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A Little Black Magic

**S**ocial constructionism continues to rack up rhetorical victories vis-à-vis contemporary identity politics and the encompassing culture wars. Its heuristic power is undeniable, its foundational presuppositions ubiquitous. This anti-essentialist position serves as dogma, *doxa*, and even hardwired habitus, despite the fact that its social hegemony is not more than a couple generations old. No matter, hoist the flag and cue the marching band, public displays of identificatory deconstructionism—specifically racial deconstructions—are the order of the day. So much so, in fact, that some recently retooled versions of sociobiology avoid explicitly invoking race at all, even and especially when arguing for genetic explanations of group differences.

There was little overt reference to race in, say, 1994's controversial *The Bell Curve*, which only made it all the more useful to unabashedly hereditarian raciologists of the Arthur Jensen and William Shockley persuasion. *The Bell Curve* exemplified a culturalization of race, an ethnicization of race thinking, that clearly still trucked in—more powerful for its Trojan-horsed sublimations—genetic notions of race in decidedly nonracial idioms. An explicit invocation of race

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would have been far too predictable, too retro, too easily dismissed as racism proper.

Even when *The Bell Curve's* arguments get revamped and more explicitly reracialized for the twenty-first century, these redemptively biological formulations just defang themselves with perfunctory claims about racial genetics' ultimate irrelevance for public policy.<sup>1</sup> Race is real, they argue, but that really doesn't matter. In an age of social constructionism, it seems, even neo-eugenics must bow to its analytical status as lone hermeneutical superpower. However, at the same time that genetics-based start-up companies unequivocally champion the view that "race is a social construction" on their Web sites and in their glossy brochures, they simultaneously sell genetic answers to laypeople's questions about African origins and ancestors—a racialized version of the proverbial cake, had and summarily eaten, too.

Clearly, there is something about the connection between race and affect that social constructionist challenges may not necessarily short-circuit—or even address. The rhetorical avoidance of race does not automatically buttress its antiessentialist cause. In fact, taking away race's vocal chords, the acoustic concreteness of its explicit bark, does not mean that one has defused its bite. If anything, race becomes more compelling in silence, when unspoken—as "tactility and distraction" more than explicit thematic, taking advantage of what Michael Taussig calls "a very different apperceptive mode, the type of flitting and barely conscious peripheral vision perception unleashed with great vigour by modern life."<sup>2</sup> When race and racism work best, we don't even think to talk about them; they cannot really be seen. We noddingly eschew any and all public policy implications.

In an attempt to highlight race's conspicuous falsehoods, some full-fledged deconstructionists argue that letting go of race as a salient social and individual category is the precondition for ending racism in practice. Socio-cultural constructions have real productive force, they say, a social power that must be defused before racialized minorities can ever accept the glories and privileges of full citizenship. Such *hard* versions of constructionism work for the cultural Left and the cultural Right, for extremists and moderates alike. In our social constructionist world, even the most unapologetic racist can be found arguing that races don't really exist. Here, one can cite the likes of Leo Felton, New England's famous "black white supremacist," a biracial love child of the 1960s who hid his black father's existence from fellow Nazi skinheads while committing antiblack hate crimes with ravenous abandon. Felton refuses to reduce the whiteness he feels inside,

the whiteness of his soul, to any narrowly biologized definition of black identity predicated on America's one-drop rule of hypodescent. Race is not biology, he says. It is not about the body at all. To ground his case, Felton uses the esoteric and Nazi-friendly work of Nietzschean Ulick Varange. "We attain now," Varange writes, "to the grand formula for the 20th century outlook on Race: *Race is a horizontal differentiation of men*. The materialism of the 19th century, confusing race with anatomy, regarded Race as a vertical differentiation of men."<sup>3</sup> Taking his cue from Varange's 1948 formulation, Felton disconnects racial identity from anatomy and uses that space to fold his unbrown body into a debiologized notion of white privilege. Felton's example indicates that divorcing race from genetic determinism does not inevitably inoculate society from bigoted, racist oppression—even the seemingly internalized and self-inflicted kind.

To appreciate just how denigrated and hollow race has truly become, one need only recognize that electoral politicians seem to be the folks most unselfconsciously and consistently invoking it these days, usually giving lip service to its continued value with platitudes about mosaics and melting pots and patchwork quilts where every single color is vitally important, particularly come election time. They have no patience for utopian theories of "planetary humanism."<sup>4</sup> Of course, that is only because politicians are greedily pragmatic about such matters, hitching their rhetorical reins to the most obvious thoroughbreds—even when constructionists might advise them, counterintuitively, that the carts themselves really do all the actual pulling.

Many scholars use the term *postraciality* to mark this antiessentialist and hyperconstructionist moment, a term that privileges identificatory deconstruction over and above any other heuristic project. All roads lead to the dissolved racial subject, and even Gayatri Spivak has recanted her former articulation of strategic forms of essentialist praxis. Racial Americana, I would argue, is something like the flipside to academia's current postracial zeitgeist—its orthogonal off-ramp, carrying us to a place where racial deconstruction is less heuristic finish line than anxious starting block. It parses race as one of the nation-state's fundamental constitutive elements, inextricably central to future understandings of how biopolitical, nanopolitical, and necropolitical strategies constrain the hopes and dreams of national citizenries. This is a biopolitics that flags phenotype as final arbiter of hierarchical difference, categorizing and codifying bodies along a continuum of recognizable somatic privilege.<sup>5</sup> It means a nanopolitics mining the human

genome for invisible racial solidities and causal absolutes, for submolecular answers to visual social inequalities.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the necropolitical impulse to control and determine life's ultimate death, thereby consolidating claims on social control and sovereignty, might help us to better explain death row's dark-hued tint.<sup>7</sup> In each of these instances, race becomes a powerful and necessary frame for thinking "the body in pain,"<sup>8</sup> both individual bodies and the collective body politic.

Racial Americana, therefore, is skeptical of postraciality, cynical even, and in this sense is explicitly in dialogue with the notion of a Pax Americana, a phrase ambivalently marking/countermarking the country's period of ostensible peace after World War II—a peace belied by overt wars in Korea and Vietnam, by covert military actions in Latin America, by structural violences against the struggling poor, and by ever impending nuclear annihilation. Racial Americana, likewise, underscores academia's current phase of racial détente, an identificatory peace born of collective agreements among scholars about the need to transcend racial essentialisms at all costs, a high-ground response to Afrocentric excesses, white supremacist machinations, and the subtly quotidian nuances of "inferential racism."<sup>9</sup> However, each one of these specific configurations (Afrocentrism, white supremacy, and everyday, inadvertent raciology) mandates distinct analytical scaffolding for comprehension and transformation. By conflating these very different instantiations of racial ideology, an essentializing ethos can remain safely ensconced within adamantly antiessentialist projects—political projects most likely to falter at the nexus where an abstract antiessentialism meets the particularities of local difference.

*Americana* itself is usually glossed as a way to invoke, even celebrate, the folksy specificities of this country's historical, geographical, and material provincialisms: the Americanness of apple pie and small-town baseball, of what Ishmael Reed lampoons as "those jockey-dressed amulets on the Southern Lawn of America's consciousness."<sup>10</sup> This last example begins to hint at race's centrality to such quaint particularities, to the idiosyncrasies of a most "peculiar institution" and its aftermath. *Racial Americana* seeks to examine those aspects of Americanness that, like Reed's amulets, constitute American exceptionalism through the historical prism of racial animus, affect, and privilege. It is the Americana of everything from Ray Charles's soulful blues-strummed authenticities to Michael Jordan's tongue-extended slam-dunks (MJ), that bald-headed icon of post-racial American desire), from segregated housing markets to ethnic grocery

stores, from handmade Kwanzaa gift-giving to photographed black bodies limply hung from southern trees. Racial Americana emphasizes the inextricable linkages between race and nationhood, even and especially in a globalizing context wherein many theorists are sounding the death knell for both these kinds of “imagined communities.” It focuses on the symbiotic relationship between race and gender, a relationship specifically carved from the history of sexually vulnerable and exploited black bodies, the hazy and chattel-slaved distance between “mama’s baby and papa’s maybe.”<sup>11</sup>

As much as we might try, every single day it gets more difficult to escape the truths of racial Americana, to escape its sordid history. The more we squirm, the harder we fight, the tighter our chains seem to become. They are always with us, returning from repression at the very instant of their supposed dissolution. An attempt to theorize race in the beginnings of a new century might start with one of academia’s quintessential examples of racial Americana: the habitual invocation of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, black son of the New England Berkshires and fiery racial conscience for subsequent generations of Americans of all colors and classifications.

Du Bois is racial Americana personified, and we usually beckon Du Bois by rote, without even a second thought—some kind of race-based Rorschach response. Like a scholastic reflex, the invocation is purely psychomuscular: a tapping on the racial knee leads to an almost involuntary extension of the Du Boisian leg. It has all become second nature. This is not meant to disparage Du Bois—or those scholars who study his foundational work on race and racism. Du Bois is just a handy, evocative, and overdetermined example of the commonsensicalities that define racial Americana today: its taken-for-grantedness, its prefabbed architectonic footprints. And this is precisely the subject these special-issue contributors engage—an attempt to extend Du Boisian analysis into the strictures of late capitalism’s newest millennium, into its own inevitably exhausted collapse.

If Du Bois proved all too easily prophetic about the twentieth century and its colored lines, the beginnings of this newest century have spawned divergent pronouncements about the potential tomorrows of race relations and racial discourse in American society. Clearly, the Jim Crowed categories of black victims and white victimizers hardly seem up to the task of wringing complete social sense out of a nation-state where the highest-ranking African American judge is consistently hostile to any and all discussions of racial community; where the influx of workers from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean can be said to “brown” every single mem-

ber of the national citizenry; where the second conservative real-life Bush presidency boasts a much more racially diverse staff than a hyperliberal progressive Bartlett presidency depicted on network television's *The West Wing*; where Chinatowns fear the threat of gentrification just as adamantly as Harlems do; and where (thanks to a vocal multiracial movement) census taxonomies change faster than the tampered-with stock prices of Fortune 500 companies. But what kind of racial theorizing helps us to understand the differences within similarity that cloud our analytical engagements with the everyday realities and surrealities of racial reasoning? More than ever, we need to create new ways of understanding the social facts that underpin race (as belief system, as common sense, as pseudopatriotism, as interpersonal shortcut, as biological mythmaking) and what those underpinnings forewarn about the possible futures of social difference in the United States.

In this volume, contributors have been challenged to push beyond Du Bois, not because we have exhausted useful readings of his powerful prose, which we surely have not, but rather because he haunts us still, has never gone away: the perpetually chanted incantation that always already grounds authoritative claims about race making, claims that provide itineraries for portions of the social journey yet to come. But what does that future entail? Where do we go from here? And how much do we need the conjuring of Du Bois's ghost to get us there?

What might be most telling about this Du Bois-inflected charge, however, is that most of the contributors took the mandate so seriously that they moved beyond Du Bois altogether, moved beyond his very invocation. For many of the authors in this volume—Tess Chakkalakal on African American anthologies, Nichole Rustin on Mary Lou Williams's musical masculinities, Donald Robotham on cosmopolitan utopianism—there is nary a mention of this canonical figure. Certainly not in the fiction of Brackette Williams or the poetic manifesto of Elizabeth Alexander. Most of the scholars offer no direct invocation of Du Bois at all, which is less dismissal than measured nonfetishization. For there are far more fetishes to be summoned in this land of racial Americana, much more than simple Du Boisian rearticulation, and these scholars are determined to unmask such alternative incarnations: popularized recollections of the transatlantic slave trade; culture's debt to cloaked assumptions about race; Derrida's significance for discussions of Tupac Shakur and everyday racism; September 11's role in revising the character of contemporary cross-racial coalitions. All of these moves—from contributors who define themselves as anthropologists, sociologists,

literary theorists, performance studies scholars, linguists, novelists, poets, and visual artists—bespeak an interdisciplinary ethos organized around the prospect of transcending Du Bois so as to dwell in the immanence of racial irreducibility, an irreducibility tethered less to biological determinism than to an adamant refusal of make-believe transcendence, of a priori racial transcendentalism.

Not inconsequentially, the genre differences between and among these entries are another rather significant part of this story. The volume includes ethnographic fiction, memoir, poetry, art, and autobiography, not to mention both academic and popular essays. Indeed, racial Americana doesn't just allow for such generic eclecticism; it demands them. Anything else would risk losing sight of this mobile and protean category, artificially boxing it up into a singularly impoverished presentational form.

The scholars in this volume highlight several important attributes of racial Americana. For one, they refuse a certain localization of social analysis. Racial Americana is about so much more than American exceptionalism, and it is comprehensible only within a larger global context of deterritorialized identities and transnational flows. With invocations of slave ships and imperialist unilateralisms, of Haitian foremothers and internationally circulating Norton readers, these scholars demand that we understand American race relations within a decidedly international framework. To think racial Americana is to think about racial formations that circulate all over the world—even when their details morph and mutate with every border crossing.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, this is no zero-sum game, where race's centrality is predicated on concomitant marginalizations of class, sexuality, religion, nationality, and so on. We are not talking about some inflexible notion of racial reasoning that would imagine gender to be static and utterly beside the intellectual point. Racial Americana demands a blackness that is gender-conscious, variously contextualized, and willing to view culture as an utterly political and politicized site, but it also recognizes the dangers of playing with racial fire in the first place—its burns that never vanish, its quick-paced volatilities and spontaneous conflagrations, its cannibalistic propensity to consume everything in its path.

Recognizing the hazards of this discursive landscape, *Racial Americana's* contributors use everything at their disposal—self-reflexivity, popular culture, feminism, political economy, psychoanalysis, and more—to imagine race as still decidedly alive and well. Not in a lazy and disingenuously genetic

sense, but in a way that admits our inability to fully outrun this monstrous creation. In fact, maybe this monster isn't even alive at all, not really, not in the way we might think. Instead, *Racial Americana* imagines the realities of race as much more like the walking dead, active but hollowed out, human and thinglike at one and the same time. How else do we comprehend a schizophrenic race that simultaneously disavows biology and searches for nanopolitical anchorings? One that eschews racial language to argue an even more absolutist and essentialist case?

No, race is not alive, not anymore. We've killed it, deconstructed it to death, social-constructionized it out of fully animate existence. But it is hardly that easy. Instead, our beast has risen from the dead and haunts our every waking hour. It is the bogeyman in our collective social closet, make-believe but all the more frightening for its irreality, its ghostly intangibility. We can't kill racial reasoning with human genomes or social constructionism because, in some very fundamental ways, we killed race long ago,<sup>13</sup> and its death is part of what plagues us today, keeps us all up at night. We can't find the corpse, and there still seem to be sightings everywhere—of both its waking life and its strangely uncanny demise.

What we have now, what *Racial Americana* highlights, is a zombified notion of race, one that we constantly put to work, much like Zora Neale Hurston describes the matter in her performative ethnography of Haitian voodoo.<sup>14</sup> Zombies are occupational slaves, she says, and they do all the labor we ourselves would never want to undertake. These walking dead are not just commodity fetishes (in the Marxian sense) but a commodified form of death itself, slaving away for the masters who fear their very own Frankensteinian fiends, masters who would feebly wish their creations off into illusory oblivion—that is, had they not already grown overly dependent on them for some much-needed surplus value.

The task, then, is not to find out why and how race's telltale heart continues to beat. That may already be conceding far too much. Instead, racial Americana might trade in deconstruction for exorcism, for an analytic of the séance, a starting point that imagines the dead to have agency—even if only as the sacred sacrifices we make to the gods of collective social reproduction. There is an interiority to the thingness of the corpse, an animation still, and wrestling with the realities of race in a self-consciously post-Du Boisian and post-postracial moment entails taking that internality seriously. It means talking with the dead, channeling them, and not sorely underestimating their social effectivity. These dead walk, talk, struggle, and strain. In so



doing, they also chain us to the scene of our past crimes. If we've killed race, yet it still moves, real analysis might take more than social deconstruction—the analytical equivalent of feebly petitioning the dead corpse that chokes us with an incredulous last-breath protest: “But you're dead. You're supposed to be dead. You're not real. This can't be re—ugh.”

To escape the clutches of our own cultural creations, we need new incantations, new charms and southern amulets, new spells for countering the powerful magics of pseudoscience and social constructionism. *Racial Americana* is a small attempt to create this alternative magic, and the pieces in this volume represent various paths along that variegated and mystical roadway, alternative tactics for breaking death's ironclad choke hold. This counterspell will demand all the writerly weapons at our disposal—poetry, fiction, collage, memoir, essay, research report, philosophical treatise, and even the deeply felt anecdote—to cobble together a rendering of place, power, and history that can take race seriously without accepting it at face value.

Fine, race is not real, but that only makes it more powerful, more difficult to deny. Therefore, our critical goal is not simply to expose race's enabling fictions; we must also find ways to rewrite them—with new plot twists and heroes and dramatic narrative cliffhangers. It is not enough to cry “fiction” in a crowded classroom, not if the fiction in question still resonates for students as profoundly true-to-life. Our task is a bit more performative than that. It entails teasing out fiction's productive force, finding where its power lies, and determining what keeps bringing our dead things back to palpable life. *Racial Americana* offers a group of social critics and scholars trying to rethink race while unthinking it in the selfsame instant. That is a special kind of magic indeed—contradictory, paradoxical, self-deconstructed. Only in America! But this is a racial America that's all around the world, an imperialist zombie that might just be circulating the kernels of its own global undoing with every new escape from its coffin.

### Notes

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- 1 I am thinking of Vincent Sarich and Frank Miele, *Race: The Reality of Human Differences* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004).

- 2 Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 145.
- 3 Ulick Varange, *Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics* (Sausalito, CA: Noontide, 1948), 300.
- 4 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 327.
- 5 For a discussion of Foucauldian biopolitics and its links to questions of sovereignty and the nation-state, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Also, for a specific look at the nanopolitics of race, see Gilroy, *Against Race*. For an argument specifically organized around biopolitics' ties to state racisms, see Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 6 For a discussion of biopolitics that marks time with the nanopolitical, see Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 7 See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003).
- 8 See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 9 See Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," in *The Media Reader*, ed. M. Alvarado and J. Thompson (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 532.
- 10 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 216.
- 11 See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64–81.
- 12 See Kamari Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
- 13 Here, I am thinking of the long line of antiessentialist race work, from the older efforts of people like Frederick Douglass and Franz Boas to the recent research by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin—as well as more recent scientific findings by Ning Yu and Alan Templeton.
- 14 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990).