

## On the Borders of Race\*

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When one speaks of race, one speaks of borders; these are insidious societal borders, which were assigned value beyond skin deep and came to be integrated into hierarchical definitions of what it means to be human. If one were to summarise the development of the idea of race, it should be noted to have originated in the ancient theories of Plato and Aristotle, spread out during the time of colonialist conquests, and extended in imperialist enterprises during the Enlightenment and afterwards; the concept gained scientific authority on the grounds of evolutionary theories, further developed in the light of Orientalist encounters and reactions, and came to be relativised as a trope in contemporary times.

The existence of the Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid races usually passes as fact and this racial categorisation is casually employed in scientific and everyday discourse. However, before it would gain such wide currency, “the idea of race had to be invented, described, promulgated and legislated by those who would benefit as a group from the concept.”<sup>32</sup> The specific use of race as a marker of essential difference in humanity emerged during the Transatlantic slave trade, which necessitated and supported a definition of blackness as opposed to and lesser than whiteness.

In the dawn of Western civilization and prior to the slave trade, documents of the attitudes toward different skin color highlight the distinction, but do not entail a correlative negative discrimination; quite the contrary, Herodotus described Africans idealistically.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean that the citizens of the Greek world did not maintain narcissistic norms of skin color; to the extent that each group creates its aesthetic ideals to its image and

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<sup>32</sup> Dana Nelson, *Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature, 1638-1867* (New York: Oxford UP., 1993), viii-ix.

<sup>33</sup> Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP., 1983), 57.

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likeness, this “somatic norm image”<sup>34</sup> applies equally to Caucasian, Negroid and Mongoloid representations. Thus, in an African creation myth the black man is said to be perfectly cooked, whereas the whiteman is underdone because of a defect in the Creator’s oven. At the same time, in Asia the ideal of white skin is not race-bound, predating colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty:<sup>35</sup> “dating back to ancient culture, pale, even skin implied a dainty and fragile quality that was associated with beauty, as well as the implication of a higher social stature.”<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, as I have argued before<sup>37</sup>, the somatic norm image proves to be a more complex construction. First, it is made not in a group’s own image, but in the group’s ideal self-image, which leads to a desired accentuation or erasure of visible features such as skin colour, eye colour, hair texture, etc. Thus, the ancient Greeks and Romans would bleach their hair and whiten their face with lead to achieve an even whiter beauty ideal. Second, the somatic norm image asserts itself in opposition to the other, e.g. the beauty of whiteness is opposed to black ugliness, to which the “black is beautiful” movement responds by positioning itself against “white trash”. Third, the somatic norm image is able to some extent to incorporate the Other, albeit marginally, e.g., the white stranger venerated in Negroid and Mongoloid communities and the ebony black admired in white groups.

By 1850 however, ideas of insurmountable racial difference appeared to be general truths; when Abraham Lincoln invited a group of black leaders to the, ironically, White House in 1862 to submit his ideas about the return of all the blacks in America back to Africa, his argument was based on racial categorisation: “You and we are different races”, he said, “We have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races,”<sup>38</sup> which implied some sort of essential human distinction accounting for a radical segregation. While the White House has grown much more

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>35</sup> Hiroshi Wagatsuma, “The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan,” *Daedalus*, 96.2 (1967): 444.

<sup>36</sup> Liz Grubow, “Marketing Matters: Chinese Culture and its Effect on Skin Care Trends in China,” *GCIMagazine.com*, 5 Sep. 2008, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Oana Cogeanu, “Travelling Ideologies: A Story of Whiteness,” *Linguaculture*. 7:2 (Iași, Romania: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2015), 15-33.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Jr. Gates (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3.

inclusive, race continues to be an active concept in mainstream discourse.

It goes without saying that the categories used to construct ideas of racial difference do not serve purely descriptive purposes; they include an evaluative dimension which links body to character; in the Westcentric mind, this privileges the category of white Caucasian bodies over all others. To the West, black Africa consequently becomes the necessary opposite. The meanings attributed starting with the 19th century to racial categories included value judgments about beauty, intellect, morality, emotionality, sexuality, etc., and the pseudoscientific consideration of the physical characteristics of the human body as signs serving as a basis for classification led to epistemic and eventually ontic conclusions. Echoing Hume and Kant, Hegel takes those conclusions to their utmost implications in *The Philosophy of History* (1837) when deducing from Africa's alleged lack of writing systems the absence of reason and memory and, consequently, the lack of history and humanity. Thus Africa comes to signify to the Westcentric mind the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit.

Like the 19th century constructions of difference from which they derive, the more politically-correct contemporary racist images of non-whites continue to employ an essentialist, qualitative assessment. Broadly speaking, such representations may take two main forms<sup>39</sup>: there are those that define difference in purely negative terms and those that celebrate difference from a white norm, most often in the form of primitivism. In primitivist discourse, the non-white other is seen as closer to nature, more authentic and less contaminated by modern industrial society: a noble savage. Like many discourses on women, primitivism as well sees the racial other as more spiritual, intuitive, physical, sensual, as well as less rational and sophisticated. Since such definitions of non-whites are produced via sets of binary oppositions, the counterparts to the qualities attributed to people of color – rationality, enterprise, suppression of emotion – are consequently assumed to be characterise whiteness.

Hence in Westcentric discourses of race white functions as the unmarked category – and the structure of Westcentric discourse “secretes the idea of white supremacy.”<sup>40</sup> The psychological logic of black-and-white binarism operates, as Peter McLaren explains,

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<sup>39</sup> David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1994), 52.

<sup>40</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and Politics of Difference* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 157.

through the processes of splitting and projection: “the center expels its anxieties, contradictions and irrationalities onto the subordinate term, filling it with the antithesis of its own identity; the other, in its very alienness, simply mirrors and represents what is deeply familiar to the center, but projected outside of itself.”<sup>41</sup> Whiteness, the absence of color, therefore comes to signify the norm of humanity. Yet as one explores racial representations in awareness of their binary oppositional logic, one eventually comes to question the implicit centrality of whiteness, which reveals itself to be a politically constructed category parasitic on blackness.<sup>42</sup>

Blackness as opposed to whiteness (and other human colors) is usually seen as a signifier of race, but it can also function as a reference to ethnicity. In fact, scholars have shown that race refers to the categorization of people, while ethnicity has to do with group identification.<sup>43</sup> This means that the African-American or Asian-American communities, which are basically described from the outside in racial terms, identify themselves from within in rather ethnic terms. While American culture encapsulates the idea of race, its fabrication and its challenges, it can also be described in ethnic terms— in the sense of a “symbolic ethnicity,”<sup>44</sup> defined as a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation. In fact, ethnic origin renders a sense of the individual belonging to an original community that race fails to convey. Indeed, although the African-American and Asian-American communities were originally distinguished based on a racial criterion, they exhibit several main features considered to be specific to an ethnic group:<sup>45</sup> having a common proper name to signify a presumed essence of the community; a myth (an imaginal, not experiential representation) of common ancestry, including the idea of a common origin in time and place, which offers the community a sense of kinship; more or less contrived memories of a common past, including heroes, events, and their commemoration, providing a sense of communal history; one or more elements of common culture, which usually include religion, customs, language and the arts, constituting the more visible appearance of an ethnic community; finally, a sense of

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<sup>41</sup> Peter McLaren, “White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism,” *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994), 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Werner Sollors, “Who Is Ethnic?” *Ethnicity*, ed. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 221.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-7.

solidarity within the population, which keeps the boundaries of the group together.

To make a step beyond such racial and ethnic definitions, it is becoming clear in contemporary times that, as a meaningful criterion of human identification, race does not exist. When one speaks of the Caucasian race, the Negroid race or the Mongoloid race, one speaks in metaphors. Thus talk of race can be distressing for people who talk of culture seriously<sup>46</sup> because “where ‘gross differences’ of morphology are correlated with ‘subtle differences’ of temperament, belief, and intention – it works as an attempt at a metonym for culture; and it does so only at the price of biologizing what *is* culture, or ideology.”<sup>47</sup> That does not mean that contemporary language and thinking are no longer imbued with ideas of race deriving from the pseudoscience of the 18th and 19th centuries. Race has become as such a trope of irreducible, qualitative difference between groups which also happen to have fundamentally opposed economic interests, and serves “the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application.”<sup>48</sup>

This arbitrariness actually derives from the fact that ethnicity or race do not exist as a signified of cultural discourse. In *Preface to Blackness*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. highlights a fact so evident that it is often neglected: black literature is ultimately a verbal art like any other and, consequently, its blackness is not a material object or event, but a metaphor,<sup>49</sup> a vehicle for a highly ideologized content. Thus, blackness, like whiteness, is not a signified, but a signifier; it does not have an essence of its own but is defined by a network of semiotic relations that form a particular discourse.

Furthermore, the structure of oppositions on which the concept of race is based is, as Saussure has shown, the mechanism of any language: white opposed to black (but also to yellow and red), Greek opposed to Barbaric, Jew opposed to Gentile (but also to Arab); yet this is a structure the realisation of which is, at best, problematic and, at worst, impossible, notes A. Appiah. As one

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” 35.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Louis Jr. Gates, “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1979), 66.

comes to understand the workings of the racial concept embodied in this semiotic system of oppositions, one realizes the impossibility of tracing it back to referents. The truth, announces A. Appiah, is that “there are no races; there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us. The evil that is done is done by the concept.”<sup>50</sup> Actually, what is missed through a focus on the meaning of race is not exactly reality, as A. Appiah proclaims, but semiosis, the very realization of race as a differential, dynamic sign. The races and ethnicities of the world are ideologized communities of discourse rather than of biology or culture.

While one may have gained an awareness of the ideological inscriptions of racial and ethnic boundaries and may have come to see their permeability, racialised subjects did not take on to obliterate these inscribed differences; quite the contrary, the inscription of the African or Asian voice in American and, by extension, Western culture has preserved those cultural differences and has undertaken to re-signify them. If authors accepted, more or less voluntarily, the challenge of Westcentric discourse, they also took on the weight of its premises, as illustrated by the following anecdote: in 1915, Edmond Laforest, a member of the Haitian literary movement *La Ronde*, stood upon a bridge, tied a Larousse dictionary around his neck, and jumped off.<sup>51</sup> This tragic gesture plays in reverse the initial move of the Other, jumping out of the ocean of Westcentric discourse with a Larousse around their neck. In the end, the heavy weight of the prescriptions of race and ethnicity inscribe boundaries that our current physical and mental mobility might be expected to surpass. As nowadays one is increasingly aware of the relativity of such inscriptions and free to change one’s place at ease, borders are presumed to be erasable. In a world where one’s identity has become less centric and more mobile, racial and ethnic boundaries could potentially melt into an all-accepting awareness of our heterogeneous shared humanity. Yet mobility tends to re-establish boundaries by continuously signifying on the domestic and the foreign, home and abroad, self and Other; thus, the same or other borders are highlighted, repositioned, multiplied, reinstated and/or crossed. Nevertheless, in a world of mobile selves, any category of human identification, including race constitutes just one boundary among many.

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

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