already accept—that race-talk is ethically and empirically problematic—and move from there to the recognition that people in at least some places have come to organize their affairs and understand themselves in ways that allow them, that allow us, to make our suspicion of race-talk operative in our lives. Serious postracialists of this type need not insist on any of the stronger claims that await on the other side of Hollinger’s discursive Grand Canyon. They don’t need to claim that the problems we attribute to race are illusory, either because they have been solved or were never all that important. They don’t need to claim that beliefs about race have no bearing on social life, or that racial meanings can play no role in the organization of postracial communities and the formation of postracial selves. Their point is just that race-thinking has, to a significant degree, *lost its hold* on us, and that we should signal this shift in our language.

CHANGE OR A CHANGING SAME? FROM DESCRIPTION TO PRESCRIPTION

The more subtle approach announced by McWhorter and developed by Hollinger avoids the problem of crude postracialism—its apparent indifference to the persistence and legacies of racism—but may still be vulnerable to a second, harder problem. The serious postracialist (not the *WSJ* variety) argues that race still matters but *not as much* as it once did (and, obviously, as everyone on all sides agrees, not in the same ways as it once did). It has in fact declined sufficiently in significance, has receded far enough from the centers of our private and public lives, to require a change in our practices of expression and in the habits of imagination that come with them. Proceeding in any other way would leave us out of touch with the historical moment we inhabit.

One might worry, though, that this argument still misreads the racial moment, despite granting the lasting salience of race. As Hollinger's colleague Waldo Martin (2011) points out, racial identities and practices still seem to be central to our lives and seem likely to remain so, in ways that Hollinger simply does not acknowledge. Racial practices have changed, to be sure, as have the contexts in which we participate in them. But, as Martin keeps putting it, they have both declined *and persisted*. Their importance, or what Hollinger calls their "intensity," has decreased in some ways, but has increased in others. In this view, even serious, non-crude postracialism is too quick, too indifferent to the actual content and contexts of our racial practices.

We might buttress Martin's argument by appealing to statistics about the race gaps that I mentioned above, or by complicating the simple narratives of linear ethical progress, or of semantic evolution that often inform popular readings of racial history. But Hollinger can grant the damage done to his argument by Martin's critique while still insisting on a deeper and more interesting point. Hollinger's argument has as much to do with envisioning a future as with reading the present, and more to do with *imagining* a future than with *predicting* one. Words like 'postracial,' he contends, point to a future in which ethnoracial categories have lost their hold on our identities, our politics, and our quest for economic justice. "No one," Hollinger (2011) points out, "calls into question the desirability of such a future" (p. 175). But when invited to reflect on this possible future under the rubric of postracialism, academics and journalists want "to talk only about whether that future has arrived" (p. 175). They overlook the degree to which references to postraciality are aids to reflection and resources for moral imagination: they are meant to help us "sharpen our vision of what a society long accustomed to... ascribing and enforcing ethnoracial distinctions might look like if those abhorrent protocols could be weakened" (p. 174). The language of postracialism, on this approach, is about helping to bring the postracial future into being, not about shackling our moral imaginations to projections of present conditions.

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH POSTRACIALISM: FROM PROPHECY TO PRAGMATISM

Making postracialism prescriptive and visionary rather than descriptive and extrapolative—in short, making it prophetic rather than prognostic—might block the worry that the view just gets the world wrong. But by raising the question of the uses and effects of language, it points in the direction of another difficulty. By insisting on the ethical functions of certain kinds of expressive choices, on the role that linguistic resources play in helping us imagine alternate futures and project visions for moral improvement, Hollinger moves the debate into range of a worry rooted precisely in concerns about the ethical functions of the language.

This new worry, ably articulated by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich (2011), holds that the main problem for postracialism has less to do with the accuracy of its claims than with the political uses to which its claims get put.² These uses become available because the language of postracialism is neatly suited to blurring the distinction between more and less crude ways of describing the post-civil rights condition. As a result, even the serious and visionary formulations of postracialism can feed into the unserious and reactionary arguments that use talk of colorblindness, which Hollinger explicitly rejects, to advance a distinctive racial project.

For Bonilla-Silva and others, the idea that we have achieved a postracial condition is part of the ideological dimension of a particular racial paradigm. What distinguishes this paradigm is not its transcendence of race or its prophetic envisioning of a world without race, but its determination to whitewash racial history and the mechanisms of ongoing racial stratification—to obscure, ignore, or erase the evidence that race still matters in a variety of definite, concrete, and distressingly familiar ways. Appeals to colorblindness figure prominently in this paradigm, as they invoke what they depict as the ethical commonsense of the post-civil rights era to block any reference to racial inequalities or hierarchies. A strong version of this view of truly achieving colorblindness means refusing race-thinking altogether: race-based affirmative action programs, anti-racist expressions of racial solidarity, and race-sensitive data-gathering, undertaken to track our progress toward material equality across racial boundaries, will all go the way of the Black codes, racially restrictive covenants, and antimiscegenation laws. Perhaps most important, becoming colorblind in this sense means losing interest in the long sordid history of what we once called race relations. This history provides the context for contemporary debates about everything from segregated schools to the corrections industry, but it can of course have no bearing on a world in which *nous avons changé tout cela* (we have changed all that). For the most vocal advocates of colorblindness, *history* has no color, which means that the role of color distinctions *in* history, in driving the historical processes that created the world we now inhabit, has no bearing on the conduct of our lives. When racial history comes to an end, when the idea that history might meaningfully be understood as having a racial dimension becomes unthinkable, then we become quite literally postracial.

A careful thinker in the Hollinger mode may explicitly disavow the ideological postracialist's wanton assertion that race no longer matters. But the plausibility that these careful thinkers confer on the general shape of the argument that we have come within view of something we might think of as the end of race, trickles down to the less careful arguments from ideology. It then trickles down even further to endorsements of the sentiment that the ideological arguments convey. I have in mind here something like the idea of semantic infiltration. I have learned this term from Stephen Steinberg (1995), who borrows it from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the man who in some ways provided the blueprint for its application to U.S. racial politics (though that wasn't what he was talking about when he coined the expression). As Steinberg (1995) puts it, "semantic infiltration" is a way of referring "to the appropriation of the language of one's political opponents for the purpose of blurring distinctions and molding it to one's own political position" (p. 116). In his infamous *The Negro Family* report of 1965, Moynihan shows how to appropriate and then subvert an influential line of thinking from the left-liberal, or further left, wings of the Civil Rights Movement. This text endorses the thought that equal opportunity is not enough, that civil rights triumphs mean little without some changes in the social and economic structures that condition and constrain the pursuit of equality. But it focuses centrally on changes in 'negro' *family* structure, not in the wider social structure.

Postracialist ideology works in much the same way as Moynihan's diversion of concrete equality discourse. It invites us to endorse the antiracist thoughts that Hollinger wants us to think, namely, that solidarity must be won, that identities must be chosen, and that neither of these can be assumed on the basis of appearance or ancestry. But the language then invites us to reject the other, in some ways more challenging, *antiracist* thoughts that Hollinger endorses. Where Hollinger goes on to insist that racism and racial hierarchies have not vanished and that concerns about racial justice should inspire a wider interest in social and economic justice, ideological postracialism suggests that racial hierarchies have vanished along with the presumptive validity of racial solidarities and identities. Whatever inequalities remain are a function of individuals failing to take advantage of the opportunities now open to them—as it might be, because of the tangle of cultural pathologies that Moynihan helped make part of the content of liberal antiracism.

We see the trajectory of postracialist semantic infiltration limned by Justice Roberts' infamous line from the *Parents Involved v. Seattle* (2007) decision, which struck down voluntarily adopted desegregation schemes in Seattle and Louisville. Roberts writes, “[t]he way to stop discrimination on the basis of race”—which is, after all, what we all want—“is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (p. 748) (i.e., to proscribe attempts to use race-thinking to break down persistent or reemerging patterns of segregation that we usually take the *Brown* decision to have abolished). In other words, our ethical commonsense, burned into our collective psyches by Martin King and others, enjoins us to stop discriminating by race; and this must be an absolute prohibition, applicable whether we use racial categories—which just is to *discriminate*—for good or for ill. In *Parents Involved* and in the line of cases leading up to it, we find “the question of racial equality [reduced] to mere formalism, completely abstracted from history” (Crenshaw 1997, p. 285) or context. Chief Justice Roberts' sound-byte-ready formulation links our postracial future to “a general rule that nobody's skin color should be taken into account in governmental decision-making” (Crenshaw 1997, p. 284), which means that demonstrable patterns and *recorded histories* of discrimination and exclusion become irrelevant to the distorted and racialized opportunity structures that define contemporary U.S. social life. In addition, the different purposes to which racial distinctions might be put in public policy also become irrelevant. Discrimination is the thing then that determines whether the racial classifications in question “seek, not to keep the races apart, but to bring them together” (*Parents Involved v. Seattle* 2007, p. 835).³ Putting discrimination behind us, in the absolutist, context-independent manner of *Parents Involved*, is the key to the colorblind racial project, and to the ideological postracial sensibility that informs it, and is informed by it.

This third worry may be the hardest for the postracialist to guard against, but one possible defense begins by pointing out the pragmatic dimension of the questions at issue. The postracialist says that the language helps us imagine a better world that we might bring into being, and invites us to focus on the aspects of this world that are already trending in the right direction. The critic says that the language empowers reactionary racist forces, provides much of the ideological content for a reinvigorated White supremacist project, and informs elaborate and misleadingly anodyne campaigns to promote ethical amnesia and sociological myopia. There is an interest in how postracialist language *in fact* works now, by and large, and there are plausible inferences to draw about how the language is likely to work in the future, about how likely it is to promote freedom and justice, or unfreedom and unjust hierarchies. But even if critics like Bonilla-Silva come closer to getting the current facts right, the postracialist can remind us that the future is still in the making, and insist that our projections of

that future be liberated from our limitations in the present. Prophetic postracialism calls us to a visionary experiment, and urges us to take up the task of *making* a future that refuses the models of the past. If the present is as bleak and worrisome as Bonilla-Silva makes it out to be, perhaps this should just arouse us to redouble our efforts, and to contest the slippage between postracialist arguments and postracialist ideology.

POSTRACIALISM'S RACIALISM

So far I have identified three increasingly sophisticated grades of non-idiot postracialism. Each of these appeared as a move in an unfolding dialectic on the prospects for the view. And each grew out of a concern with a simpler form of the view.

If accused of denying racism in the manner of simple or idiot postracialism, one can easily, and rightly, point out that this sort of denial is not at all what animates careful forms of the argument. Careful postracialism does not claim that racial dynamics, racist practices and, by extension, antiracist advocacy and organization no longer matter. It claims that these things matter *differently*, and *less* than they once did.

If confronted with the objection that 'differently' and 'less' are not the same thing, and that a careful reading of the contemporary racial terrain undermines the idea that racial dynamics are in some broad way less "intense" than they once were, the postracialist might insist on the visionary and prophetic dimension of the view. Prophetic postracialism does not claim to have provided an accurate description of the world as it stands. It claims to have identified and emphasized certain social tendencies that can be nurtured and developed in order to bring a new world into being.

Finally, if charged with ignoring the anti-antiracist ideological functions of this visionary ethical stance, the postracialist can insist on the experimental and voluntaristic dimensions of the view. Pragmatic postracialism does not deny that its language might be used to advance new racist or old racialist projects. It just insists on weighing this possibility against the importance of committing ourselves to the postracial vision, and against the possibility that this commitment, properly undertaken, might overcome the influence of our cynical, postmodern racial projects.

Taking experimentalism seriously in the context of postracialism points us to a fourth worry about the view, even in its sophisticated forms. Sensible experimentalism must make a sober estimate of the conditions that actually obtain, to evaluate the prospects for the courses of action it recommends. Once this estimate is in place it is of course still possible, and not necessarily unreasonable, to bet on poor odds, perhaps because the payoff for a winning bet would be so enormous, or because the more likely outcomes are so much less desirable than the less likely ones. This course of action is even more reasonable if it is possible to work in support of the less likely outcome, to influence the odds in one's favor, if one is willing to put in this work.

This experimentalist calculation must unfold differently, though, if the outcome one desires and aims to help bring into being, or if the path one proposes to take to reach this outcome, is self-undermining. This is precisely the situation for the postracialist vision of social justice. Postracialism imagines free and equal persons creating themselves by affiliating and cooperating without regard for existing racial boundaries and scripts. But the very idea of postracialism both presupposes and reinforces a racially circumscribed vision of race in U.S. history. And the social practices and public policies that we build on this vision in turn reinforce the racial gaps and divisions that postracialism aims to transcend.

UNIVERSALISM + A THEORY OF HISTORY

The first step in making clear the historical dimensions of postracialist thought is to distinguish invocations of postracialism as such from some of the broader views that overlap with and inform them. I am thinking here of the move that Howard McGary makes in his important lecture, “The Post-Racial Ideal” (2012). McGary writes:

The debate over the meaning and value of a postracial America is not new. At various times in American history, the debate has intensified. Advocates for a postracial America in the past have been described as assimilationist and their opponents as non-assimilationist. As a racial assimilationist, Frederick Douglass . . . believed that morally decent people should work to get beyond their racial identities. For Douglass, racial identity places constraints on individuals and prevents them from reaching their full human potentials. Therefore, Douglass rejected the politics of difference [He] was a universalist (pp. 9–11).

There is something importantly right about McGary’s point here. The ethical content of contemporary postracialist arguments is significantly universalist and to some degree assimilationist, provided that we understand assimilationism broadly enough (so that it involves assimilation to a reconstructed human culture, not to a hegemonic and still White culture). But it matters, especially for our purposes here, that Frederick Douglass did not, and could not, refer specifically to *postracialism* as such. This notion, like the related notions ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodern,’ presupposes a way of thinking and talking about temporality that was not yet available in Douglass’s time. Georg Wilhelm Hegel and others had begun to assemble the resources for it, but the consolidation of post-structuralist thought was necessary in order for the resources to converge on and find expression in the idea of being ‘post-.’ The prefix is a philosophical operator that expresses a philosophic impulse—I call it ‘the posterizing impulse’ (Taylor 2007)—that Douglass could have felt only dimly in his time.

For these reasons, it might be more precise to say that postracialism is Douglass-style universalism expressed and defended in a particular philosophic idiom, with particular generic and discursive commitments at stake. These commitments start with the insistence on temporality, and with orienting oneself to the experience of time in fairly definite ways at a particular moment in time. So we might say further that postracialism is universalism plus a theory of history.

The general commitments that drive the posterizing impulse and organize its theories of history ought to be familiar. They have to do with: highlighting the emergence of a new-found diversity in some domain; using the historic shift, break, or rupture marked by this new pluralism in order to establish distance from some older way of proceeding—what Anthony Appiah (1992) calls a “space-clearing gesture” (p. 149); and expressing suspicion or skepticism about our ability to understand current and emerging practices and experiences in the older vocabularies we have available. Posterizing is all at once a gesture of repudiation, of indebtedness, of skepticism, and of openness—done with an eye toward the inexorability of change over time.

We can catch the spirit of this posterizing impulse by considering an example from the great architectural theorist Charles Jencks. Jencks (2003) says he labeled emerging trends in his field “postmodern” in order “to describe where we had left rather than where we were going,” and that this made sense because the architects “had all departed from Modernism and set off in different directions...” (p. 472). This backward-looking gesture defines an historic shift negatively, in terms of what people are no longer doing; but this repudiation comes with the recognition of indebtedness,

of having been shaped by what one has left behind. Still, this appeal to posteriority refuses to tether the present to any unifying theme other than the common point of departure, often in deference to the thought that there just is no unifying theme to be had (a thought that marks the passage out of modernism, though in different ways in different traditions), or that insisting on such a theme will obscure or, worse, stifle the emergence of true novelty.

This posterizing move has of course become popular in a variety of domains, in references to everything from postcolonial theory to post-industrial cities and post-Black art. In each case, the point is to suggest that something has been repudiated and that the act of repudiation has created an opening for something new. Understanding this sort of argument, then, means figuring out with some precision just what has been repudiated and what sort of opening this creates.

Understanding this posterizing argument also often means grappling with the legacies and commitments of the philosophic traditions and genres of expression that tend to inform the arguments. This is one of the reasons that some theorists now recommend that we abandon postcolonial theory for *decolonial* modes of analysis. Decolonial thought, on this approach, exchanges “a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism,” built on the likes of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, for “a critique of Eurocentrism from subalternized and silenced knowledges” (Grosfoguel 2011, p. 3). The posterizing impulse has its natural home, as I have noted, in the European-centered modes of inquiry that worry decolonial thinkers (and others). But for reasons of space I will mostly have to set aside the questions that this fact raises for postracialism. The question at issue right now is just this one: What, *exactly*, does the ‘post’ in postracialism distance us from?

THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE GETS BENT

If we credit the criticisms of postracialism and the more subtle defenses of it that I rehearsed earlier, then it is not as easy as one might think to say just what postracialism annuls and supersedes. As we saw above and as non-idiot postracialism concedes, we still contend with various forms of racial bias and discrimination. In addition, well-intentioned race-thinking still persists, and it informs various familiar practices like emancipatory nationalism and diagnostic social theory. Finally, we still face a distressing array of measurable, hierarchy-sustaining asymmetries in the distribution of social goods across racial populations, both within individual nation-states and across national boundaries.

In light of all this, we saw that the best play for the postracialist is to become more careful, prophetic, and pragmatic. For this sort of postracialist, what we have left behind is our largely uncritical fidelity to the idea of race as an authoritative organizing principle for social life and individual selves. At least three things are important on this approach: (1) that racial practices have *started* to lose their hold on us, as we can see from the real albeit incomplete social, cultural, and political shifts that even critics of postracialism acknowledge; (2) that this development portends a social world rather unlike the ones we have known over the last 400 or so years; and (3) that the ability to plausibly envision this moment, the fact that we can see it from here, is an important beginning that the right-thinking among us should hasten to build on (by, to begin with, talking up the prospect of being postracial).

If this is right, if the ‘post’ in postracialism distances us from the confidence or faith or innocence that we once brought to the enterprise of race-thinking, then there is still more to say about what we have put behind us. What’s interesting about this

dialectic of ‘post-’ talk is that it means to open us to new ways of acting and being, not just to skeptical ways of thinking or feeling. Remember, the prophetic dimension of Hollinger’s (2011) argument begins with his invitation to “sharpen our vision” of a society without the “abhorrent protocols” (p. 174) of ethnoracial distinctions. This will be a negative enterprise to start because its first moves will involve space-clearing and repudiation, to create room for the novel, and as-yet unknown, inventions of postracial society. So it is important to say more about what occupies the space to be cleared. If the postracialist means to be the herald of a new world, what, *exactly*, is it replacing?

The key to figuring out which world postracialism counsels us to quit may lie in figuring out what sustains the optimism that this world is already in the making and awaiting our ministrations. As we have noted, the postracial idea caught on in earnest after Barack Obama established himself as a viable candidate for the U.S. presidency. A fairly representative article in *New Leader* magazine puts it in a way that makes clear what leaves the historical stage when Obama enters: “In the postracial era personified by Obama, *civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history* and Americans start to make race-free judgments about who should lead them” (Schorr 2008, p. 4, emphasis mine).

If we credit this sort of journalistic testimony (which exists in considerable abundance), and the chronology of the term’s usage that it exemplifies, the idea of postracialism seems to owe its popularity largely to the thought that we have transcended the specific regime of race-thinking and racial politics that we typically connect with the Civil Rights Movement. The slide of this regime into irrelevance is what emboldens us to think that racial practices themselves are in decline. As surely as the civil rights era brought the era of White supremacy to a close—making us, if we had then allowed ourselves this way of putting it, post-racist—then Obama’s rise, like the rise of Deval Patrick, Cory Booker, and other members of the so-called Joshua Generation (Remnick 2008),⁴ makes clear that the era of racial politics has also come to a close. It may have been a necessary moment, a stage we had to work through in order to finish off the Strom Thurmonds and reform the George Wallaces of the world. But now, since Whites no longer concentrate their votes and other resources to keep non-Whites disempowered, exploited, and exploitable in the manner of *de jure* White supremacy, there is no need for non-Whites to line up presumptively behind leaders of their own race. We now vote and organize on the basis of shared interests rather than on the basis of complexion. And there are fewer reasons than ever before to think that complexion can serve as a proxy for shared interests.

If this is right, if being postracial means being after the particular regime of race-thinking and racial formation processes that gave us the civil rights era and that finds its culmination in Obama’s election, then the idea of postraciality will for many of us be fixed by our sense of what the civil rights era was. This may not be the case for the most sophisticated versions of the view. But it is surely the case for more popular accounts, and the mechanism of semantic infiltration discussed above makes the prospect of repudiating (or, which is almost the same thing, *completing*) civil rights politics the key to postracialism’s popular appeal.

The completion and obsolescence of the Civil Rights Movement, then, is at the heart of the theory of history that gives postracialism’s universalist gesture its distinctive phenomenological inflection. The Civil Rights Movement, or our consolidation of the gains of that movement, breaks history into before and after. It creates an opening for new modes of self-conception, political mobilization, social affiliation, and cultural practice. And we can’t say what this new world looks like apart from specifying its point of departure because there is nothing else in the relevant register of discourse

or domain of practice to do the work that we wanted the race concept to do. Civil rights-style identity politics was the last gasp of race-thinking and racial practice, and with the collapse of that political model we have reached the end of racial history. This makes us postracial—inhabitants of a condition we can specify only by appeal to our point of departure—because we can now set off in different directions, unified only in their refusal to follow paths laid out by the shibboleths of race-thinking.

AGAINST THE GRAND NARRATIVE: OBSCURANTISM, REDUCTIONISM, EXCLUSIONISM

I have spent the past few sections trying to tease out the historical commitments that come with the idea of postracialism. The point was to figure out just what postracialism says we have put behind us, and what putting something behind us in this way means, so that we can see whether the experimentalist defense of the view withstands scrutiny. The experimentalist elaboration of the view puts claims to predictive and sociological accuracy aside, and focuses instead on three other moves: (1) highlighting those features of the world that we might nudge further in the direction of nonracial universalism; (2) insisting on the attractiveness and availability of this ethical vision; and (3) reminding us of the historic shifts in virtue of which this vision is no longer a political and cultural non-starter. I suggested above that this move works only if enacting the project does not actually make the vision harder to instantiate instead of easier. And I shared my suspicion that postracialism's theory of history does in fact undermine the project in just this way.

In order to make this worry clear, it is necessary to say more about just what's wrong with the thought that we are postracial because we are post-civil rights. The basic problem is that this assessment of the consequences of the civil rights struggle is possible only if we accept a narrow, highly tendentious picture of the struggle. More specifically, the account of U.S. antiracist history that breaks it into before and after Obama, as the heir and instantiation of Martin Luther King's dream, is obscurantist, reductionist, and exclusionary.

The specific problems I have in mind will become clearer once we fix ideas around the picture of the U.S. antiracist history I have in mind. Civil rights historians have in recent years developed a variety of powerful criticisms of the way the mid-century U.S. racial justice struggles register in popular consciousness and public discourse. These criticisms tend to take as their target something like what Julian Bond calls "The Grand Narrative" of the civil rights struggle. Bond's narrative goes like this:

Traditionally, relationships between the races in the South were oppressive. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided this was wrong. Inspired by the court, courageous Americans, black and white, took protest to the streets, in the form of sit-ins, bus boycotts, and freedom rides. The protest movement, led by the brilliant and eloquent Dr. Martin Luther King, aided by a sympathetic federal government, most notably the Kennedy brothers and a born-again Lyndon Johnson, was able to make America understand racial discrimination as a moral issue. Once Americans understood that discrimination was wrong, they quickly moved to remove racial prejudice and discrimination from American life, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Dr. King was tragically slain in 1968. Fortunately, by that time the country had been changed, changed for the better in some fundamental ways. The movement was a remarkable victory for all Americans. By the 1970s, southern states where blacks could not have voted ten years earlier were sending

African Americans to Congress. Inexplicably, just as the civil rights victories were piling up, many Black Americans, under the banner of Black Power, turned their backs on American society (Lawson and Payne 2006, pp. 124–125).

This narrative is of course a parody of the innumerable journalistic, popular, and civics-class accounts that now constitute our public understanding of the Movement. It appears here because it tracks those accounts quite closely, while also rendering their salient features with admirable efficiency and perspicacity. Anyone who has studied at a public or publicly sanctioned U.S. school or read a mainstream U.S. news periodical since, say, 1975 has been presented with some version of this narrative, a fact that I take to absolve me of the need to find people other than Bond telling the story. If that's not enough, one can find the first half of the narrative in the film "Mississippi Burning" (Parker 1988), and one can find the last half both contested, in some important and praiseworthy deviations, and partially endorsed in the opening pages of Elizabeth Anderson's important book, *The Imperative of Integration* (2011).⁵

We can begin to see the problems with this narrative, and with the vision of history that it presents, just by focusing on one sentence. The third sentence tells us that King led the protest movement, and that Johnson and the Kennedy brothers (presumably Jack and Bobby) enlisted a sympathetic federal government to help. There are several points of contention here already: that King led the movement (actually, he was in important ways led by it as often as he led it); that there was a single movement to lead (local variations in movement aims and strategies had much to do with King's inability to get out in front of, or even work productively with, every group or campaign); that it was a *protest* movement (instead of, as activists often explicitly said, a movement aimed at securing human rights, or cultivating the capacity and creating the space for self-determination, or to demand the provision of basic services, and so on); and that the federal government was somehow generally sympathetic (instead of sometimes working actively with racist reactionaries, sometimes with lethal effect, and in any case having to be prodded into action by activist campaigns (like the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964) that strategically put more valuable White lives—those of brave and sympathetic student volunteers—in the path of violence with their Black colleagues). Generalizing from specific complaints like this is what gets me to my broader worries about the obscurantist, reductionist, and exclusionary nature of this account.

The grand narrative of civil rights history is obscurantist in the sense that it hides from view the diversity of actors, aims, and arenas that defined what we now think of as the Civil Rights Movement. What we typically think of as an affair of middle-class ministers, lawyers, and students, mostly men, and eventually of sympathetic government officials was in fact often a working-class affair, often led and sustained by the efforts of women and of people with little formal education and no support, and even active, often lethal opposition, from various levels of government. These people established a broad ideological *modus vivendi*, linking advocates for armed revolt with committed pacifists, Christians with Jews, nationalists with integrationists, capitalists with socialists and communists, all in an effort to defeat White supremacy. As historian Charles McKinney (2010) puts it, the movement involved activists committed to a range of strategies "from accommodation to advocacy to confrontation," and people from all these camps "provided the forward momentum of the movement" (pp. xx–xxi).

The ideological breadth of "the movement" points to the second problem with the standard account: its reductionism. This account constricts a broad liberation struggle to a "protest," as we saw above, or to a battle against segregation, as we'll soon see, or to a quest for something called "civil rights." As historian Todd Moya (2011) points out, "many of the local movements . . . defined *themselves* as movements for human rights,

for freedom and self-determination, more so than as movements for constitutional protections and civic rights” (p. 148). This reduction is not just a sociological error, a matter of underrepresenting the diversity of opinion that exists on some issue. It is also an epistemological and ethical problem. As historian Charles Payne puts it, “Our understanding of social change, our conceptions of leadership, our understanding of the possibilities of interracial cooperation are all affected by how we remember the movement. Even much of the language that we use to discuss social issues derives from movement days” (Lawson and Payne, 2006, p. 144). Accepting histories and vocabularies that have been problematically weighted towards middle-class quests for civil rights reform loads the perceptual, deliberative, and imaginative dice in favor of particular diagnoses, solutions, and moral visions. It limits what we are willing to count as a remediable problem—segregated lunch counters, rather than poverty, or the privatization and monetization of policing—and constrains our sense of the legitimate modes of response to our problems. Committing to the civil rights frame locks us into particular conceptual frameworks, and thereby obscures the realities and aspirations that the privileged frameworks can’t discern or account for.

The reductionism of the grand narrative leads to its third problem: it is also exclusionary and counter-democratic. Insisting on the civil rights framework not only biases us toward certain accounts of the liberation struggle and of the states of affairs that “the movement” sought to ameliorate or abolish. It also privileges the discursive communities that insist on these frameworks, isolates or silences the communities that credit alternative perspectives, and complicates the task of building bridges between the two.

DIALOGUE, DELIBERATION, AND THE MOVEMENT

We can bring the problem of counter-democratic exclusion more clearly into focus by returning to Bond’s narrative and examining the last sentence. “Just as the civil rights victories were piling up,” we learn, many Blacks “inexplicably turned their backs on American society.” This common view of the Movement’s denouement quite explicitly places those who (“inexplicably”) dissent from the movement mythology beyond the boundaries of reasoned ethical discourse. We’re not supposed to consider the possibility that protest movements have persisted and transformed because their original goals were never actually met, or because White supremacy has persisted and transformed, or because they were continuing to work for justice (or whatever) in the spirit of the diverse, multigenerational liberation movement that began well before the mythic movement began in 1955. The truth must be that these people with visions of democracy and racial justice and freedom that can’t be cut to fit the mold of civil rights mythology have turned *away* from America, not toward a richer and more expansive vision of it.

If one must accept a triumphalist vision of the civil rights struggle in order to be a party to ongoing deliberations about how to extend, consolidate, or restore the gains of that struggle—in other words, arguing that the vision is incomplete, that the victories are not “piling up,” marks one as having turned away from the shared democratic project—then the dissenters will be excluded from “our” democratic conversation and cultural community.

It matters in connection with this point that the line between dissent and assent neatly tracks long-standing racial boundaries. We have long known, and it continues to be the case, that White people tend to see the work of racial justice as much closer to complete than Black people do, and that people of different races tend in general to view race-related social issues very differently (Bobo 2001; Dawson 2011). We might

adjust this generalization slightly to accommodate the failure of our thin racial identities, built around superficial traits like skin color, to map onto our “thick” (Shelby 2005, p. 201) identities, built around deeper traits like political ideology or cultural predisposition.⁶ But even if we count Black people who adopt “Whitely” (Frye 1992, p. 126.) perspectives on racial issues as White, and we count White people who achieve Black consciousness of these same issues as Black, the gap between White and Black perspectives has dire implications for the pursuit of a democratic racial politics.⁷

The implications of this racial perspective gap are particularly dire if we consider the discursive preconditions for productive democratic practice. Influential scholars of democratic communication now routinely claim that deliberation is much less likely to be effective without prior *dialogue*, which has less to do with solving problems than with “bridging linguistic, social, and epistemological chasms between different subgroups of the potentially deliberative body . . .” (Levine et al., 2005, p. 9). Using dialogue to find a shared vocabulary for deliberation is important for a variety of reasons, all related to creating the conditions under which deliberation can be productive. Interlocutors with different ideas about what counts as evidence, how to show respect, and what the key terms mean—what conceptual networks the key notions belong to and what roles they play in these networks—are not likely to reason effectively together. Matters get even worse when one participant or set of participants can deny the need for dialogue and insist that its own preferred vocabulary is *the* right vocabulary. The other participants may feel unheard, may reasonably conclude that their participation is not valued or vital, and may withdraw from the process.

The enshrinement of the civil rights grand narrative as our cultural common sense creates precisely the conditions that the distinction between dialogue and deliberation is meant to help us avoid. In light of the racialization of public opinion, noted above, we can say that Bond’s grand narrative reflects an essentially Whitely way to view the history of U.S. anti-racism. The persistent racial gap in the capacity to influence public opinion—which likely has more to do now with asymmetrical access to the means of communicative production and with atrophied Black counterpublic spheres than with the direct suppression of Black opinion (Dawson 2011)—enables us to say further that this Whitely perspective is virtually impervious to public correction and contestation. And putting all of these distressing considerations together suggests that Black (and Blackly conscious) people may reasonably conclude that they might as well withdraw from the ostensibly shared democratic project of extending the legacy of the civil rights era.

CONCLUSION

Postracialism inherits the problems of obscurantism, reductionism, and exclusivism in the civil rights mythology because it presupposes the theory of history that the mythology dramatizes. The most defensible version of the view that I can think of—the careful, prophetic, and pragmatic version worked out above—is that postracialism is meant to stand as an emblem of the possible future of interracial comity, and as a distillation for current consumption and inspiration of the elements of that future that are already in place. But this emblem in fact stands in for a tendentious and already racialized picture of our second reconstruction, a picture that maintains its claim on our attention because of persistent racial gaps in the capacity to shape U.S. public discourse.

By putting this problematic philosophy of antiracist history at the heart of an experiment in trans- or interracial democratic living, the postracial vision undermines itself. Inspired by, among other things, the spectacle of Black politicians emancipated from the rituals of bourgeois Black civil rights politics and winning White votes,

postracialists aim to trumpet the emergence and nurture the growth of a world unfettered by the shibboleths of race-thinking. But this reading of our present distorts the history on which it depends, and threatens to alienate and silence the principal agents, heirs, and beneficiaries of that history.

There is much more to say about the theories of history in play here, both in postracialism as I read it and in the alternative that animates my critique. It is important to note, for example, that our civil rights mythology is a special case of a more general American mythos, an idealist, exceptionalist, and millenarian civil religion organized around narratives of ineluctable and linear progress. This religion is idealistic in the conventional sense of the term, with its optimistic vision of an America always in the advance guard of civilization. But in its relation to race matters, it is also, and more importantly right now, idealistic in something like the Marxian sense. It treats social and historical change as a matter of contests between ideas and principles, rather than of contests between complex formations of ideational *and* social-structural elements. Remember Bond's grand narrative: the supreme court *decided* that segregation was wrong, and Americans eventually *understood* that discrimination was wrong, whereupon they moved to remove racial *prejudice* from our national life.

A history as indifferent to material conditions as this can hardly avoid the lack of internal complexity that allows us to experience time as before and after, as "pre-" and "post-." A more adequate approach to this history might begin with the insights of racial formation theory, which in all of its forms distinguishes multiple phases of racial history by reference to the distinctive configurations of meanings and material conditions that racial discourse helps effect and sustain.⁸ We can then render these configurations as distinct racial projects or racial formations, separated from each other by different systems of meaning and symbolism as well as by different mechanisms for generating and distributing social goods, with these symbols and socioeconomic structures working together to shape each moment.

Reading the present through this more complicated historicism reveals that the shift that postracialism means to register is actually the shift to the latest in a *series* of evolving—but not necessarily *progressing*—racial formations. Postracial discourse is part of this new formation, but so are material phenomena like deindustrialization and subproletarianization (the processes by which the fortunes of what used to be an urban industrial work force are refitted to a post-industrial setting). And we can't understand what all of this means, and what racial history means, without keeping the complexity of this history in view.

This paper is only a first step toward the harder thoughts that recommend themselves once we adopt a more complex orientation to the histories of U.S. racialism and anti-racism. My main aim here has been to reconsider the thought that events like the election of 2008 are the rock on which racial history has been broken, to see whether reformulating this thought to address the major criticisms gives it more of a claim on our attention than it generally enjoys. My sense is that even the strongest form of postracialism is self-undermining, despite its valuable insistence on certain key shifts in our racial practices. We can think of ourselves as postracial only if we ignore the way the "grand narrative" of U.S. anti-racism—a narrative that informs postracialism *as well as much liberal anti-racism*—intertwines with the transforming material conditions of enrichment and immiseration, and confines our ethical imaginations and deliberative communities within unacceptable boundaries.

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NOTES

1. I have borrowed this adjectival use of 'idiot' from Arthur Fine (2007), who famously defends a form of relativism by, to begin with, distinguishing it from "idiot relativism" (p. 51). According to Fine, the easy refutations of relativism attach to the idiot variety, which unfortunately (for the critics) no one has ever seriously endorsed. Idiot postracialism happens to have many adherents, and they are easier to find than the non-idiot variety.
2. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) developed this line of argument in relation to ideologies of colorblindness and conceptions of post-civil rights politics well before the language of postracialism came into vogue.
3. This language comes from Justice Stephen Breyer's dissent.
4. Like the rise, in a different way, of Nikky Haley and Bobby Jindal, and, in a still different way, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell.
5. For an argument about Elizabeth Anderson's orientation to this kind of narrative, see Taylor (2013).
6. For more on thick and thin racial identities, see Shelby (2005), pp. 201–242.
7. For more on whiteness see Frye (1983); on black consciousness see Gordon (2008).
8. The canonical form of racial formation theory appears in Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994). Alternate forms and elaborations appear, among other places, in: Cha-Jua (2010); Goldberg (1993) and (2009); and Kim (1999); Goldberg (1993) and (2009); and Cha-Jua (2010).

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