Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History

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How does it feel to be a problem? . . . a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else . . . It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me . . . up in the hills of New England . . . In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out of their world by a vast veil.[1]

"Dirty nigger!" Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"

I came into the world anxious to have it yield to me the meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to be at the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Enclosed within that crushing objecthood, I begged the Other for recognition. Its liberating look, running over my body, suddenly freed it of differentiating marks, endowing me once more with the agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restores me to it. But just as I rebounded almost to the summit, I stumbled, and the others by movements, attitudes, glances fixed me, as one fixes a photograph in a developing bath. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I exploded. And finally, here are the fragments reunited by another me.[2]

THOUGH SEPARATED BY AN OCEAN IN DISTANCE and nearly half a century in time, Du Bois and Fanon articulate strikingly similar descriptions of their discovery of a racial self. It is important to note that theirs is in fact a *discovery* of race, for their "race" inheres neither in biology nor in culture but must be summoned to consciousness by their encounters in social space and historical time. To Du Bois, this racially polarized world "yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world." It is "a double-consciousness," he writes, a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes

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[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903), 1–2.

[2] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, 1952), 88. Please note that my translation is a modified rendering of *Black Skin, White Masks: The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World*, Charles Lam Markmann, trans. (New York, 1967). I am indebted to Jean-Claude Zancarini for his invaluable assistance in translating this passage.

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of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[3] To Fanon, self-consciousness is not double but multiply fragmented. The problem begins with his very corporeal existence: "The Black has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the White." "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema." It is difficult to compose a self, a physical body in nature, space, and time. There is "a historico-racial schema," wherein the white Other creates his image of the Negro from "a thousand details, anecdotes, stories." Finally, there are the encounters in the outer world, like Fanon's with the little girl who called him "nigger," the "racial epidermal schema." Thus assaulted from all sides, he was made not a double but "a triple person": "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors."[4]

These stories play powerfully on the cultural and perhaps personal memories of anyone who has experienced that special alienation that separates one not only from the world—its resources, its means of production, its fellowship and sociability—but from one's very own being. Although each of these narratives is in some sense idiosyncratic, representing the experience of black males of a particular class and political orientation, their form and essential content are nonetheless part of a more general pattern found in the autobiographies and memoirs of countless black men and women of diverse origins. For Anna J. Cooper or Ned Cobb, no less than Du Bois or Fanon, there comes some traumatic confrontation with the Other that *fixes* the meaning of one's self before one even has had the opportunity to *live* and *make* a self more nearly of one's own choosing. This confrontation with a racialized self may not appear in dramatic street encounters but in the quiet stories of one's parents—or in their silences—about a painful past.[5] Indeed, the latter are probably more common, more accurate representations of such racial learning than the dramatic vignettes found in authors such as Du Bois and Fanon.

Still, these powerful, even archetypal, narratives remind us how deeply impersonal racism is, how automatically, unreflectively, race and racism are learned, but they also reveal how strong and tenacious is the struggle to be freed of its imprisoning constructs. Du Bois sought to merge the two selves severed by his racializing encounters into "a truer and better self." Reuniting the fragments of his exploded self into what he called "another me," Fanon sought again to be an unmarked part of human existence; he sought acceptance as a contributor to the common struggles, aspirations, and destiny of humankind.

[3] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3. For an interesting discussion of the formative experience of Du Bois's childhood in Great Barrington, see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race* (New York, 1993).

[4] Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 89–90.

[5] African-American autobiographies abound with such moments when a member of the older generation falls silent about racializing encounters in the past but in ways that communicate much about that past. It is a theme that may be well worth investigating more systematically. For examples of stories and silences, see Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940; rpt. edn., New York, 1980), 11, 15–16, 20–23; Thordis Simonsen, ed., *You May Plow Here: The Narratives of Sara Brooks* (New York, 1986), 63; Gloria Wade-Gayles, *Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Woman's Journey Home* (Boston, 1933), 2; Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892; rpt. edn., New York, 1988), 94–99; and Nate Shaw [Ned Cobb], *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, Theodore Rosengarten, comp. (New York, 1974), 8, 27–34, 83, *passim*.

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I would like to focus attention on this problem and attempt to delineate its problematic because it is so ubiquitous in African-American life and letters, because I think it offers potential clues about how to think about the problem of race and racism, and because it articulates with our more general concerns about how history should be written—and made. I use marking here in a doubled sense—as the act of representation that is the marking of race and as the act of inscription that is the marking of history. In both senses, this marking pervades not only the dramatic and global phenomena of our world but is part of the "ordinary" events of everyday life and is perpetrated by "ordinary" people. In all of this, it joins issues about the philosophy and practice of our craft, about the intellectual and formal politics of our times, and about the lived experience of a generation seeking to evade the curse of modernity—the alienation of work from life.

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE DIVERSE DIMENSIONS of our inquiry is captured best, perhaps, by Du Bois. Describing in *Dusk of Dawn* his intellectual odyssey of fifty-odd years, he noted that upon his graduation from Harvard in the 1890s, he had thought of "[t]he Negro problem [as] a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation." Consequently, he decided to address the problem by studying "the facts, any and all facts, . . . and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization which I could." But soon,

> there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored . . . a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord's wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution* office . . . I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking . . . I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work.[6]

Du Bois's turning away—which involved also a turning from the task of explanation—is emblematic perhaps of our own turning; for despite the many important and seminal works on the problem of race in American life, scholars—in historical as well as other social science and humanistic studies—have yet to unravel the mysteries that events like the Sam Hose lynching pose. Much like Du Bois, we, too, are stopped in our tracks, "turned back" and "turn[ed] aside" from our work by the sheer incomprehensibility of racist phenomena such as these. One result of this turning, it has been noted, is that racism is often treated as if it were somehow outside normal historical and social processes, as if "trans-

[6] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York, 1940), 51, 58, 67.

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historical," or epiphenomenal.[7] Consequently, even as the concept of race becomes historicized, our notions of racism become naturalized.

In fact, of course, Du Bois did not actually turn away from his confrontation with race, either in thought or praxis, either then or later. Instead, within a lifetime stretching from slavery emancipation to the apogee of the Civil Rights Movement, Du Bois tested, intellectually and practically, a whole range of approaches to the problem of explaining race. Indeed, his usefulness to us today may lie in the fact that the various paradigms by which he sought to explain racism—idealism, materialism, the psychological, and the cultural—are all approaches that in one way or another still inform contemporary historical scholarship.[8] Although each of these approaches has made some useful contributions to our understanding of racial phenomena, each approach also fosters a mode of analysis or set of assumptions, often unstated, about human behavior that ultimately risks undermining the efficacy or comprehensiveness of the explanations offered.

For example, the substantive findings of research into the intellectual history of racism are often intriguing and useful. At its best, such research can demonstrate the temporality of ideas and their roots in specific historical processes or conjunctures; it can illuminate roads not taken and the limits of contemporaneous imaginations.[9] But, even at its best, this approach, directly or indirectly, tends also to imply that racism is largely a consequence of bad ideas, a product of thought; as such, one can trace it to its source in some intellectual wrong turn, perhaps in philology, or nineteenth-century historicism, or the Aryan myth. All too often, however, the causal links between ideas and material phenomena are ambiguous and ill defined. Do racist ideas merely rationalize behavior or cause it? And what are the mechanisms for social change? Do good ideas inevitably chase out the bad? Is change simply a matter, as Du Bois put it, of showing the world through scientific investigation that it was wrong about race? Du Bois abandoned any such illusions before the end of the last century, and it is doubtful that any serious historian or social scientist would embrace a purely idealist position in the waning years of the present century; nonetheless, it often appears as an unstated assumption underpinning much of our popular and academic discourse about racial matters.

The economistic or materialist paradigms are perhaps the most familiar and easily grasped by lay opinion. In contrast to the fuzziness of idealism, they appear hard-headed, with feet planted firmly on the ground. Actually, these paradigms

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[7] This point has been made most eloquently by Barbara Jeanne Fields in "Race and Ideology in American History," *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds. (New York, 1982), 143–77; and again in "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review*, no. 181 (1990): 95–118.

[8] For a more detailed discussion of the historiography sketched below, see my "Explaining Race in American History," unpublished paper prepared for the Conference on the State of Historical Writing in North America, San Marino, Italy, June 5–11, 1995. For a critical discussion of Du Bois's various proposals for combating racism, see Thomas C. Holt, "The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940," *American Quarterly*, 42 (June 1990): 301–23.

[9] For one of the better examples of the genre, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

embrace a number of very different—sometimes conflicting—explanatory schemes, each arguing in one way or another that racism is a function of economic drives, of either exploitation or fear of competition. But such accounts tend to turn on the assumption of a rational calculation of ends in relation to means, with the consequence that any purely materialist explanation soon confronts the inexplicable excesses of racial phenomena, their seeming irrationality. Indeed, it was precisely such an excess that Du Bois confronted with the Sam Hose lynching. To kill an economic competitor or make an example of a recalcitrant worker was one thing; to mutilate him—to exhibit the grisly trophies of that mutilation in a grocery store—appears to be something else altogether.

It was this excess that led Du Bois to muse about the possible psychological sources of racial antagonism. Although a consistent theme in his lifetime of writings was that race was linked to the unfolding of the global structures of power and privilege that the rise of capitalism had wrought, he also recognized that "in the fight against race prejudice, we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge."[10] Like many historical scholars to follow, however, Du Bois invoked the psychological paradigm rather than subject its explanatory mechanisms to rigorous examination or elaboration. All too often, such attempts at explanation are less than rigorous theoretically and less than useful in determining how to combat racist phenomena. Those who take Freudian theory most literally are especially prone to naturalize racist behavior; that is, generalized over time and space, the presumably innate processes of child development come to function much like biological explanations.[11] Thus, at a time when we have finally come to see race as socially constructed rather than biological, we are asked to reverse field and explain racism in terms of innate human processes.

In what I have called the cultural paradigm, racism is traced to some aspect of the specific cultural or social formation in a given society or to the evolution of society as a whole. Racism is seen to be embedded in a social formation that is materially, culturally, and historically specific.[12] But even in this work there is often vagueness about the meaning or location of its key concept—"culture." How is culture best defined, as a way of life, as symbols, as artifacts, as beliefs, or as all of the above? Are the practices and beliefs of the elite or the non-elite most salient? Like the other models discussed above, this approach also fails to locate the tie that binds the individual to the social order or to explain how social change

[10] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 296.

[11] One example of the kind of approach I am criticizing here is that of Joel Kovel, whose work has been influential among historians and other students of race. Kovel traces racism's origins in part to pathologies in the unconscious and/or conscious minds of individuals, arguing that the "natural" association of blackness with dirt and excrement together with sexual anxieties stemming from our childhood development—if unresolved—will be projected onto black people as objects of fantasy and invention, and that this helps explain racist impulses. Despite his gestures toward relating these purely individual traumas to the larger social and cultural order, the basic form of Kovel's explanation is a kind of *metaphorical* extension of individual, psychological phenomena to the social level. Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York, 1971), 46–105.

[12] Best examples of such approaches are Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1980); and Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (London, 1986).

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occurs. Is it a matter of a hegemonic elite that tells the majority what to think and what to value? Or is it popular spasms among the envious masses, seeking revenge or scapegoats? How is racism's reproductive cycle to be aborted?

Nothing that I have said is intended to suggest that the best work within these paradigms has not produced valuable contributions to our understanding of race in particular or history in general. Admittedly, for the purposes of this analysis, I have somewhat artificially isolated approaches that are more often used conjointly. I would argue, nonetheless, that those inadequacies cannot be compensated for by a salad bowl approach—say two parts job competition and one part psyche predisposition—which leaves the linkage between social context and individual actor unresolved. I am convinced that only this linkage can explain to us Sam Hose's burned and mutilated body or the more general problem of marking elaborated by Du Bois and Fanon. And, for us, no less than for Du Bois, this is not merely an academic issue: our failure to explain leaves a void filled by those who would see racism as an innate quality of people born white—"white devils"—or by others who see the stubborn persistence of racism as the natural distinction of the haves over the have-nots in a struggle of the fittest, a struggle in which the victims are held responsible for their victimization. Given these stakes, the task is truly an urgent one.

Having found our problem sketched in its sharpest outlines in Du Bois's writings, perhaps we can return to them for one final insight into the possible sources for a solution. Du Bois's analysis of the causes of the race riot in East St. Louis in 1917 brings into sharp focus his intuitions about the social construction of race. A war-induced boom, he writes, had produced a historic conjunction in that city of northern capitalists, eastern poor white labor, and southern impoverished blacks. The latter two groups might have logically found common cause and community in their basically similar relation to capital, but instead white labor came to see its interests and itself as somehow fundamentally different from those of black labor. "They saw something at which they had been taught to laugh and make sport; they saw that which the heading of every newspaper column, the lie of every cub reporter, the exaggeration of every press dispatch, and the distortion of every speech and book had taught them was a mass of despicable men, inhuman; at best, laughable; at worst, the meat of mobs and fury."[13]

Envisioned here is a subtle interaction between various levels and terrains of human experience. First, white and black workers had been *brought* to their fateful confrontation in East St. Louis in response to choices made in a context of global economic and political forces. Second, white workers had already been prepared to *interpret* that encounter in racial terms by various media of communication—newspapers, books, political speeches, and, one might add, stories and songs—that told them who black workers were. But, ultimately, theirs was not merely a matter of overdetermined responses; they had a choice. Some inner need or disposition made possible the transition from laughing at "a mass of despicable men" to treating them as "the meat of mobs and fury."

Although Du Bois does not push his inquiry as far as identifying what that inner

[13] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Work and Wealth," in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920; rpt. edn., New York, 1921), 88.

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need or disposition was, his analysis implies a global vision in which issues of world economy are related directly to issues of ordinary everyday life, to issues of representation, and thus necessarily to issues of self-consciousness and identity. In a discussion of the roots of World War I in colonialism and imperialism, he makes these connections more explicit.

> One cannot ignore the extraordinary fact that a world campaign beginning with the slave-trade and ending with the refusal to capitalize the word "Negro," leading through a passionate defense of slavery by attributing every bestiality to blacks and finally culminating in the evident modern profit which lies in degrading blacks,—all this has unconsciously trained millions of honest, modern men into the belief that black folk are sub-human.[14]

Implicated in this statement is a very complex and profound problem of social analysis, what I will call "the levels problem," that is, the problem of establishing the continuity between behavioral explanations sited at the individual level of human experience and those at the level of society and social forces. The fundamental problem articulated here is one of linkages. The everyday acts of name calling and petty exclusions are minor links in a larger historical chain of events, structures, and transformations anchored in slavery and the slave trade. Together, they nourish the racial knowledge that produces and sustains the mentalities or subjectivities capable of engaging in the brutal, wholesale destruction of other human beings.

Du Bois's analysis presupposes the foundational issue of human subjectivity: first, how one comes to know and define a self and then, how that self is consolidated or transformed as it acts in the world and is acted upon. These questions are fundamental to any analysis of human thought and behavior; and, to address them, historians—no less than other analysts of human life—need an approach that bridges the global and the local, the societal and the individual. I believe some elements of that approach are offered by the concept of a study of everyday life and "everydayness." It is at this level, I will argue, that race is reproduced via the marking of the racial Other and that racist ideas and practices are naturalized, made self-evident, and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge. It is at this level that race is reproduced long after its original historical stimulus—the slave trade and slavery—have faded. It is at this level that seemingly rational and ordinary folk commit irrational and extraordinary acts. It is precisely at this level that Du Bois in his schoolyard or Fanon on a Parisian street was marked, marked in ways that both summarized and actuated the global historical processes of the worlds they inhabited. At this level is produced that chain of signifiers that end—as Du Bois suspected—with the pogrom at St. Louis or, three decades later, mass murder at Auschwitz.

"THE EVERYDAY" EMERGED AS A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT in that vital period separating World War I and the Holocaust, gained purchase within the social sciences during the postwar era, and, almost simultaneously, took renewed force and form in the French student-worker rebellion in France in 1968 and in the

[14] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Hands of Ethiopia," in *Darkwater,* 72–73.

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German academic and political movements that sought to come to grips with the national nightmare of Nazism. Not surprisingly, given these diverse origins and contexts, the concept of everydayness has come to evoke an array of meanings, references, and approaches. Often, it simply designates that part of human activity and consciousness left over after politics, wars, and the other big subjects and events have been addressed. It can be taken to refer to either cyclical, repeated phenomena, such as the *longue durée* patterns of weather and economics, or to aspects of the human life-cycle. It can mean the unexceptional, day-to-day arrangements and ordeals of individual existence, such as leisure, private life, or forms of passive resistance to authority. Temperamentally, it might be associated with what was once called "history from the bottom up," or the history of the "inarticulate." Methodologically, it, like some genres of social and cultural studies, seeks to ferret out sources for the experiences and voices of non-elites, of the popular and the relatively powerless.[15]

There is, however, another conceptual trajectory within this literature—rooted in some of its earliest formulations, though often appearing only faintly in many contemporary discussions—that is more directly relevant to our explorations of the problem of race and racism. It is a trajectory captured most succinctly by Leora Auslander in her forthcoming study of the role of consumption in fashioning modern French political identities:

> The challenge . . . is to simultaneously grasp the manifestations of the very large and abstract structures and transformations of the world in the small details of life; to re-capture people's expressions—in all media—of their experiences of those abstractions, while also attempting to understand the forces shaping the multiple grids mediating those expressions; and, finally, to analyze how concrete and mundane actions in the everyday may themselves transform the abstract structures of polity and economy.[16]

The crucial injunction here is not that we should privilege the study of everydayness over other aspects of human experience but, rather, elaborate the nexus between the remote or global levels of that experience and its immediate or micro-local expressions. The task of sorting out how these different levels of analysis are linked—that is, understanding how the large and "important" are articulated with and expressed through the small and "unimportant," and vice versa—requires that we explicate more precisely the relation between individual agency and structural frameworks, on the one hand, and that we conceptualize more clearly just how one's consciousness of self and other are formed, on the other.

The issue of understanding the formation of the human subject is clearly fundamental to such an inquiry and perhaps the least well investigated by historians. Among the diverse approaches to this question, I find Martin Heideg-

[15] This literature is vast, and I will not attempt to provide a bibliography here. Perhaps the practitioner best known to and most influential among American historians is Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall, trans. (Berkeley, Calif., 1984). For an example of de Certeau's influence among African-Americanists, see Robin Kelley, " 'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993): 75–112. (The approach discussed below is quite different from de Certeau's, however.)

[16] Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley, Calif., forthcoming, 1995), quoted by permission of the author.

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ger's exploration of the philosophical puzzle of existence a provocative and stimulating place to begin, especially for historians.[17] In the process of reengaging the age-old ontological problem of being, Heidegger elaborated a notion of "the everyday" and, through it, a painstaking epistemological reconstruction of how we come to know ourselves as conscious beings. In his inquiry, the everyday is merely part of the method of inquiry, an illustration and instrument of his chain of reasoning, but it underscores and demonstrates, nonetheless, the fact that conscious human selves are socially formed and revealed.[18] One of the primordial ways in which the self is knowable or realized—and thus one might say constituted—is through its interactions with everyday life, where other entities and other selves are encountered. The predominant mode of one's conscious living is within and through the physical "out-there" and in relation to the common mass of humanity. Moreover, through one's everyday encounters with existence, through one's consciousness of one's own mortality and selfhood, is disclosed something about the nature and limits of actual human existence. With these insights, Heidegger lays a theoretical basis for our understanding that human experience, motivations, and behaviors must ultimately be understood as grounded in social processes and framed by historical moments. Thus models of human thought and behavior deduced from the premise of an isolated individual—a constellation of emotions, psychology, material aspirations, or rather one whose behavior and motivations are reducible to those terms—are inadequate at best; at worst, simply false.

Any model of social action, moreover, must be historical. Historicity is crucial both in the sense of personal and collective memory and in terms of the constructs of the "non-self" that take shape within its space. Indeed, one cannot even conceptualize an individual consciousness, a self continuous from one time point to another, without a concept of history, of memory.[19] To think "I am" requires "I was," which needs in turn a narrative of "they" and/or "we."[20] Such narratives link the succession of events, experiences, and persons that constitute any self in any time-present, which is to say in one's consciousness. A self is knowable, then—even to itself—only in terms of its history. If this premise is true, it follows that one cannot explain human behavior and desire absent the social and historical contexts within which they are grounded. More specifically, one must seek explanations for the reproduction of racist belief and behavior not in

[17] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (San Francisco, 1962). I am aware that the recent exposure of Heidegger's complicity with Nazism has discouraged engagement with his work. For a student of racism to apply such a standard would be counterproductive, however, since so many of the world's great thinkers (Aristotle, Locke, Hegel, for example) held unsavory racial views. I would argue that works fundamental to our effort to comprehend issues like those raised here should be studied despite (and perhaps in some cases because of) their author's politics.

[18] I recognize that Heidegger's work is strictly a philosophical treatise that in no way claims to be an analysis of actual human societies, but his phenomenological method provides a virtual sociology of how subjectivity is formed, nonetheless. See esp. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 96, 152–54, 164.

[19] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 241. See also commentary by Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time,* rev. edn. (De Kalb, Ill., 1989), 182.

[20] In a different context but vividly expressive of the general point I wish to make here, Heidegger writes: "Only he who already understands can listen." *Being and Time,* 208.

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individual pathologies but in social formations at specific historical moments that shape and make both self and other knowable.

All of which brings us back to the original problem of conceptualizing the linkage between the social and the individual levels of existence. We return, however, armed with the knowledge that the individual self is already imbricated in the social—it being the condition of possibility for individual self-knowledge—and that the self is fashioned in social space, in relation to others, and in relation to historical time.

Henri Lefebvre, a pioneer in the sociology of the everyday, pushes us further.[21] The global and the everyday, which he calls the macro and micro levels of human experience, are interactive and mutually constituted, and neither takes causal priority over the other. At any *given* historical moment, the everyday has already been created within a determined global space, and global relations are already the product—at least in part—of everyday existence.[22] It is at the global level that human activity achieves its greatest efficacy and most enduring significance. It is at the level of the everyday that global phenomena are enacted. The everyday is "the living root of the social," he writes; it is where "social labor is organized," where "norms and images are elaborated."[23]

Major activities are born of germs contained in everyday practice, because it is at that level that the group and the individual can and must plan and organize their time and apply their means. A woman buying a pound of sugar, for example, has a doubled aspect: hers is at once a simple gesture but one within which are inscribed complex social relations.[24] Her action not only expresses but makes possible a global structure of imperialist politics and labor relations that racialize consumption as well as production. The analysis of such an act must not simply collapse the one level into the other, however, but begin with the recognition of their essential reciprocity. Power can only be *realized* at the level of everyday practice, and it is dependent—ultimately and inherently—on the reproduction of the relations, idioms, and the world-view that are its means of action. In short, the everyday is where macro-level phenomena—politics, economics, ideologies—are lived.

The two levels are mediated by material conditions, symbolic gestures, and discursive action; mediated, for example, by money and by language, each with its

[21] The following discussion is drawn primarily from the second volume of Lefebvre's three-volume work, full citations of which are: Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne: Introduction* (Paris, 1958); *Critique de la vie quotidienne: Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (Paris, 1961); and *Critique de la vie quotidienne: De la modernité au modernisme (pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)* (Paris, 1981).

[22] It is important, moreover, not to confuse the everyday with the merely popular or non-elite. Every institution, class, or power also has its "everyday"; it is a level of experience and analysis, not an aspect of social hierarchy. Thus Lefebvre writes of the state having its everyday in the bureaucracy, the army in the routines of peacetime, and science in its training regimes, conventions, and institutional milieu. Although the issues of hegemony and agency raised in studies of popular culture are salient here, too, the *quotidien* approach should not be reduced to what is merely a feature and not its essence. To confine the analysis of the everyday solely to a populist terrain risks portraying a dynamic and ever-changing relation as immutable and ahistorical. Rather, the analysis of social phenomena must explore the nexus between the everyday and the global, or what Lefebvre calls micro and macro sociological levels. Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 2: 47, 50–51, 142–46.

[23] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 2: 145.

[24] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 1: 66–67.

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own potential for being naturalized, fetishized, and thus rendered capable of obscuring and mystifying essential features of the original relationship. At the macro level, such phenomena can become abstract; at the micro level, ambiguous, even mystical. Thus Wall Street stock traders speak learnedly about an anthropomorphic "market" that fears, hopes, and desires such things as higher interest rates and government policies that beggar the poor. But when a more specific assignment of responsibility for recession or unemployment is called for, this singular market becomes an "invisible hand" made up of thousands of other hands acting in guileless unison.

Methodologically speaking, this means that one can neither proceed by simply aggregating the minutiae of human activity—the sociology of the *poubelle* (trash can), Lefebvre calls it—nor withdraw to the Olympian heights of abstraction.[25] Within everydayness, one finds relations of kin, neighbors, and allies elaborated and reproduced, while at more global levels, these same relations become cultural rules, territorial boundaries, and class solidarities or conflicts. Similarly, the conditions of possibility for intimacies like marriage, kinship, and social boundaries of all kinds are established by church, state, and economic arrangements. Any social analysis, therefore, must build on the mutual interdependence between these levels, must recognize their "conflictual, polyvalent, mobile, multiformed" relations.[26]

Neither level can be fully understood separate from the other. Privileging the macro level—"which would absolutely define the daily by the global"—yields atrophied, lifeless, passionless depictions and the incalculability that are not only the fated conditions of human existence but possibly essential resources in struggles for self-realization and defense. Isolating micro-level phenomena, on the other hand, renders human behavior simply unknowable.[27]

Knowability must commence by acknowledging and marking the areas of seeming incalculability in human behavior. And it is precisely in the everyday that one encounters *lived* contradictions and contingencies. One must think of the everyday, Lefebvre warns us, as at once "the modality for the empirical organization of human life" and a repertory of "representations which mask that organization."[28] Within this doubled aspect as modality and representation, he seems to suggest, one might discover means for a dialectical analysis of the structuring principles of the human condition and of social action. His image of structure intends to project dynamism rather than stasis, however. Structures are constituted of the mutable linkages between entities, processes, forces, and events, where the links are cultural elements—signs, symbols, images, proverbs, myths, and stories—that mediate the different parts of the whole.[29] However fragmentary, inaccurate, and incomplete, they form the information and memory—collective and individual—that blend into the material and imaginary furnishings of everyday life. They are nothing less than resources for living, the tools for shaping a world for good or ill.

[25] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 2: 49.
[26] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 2: 140–44, quote on 144.
[27] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 2: 143–44.
[28] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 2: 141.
[29] Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 2: 161, 288.

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Again, what all this suggests for the protocols of studying racism is that we look to the entities that mediate between the individual and his/her social life; that is, precisely to Du Bois's stories, songs, symbols, and myths by which people shape and reflect their being, their understanding of self and of how the world is. As for the thing itself—racism's powerful hold, its tenaciousness—it appears to arise not from some parasitic attachment on the surface of an otherwise healthy body politic but from viral growths within the living whole. Race yet lives because it is part and parcel of the *means* of living.

This is, of course, a bleak, even horrifying, metaphor. It explains the tenacity and power of racism at the risk of rendering it immutable—beyond the reach of ordinary human will to change. It need not be so, however. Within this seemingly closed system are the means for emancipatory action. The problem—emotional as well as intellectual—is that one must hold both ends of the polarity within the same uncertain grasp.

Clues to how that problem might be approached, I would suggest, could be found in some of the studies of that other twentieth-century instance of a seemingly irrational, racist excess: German Nazism. Indeed, the efforts to come to grips with the Nazi phenomena have produced perhaps the broadest and deepest application of the concept of everyday life to a concrete historical moment. As with race, these scholars also confront the compelling question of how "ordinary" people come to participate in or tolerate extraordinary acts of human cruelty and depravity.[30]

What studies of everyday life under Nazi rule make clear are the technologies of power by which Nazi authorities monitored and sought to control—without uniform or consistent success—the everyday lives of German workers, youths, and women. The most dramatic aspect of this system of control is very familiar: the selective application of terror and intimidation against Jews, gypsies, leftists, homosexuals, and anyone who dared defend these stigmatized groups. Less dramatic, but perhaps equally effective, was the regime's seduction of the German middle classes, catering—in a discourse eerily familiar to us today—to the notion that there was some moral injury in the fact that they were experiencing social and economic decline, were no longer assured of ever-expanding material prosperity, were witnessing the ostensible rejection of their traditional values, were fearful of a genetically inferior underclass in their midst.[31]

But what is immediately relevant to the present inquiry is how these global ideological claims unfolded at the local level, how they were interpreted, reproduced, or parried in the hands of ordinary people. The Nazi regime's unsatisfied anxiety for absolute control, to command consent in the minutest site and gesture, highlights the crucial linkages between grand public purposes and phenomena and everyday existence. It is clear, on the one hand, that the goals of

[30] Fred E. Schrader provides an informative overview of the German literature and its differences from its counterparts in France and England, in "Avant-propos: Historiographie allemande d'après-guerre et anthropologie de la vie quotidienne," *Histoire du quotidien*, Alf Lüdtke, ed., Olivier Mannoni, trans. (Paris, 1994), v–xii. See also Alf Lüdtke, "Introduction: Qu'est-ce que l'histoire du quotidien, et qui la pratique?" *ibid.*, 1–38 (esp. 2–4).

[31] See especially Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, Richard Deveson, trans. (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 86–96.

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the state, its image of social order, effectively intruded into and reshaped everyday existence; fear, surveillance, betrayal, and ritualized confirmation of Nazi ideology were fully evident and efficacious. On the other hand, it was also at the level of everyday life that Nazi designs were often thwarted, deflected, or simply expired. In fact, the state's efforts to invade, terrorize, and colonize everyday life often produced ambiguous and contradictory effects. For example, the state's effort to stamp out "negro" jazz inadvertently stimulated and politicized the otherwise hedonistic revelries of middle-class youthful jazz buffs. Similarly, their effort to discipline workers drove dissent underground and into privatized forms.[32] Thus global power exercised from above shaped but was, in turn, reshaped by ordinary people.

As Alf Lüdtke has shown, however, gestures of resistance and consent are not always easy to disentangle.[33] Workers forged individual breathing spaces within the Nazi industrial regime and relations of solidarity with their co-workers through the complex and multifaceted behaviors he calls *Eigensinn*, behaviors that included malingering, horseplay, or simply "tuning out." Although this description resonates with the populist impulse to discover moments of resistance among the common people, Lüdtke's story is much more complicated. "*Eigensinn*," he writes, "does not refer solely to benevolent needs and practices by the multitude of workers—but also to actions and attitudes that are downright misanthropic, full of contempt for one's fellows. Indeed, such practices are often motivated by the desire to see others squirm and suffer."[34] Thus a worker might by turns seek integration with his fellows or separation from them, neither of which can be easily contained within dichotomies of resistance and accommodation; a given act could be either, or both, or neither. What is at stake here, then, is not finding resistance or accommodation in *Eigensinn* but showing how it was deployed in the workers' efforts to reconfirm their sense of being—in signs of "mutual perception and recognition."[35] It was at this local level that power relations—that is, politics—were lived, reproduced, and sometimes deflected.

As in Lefebvre, the nexus between global and local social relations was neither unilinear nor asymmetric; like other social phenomena, that linkage reveals a stubborn unpredictability, occasional disconnectedness, and moments of incalculability. For example, it was also at the level of the shop floor that the "political" resources thus cultivated could be eventually manipulated to achieve greater factory production in response to the flattering Depression-era slogan of "German

[32] Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 110–74.

[33] Alf Lüdtke, "Polymorphous Synchrony: German Industrial Workers and the Politics of Everyday Life," *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), Supplement, 39–84.

[34] Lüdtke, "Polymorphous Synchrony," 83. Much like Heidegger and Lefevbre, therefore, Lüdtke suggests the task of refiguring social choices away from purely economistic rationalism toward a more complex field of social and existential forces. Purely instrumental action is not denied but is subordinated within a broader matrix of ultimately existential desire—to know, to realize one's being, in a Heideggerian sense to cheat death.

[35] Lüdtke argues that one cannot segment the economic, social, and cultural factors of a worker's existence because they are all interactive components of what he calls a "polymorphous synchrony." Thus he frames the pivotal question as one of determining "how subjectivity is actually constituted." This would appear to require in turn some notion of the linkage between the personal and the social, the psychic and the material, and to imply that productive, reproductive, and representational life are all mutually imbricated in profound ways. Lüdtke, "Polymorphous Synchrony," 41–58, quotes 53, 63.

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quality workmanship," and subsequently toward xenophobic and racist attacks on foreign workers and other presumed enemies during the Nazi era and after.[36] Thus did modalities for privatized living become instruments for achieving national goals, which in turn helped define the targets and provide the language for racial self-fashioning and aggression. Moreover, even when not placed directly in service of the Nazi regime, these private adaptations amounted to apathetic resignation in a crisis demanding active resistance.

What criteria can we deduce from this last example for framing the problematic of racial phenomena? German workers, youths, and middle-class supporters of the Nazi regime were caught in a world not of their own making—one forged from above by great power conflicts, unsettling economic transformations, and an ideology that purported to make sense of it all. They did not passively receive it: in some cases, they resisted; in others, they adapted it to their own ends. Even their resistance, however, often had the perverse effect of reinforcing the original propaganda—as in the case of Nazi racism. Forging solidarity with other German workers, for example, entailed stigmatizing and racializing alien workers. Thus the racial ideologies generated from above fell on fertile ground below, providing additional means of fashioning selves and worlds under otherwise impoverished conditions. None of this absolves these workers of moral responsibility. Indeed, their moral irresponsibility is rendered all the more chillingly apparent. Passivity in the face of an enormous evil—racial demonization and mass extermination—is one aspect of that responsibility certainly, but it is not one that any of us can claim to be innocent of. The more profound aspect of their moral irresponsibility is the fact that in the small gestures of everyday life they reenacted and sustained a vision of the world that made mass extermination ordinary, perhaps even possible. What is most chilling is the routineness of their culpability.

THIS ORDINARINESS AND ROUTINENESS SHOULD WARN US against seeking comfort in the extraordinariness of the Nazi's crime. As my opening quotations from Du Bois and Fanon suggest, it is precisely within the ordinary and everyday that racialization has been most effective, where it *makes* race. I can think of no better historical illustration of how this phenomenon works than the pervasive, long-lived imagery and symbolism of blackness fostered by the American minstrel tradition. I have chosen this example in part because minstrelsy has held such a powerful grip on American public culture but also because the phenomenon has been so richly documented by some stimulating and provocative recent work.[37] Synthesizing and recasting that work in the light of the conceptual work on everyday life that I have just described may be helpful to us in the task of

[36] "The images and formulae of *deutsche Qualitätsarbeit* carried a double load of semantic freight: on the one hand, an appeal to work experiences and attitudes; on the other, a patriotic reference to their significance for the 'whole nation.'" Lüdtke, "Polymorphous Synchrony," 80–81.

[37] The discussion that follows is drawn from and synthesizes the following works: Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993).

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reconceptualizing the study of racism. What that work shows, I will argue, is how racial selves—black as well as white—were made in the social environments of theatrical and street performances, how such performances mediated between global economic and political forces and their local enactment, and how both the reproduction and disruption of the racial content of these performances can be—much as in the scenarios described by Alf Lüdtke—two sides of the same coin.

The original minstrel show, consisting of a vaudeville-like concoction of songs, dances, and skits, was created in the 1830s, achieved its peak popularity in the 1840s and 1850s, remained a prevalent professional entertainment form throughout the nineteenth century, and continued as a staple of local amateur shows at least though the 1920s. A uniquely American art form, it was an important precursor to vaudeville and contemporary musical comedy, with many famous stars gaining their first experiences in it and continuing to draw materials for songs and skits from it.[38] Thus its symbols, imagery, and narratives became embedded in all forms of popular entertainment and material culture, profoundly shaping this nation's racial imaginary.

Although neither its performers—mostly white men in black grease paint—nor its audiences—mostly white male foreign immigrants and native rural immigrants—had much direct knowledge of the southern plantation or of black life, the minstrel show's dominant feature was its portrayal, or rather its supposed portrayal, of black life during the slavery era. Performers drew their key characters from the stereotypes of contemporary literature about southern plantations—"Aunt Jemimas," "Uncle Toms," and city slickers, or "dandies." After American slave emancipation, the themes and content of the minstrel show also shifted somewhat as the original "plantation tradition" framework became more of a conceit upon which romantic songs and narratives more clearly about white subjects were overlaid. Nonetheless, overt racial references remained the defining trope of the form.[39]

It is now clear, however, that minstrelsy was never just about race; complex political, economic, and social forces were at work in this "play." Studies of the content of minstrel shows, their music, and their social setting suggest that they served to assuage the cultural anxieties of both the new European immigrants uprooted from homelands and integrating into an alien society and political economy and the young rural native migrants to the city, many of whom were being incorporated into wage labor and the factory system for the first time. The malaprop-prone slave preacher, the misplaced urban dandy, the unsophisticated slave or freedman were all characters, it has been argued, onto whom the anxieties of a working class in the making could be projected, laughed at, and thus somehow mastered. Outrageous sentiments about contemporary politics, class pretensions and conflicts, and gender roles and sexuality could be put into the mouths of society's lowest caste.[40] In some sense, then, the origins of, the impetus

[38] On the long history of minstrelsy, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974); on its afterlife on the amateur circuit, see Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York, 1991), 23–46.

[39] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 180–82.

[40] Toll, *Blacking Up*, 160–94; Saxton, *White Republic*, 165–82; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 115–19; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 87.

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behind, the elaboration of the minstrel tradition had nothing to do with the lived experience of African Americans;[41] rather, aspects of black life—even black creativity—were appropriated and used by whites to negotiate problems posed by the larger society. Thus a racist discourse and performance became media for fashioning as well as expressing white, especially white male, identity.

This social-psychological process, moreover, linked, more or less directly, global forces of political economy and the lived everyday experiences of urban workers and others. The peak years for minstrelsy were in the decades when the nation was racked by political and economic tensions. The abolitionist struggles, westward expansion, the formation of an urbanized working class raised crucial issues of national as well as personal identity, of sectional and ethnic loyalties. Minstrelsy invoked a comforting image of a hierarchically ordered, placid, and above all innocent, rural countryside—the southern plantation. These images and themes are, for example, central in minstrel songs such as "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," "Oh Susanna," "Old Folks at Home," and "Dixie" (which ironically began as a minstrel song first performed in New York City and only later became the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy).[42] White Americans embraced minstrelsy, therefore, not simply to revile black people; that motive alone could hardly have sustained their century-long love affair with the form. It seems more plausible to suggest that through this form they posed traumatic questions to themselves about vital issues wherein their everyday lives converged with more global phenomena: What was America? Who was an American? Who was "white"? Such questions strike at the very root of social order and at the very soul of the subjectivities people construct in the process of locating themselves in a social formation. In the minstrel theater, such issues were deflected or settled symbolically; there, perhaps, white men at least reassured themselves who they were not—not black, not slave.

Minstrelsy soothed white anxieties, however, at the cost of reinforcing black stereotypes and institutionalizing racist ideas and images for generations to come. It established a tradition, a system of signs, symbols, and layered racial codes that penetrated deep into American culture, from its classic literature to street parades in northeastern cities, from the signature songs of Al Jolson and Judy Garland to the Amos 'n' Andy Show. In the booming American economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its imagery became embedded in popular advertising trademarks, such as Aunt Jemima's pancakes and Uncle Ben's rice, capable of communicating at a glance accumulated stores of racialized knowl-

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[41] Alexander Saxton estimates that about 70 percent of the early minstrel show innovators and songwriters were northern or foreign-born and came from middle-class urban backgrounds. They were not slaveholders and had very little experience with black people other than contacts while traveling in the South with various theatrical road shows, or perhaps doing the "research" many claimed as the basis for the "authenticity" of their acts. From what they saw, or thought they saw, they attempted to emulate black songs, dances, and characters on stage. Furthermore, the audiences for minstrel shows were overwhelmingly urban, working-class northern white men—often immigrants or recent native migrants to the city. Saxton, *White Republic*, 168.

[42] Saxton, *White Republic*, 155–80; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 203–07; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 216.

edge. The smiling visages of these seemingly familiar figures suggested American authenticity, nurturance, and the reassurance of subordination.[43]

Along with the advertising images there developed a parallel market in the simulacra of such symbols intended for household and other uses. Aunt Jemima soon graced not only the pancake box but salt and pepper shakers, a "to-do-list" holder, and a veritable bazaar of other domestic tools and home decorations. Well into the mid-twentieth century, images of grinning, subservient black men, women, and children filled the yards and domestic spaces of white American homes.[44]

It is against this backdrop that African Americans confronted the task of fashioning a self, confronted their aspiration to, as Fanon put it, "enter at the source of the world," or as Du Bois phrased it even earlier, "to be co-workers in the kingdom of culture." The haunting image of that confrontation, I think, is that of a New York mob forcing Ira Aldridge—the great African-American Shakespearean tragedian—to halt his performance of Shakespeare to sing "Possum Up an Old Gum Tree," a minstrel standard of the day. That scene would be repeated—with different accents and nuances, to be sure—as blacks assumed greater roles in theater, music, literature, and the arts.[45] That scene is emblematic of the struggle not only of black artists, intellectuals, and other culture workers but of a whole people—struggling to be other than the mark assigned then.

The marking of racial otherness so indelibly into the American material and spiritual culture, into its everyday, meant that what blacks confronted was never simply insult and psychic injury, never some transient epiphenomenon, but a kind of national ambivalence about racial matters that still complicates our efforts to understand and combat it. That ambivalence is best captured, perhaps, in the apt phrase Eric Lott uses to describe the reception of the original minstrel theater—as "love and theft." The theft refers to the appropriation and distortion beyond recognition of the experience of a subordinated people; the love refers to the intense and fatal fascination with the defaced, commodified result.[46]

But the fascination was as "genuine" as the theft, and together they produced antinomies peculiar to American race relations. For example, over the course of the twentieth century, we have witnessed African-American roles in American popular culture—its theater, sports, and music—change fundamentally but not the racial mark of being "natural" singers, dancers, and physical athletes. Today, the traditional "common sense" that underwrote this racial knowledge is reinforced by multimillion-dollar televised images and commodities. Instead of Aunt Jemima salt and pepper shakers, we have a brutal economy of prestige and status

[43] For the story of Aunt Jemima, see Jackie Young, *Black Collectables: Mammy and Her Friends* (West Chester, Pa., 1988).

[44] For a sense of the ubiquitous spread of these objects, see Kenneth W. Goings, "Memorabilia That Have Perpetuated Stereotypes about African Americans," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, no. 14 (February 14, 1990); "Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind," an exhibition of Afro-American stereotype and caricature from the collection of Janette Faulkner, Berkeley Art Center, September 12–November 4, 1982; "Contemptible Collectibles," *Perspectives: The Civil Rights Quarterly*, 12 (Spring 1980): 19–23.

[45] For Aldridge's confrontation, see Lott, *Love and Theft*, 45–46; for others, see Lott, *Love and Theft*, 235; Ely, *Amos 'n' Andy*, 206; and Toll, *Blacking Up*, 217–22.

[46] Lott, *Love and Theft*, 38–62.

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in which children kill each other for sneakers and jackets. Fanon's image of exploding in his confrontation with a racialized self is not literary license, it seems, but contemporary reality. It is, moreover, a horrifying, incomprehensible reality, making all the more urgent our need to re-think how race is made and thus might be un-made.

HAVING SKETCHED this depressing portrait of how racism is reproduced in American society, I am left with the even more difficult problem of discovering within it an emancipatory potential. Even here, I will be more effective, I am afraid, in exposing obstacles than certain paths of liberation. I can only hope that some discussion of contemporary obstacles and dangers may serve to alert us to a way out.

It is perhaps natural that as an academic I would think first of intellectual processes, of teaching and discussion, and of the constant critical reexamination of our own everyday practices as professional historians and as citizens—as history writers and history makers. We, after all, are specially charged with producing and communicating important parts of the materials from which identities are to be constructed. If the problem of marking reveals itself, as Fanon describes it, in "a thousand details, anecdotes, stories," or as Du Bois suggests, in jokes, songs, public media, then one appropriate response would seem to be to rewrite the stories, to expose to searching scrutiny the insidious content and injury of the jokes, songs, and anecdotes, to provide the means for people to think of themselves "otherwise."

Within the everyday that we academics inhabit, we can seek to ensure that the histories we teach about humankind do indeed reflect the diverse stories of human existence and struggle. We can seek to ensure that our faculties, our student bodies, our professional associations are themselves reflective of that diversity of experience and knowledge. And perhaps most unsettling of all to many of us, we can open to critical inquiry and scrutiny not just the content of our "received" wisdom but the very premises, discourse, and intellectual processes by which we received it.

In some ways, as we face daunting problems of difference in the waning years of the present century, these measures seem small. But, ironically, the fierce counter-attack that even their modest and uneven pursuit has attracted suggests that they may not be so small after all. For questioning the representation of our selves in history books and on history faculties, many of us have been condemned for trying to limit free speech and ridiculed for being obsessed with policing trivial individual behavior. Thus almost every response to the phenomenon of marking is driven onto the defensive—a trend likely to be encouraged by recent mid-term elections and referenda.

The issue of free speech is not one to be taken lightly. This struggle, like any other, can produce its excesses and abuses; ours is the burden to work out modalities by which the freedoms of both speech and people are protected. Such efforts must begin, however, with the recognition that freedom of speech has

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never been, and never can be, absolute. It has always been hemmed in by rules and conventions that mark its boundaries. Our most important codes are not for the most part written down, much less legally enforced; they are simply part of the mores, etiquette, and behaviors we internalize, that is, simply part of our everyday. All of which suggests that in many areas it should be the conversation about and articulation of what is appropriate that is the first object of our attention rather than cumbersome and often ineffective legal sanctions. Fostering an atmosphere of criticism and self-reflection would seem to be crucial for such an approach, which it is certainly appropriate for the university to seek to provide.

It is critical to recognize, however, that one of the crucial elements of the racializing encounters that Du Bois and Fanon described is that the structures and relations of power are unequal, ever tilted to the side of the victimizer rather than the victim. The arena in which we struggle is not simply a marketplace of ideas, unmediated by wealth and power. This lesson was learned by the NAACP and others who struggled against the harmful effects of Thomas Dixon's and D. W. Griffith's racist film *Birth of a Nation.* The NAACP efforts at outright censorship ran afoul of their own and their white liberal allies' philosophical commitment to free speech. But their effort to portray a different history by producing the independent film *Lincoln's Dream* also failed. They failed, for the simple reason that they could never command the capital or the audiences that Griffith had.[47] The capacity for speech in modern society is not independent of capital and the power that capital nurtures. Moreover, Griffith's film—like television to follow—emerged out of a cinematic public sphere that it and other films were in the process of creating.[48] Blacks—as producers and sometimes as audience members—were excluded from that sphere. Even if financially successful, therefore, such oppositional films or spectacles they succeeded in producing would be unlikely to confront the white audiences reached by Griffith's film.

That lesson is relevant also to another criticism directed at efforts to reform the everyday. This criticism ridicules and demeans the victims of stigmatization as being merely "politically correct" and thus less deserving of the community's concern. It is a form of criticism that has enjoyed immense political success of late, but in the final analysis it is morally and intellectually vacuous. With what is little more than a slogan, its proponents purport to dismiss as merely trivial encounters such as the incidents of marking with which I began this address. But what I have tried to demonstrate is how the seemingly trivial act is often not so trivial, either in its real effects on people or in its relation to the realization of more global and sinister designs. Indeed, it is the power relations in which so-called trivial acts are often embedded that renders them capable of damage. In this sense, the powerful will always have the upper hand in defining and enforcing "correctness."

It is in this latter sense that I am most familiar with political correctness. I grew up, you see, in a politically correct world—southside Virginia in the 1950s. This p.c. was of a more serious sort than that envisioned by Lynne Cheney. This was p.c.

[47] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (1977; New York, 1993), 41–69.

[48] My reading here is generally influenced by discussions of early cinema and television in Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 7–16; and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1990), 3–75.

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backed by power, by capital, by racial privilege. This p.c. was far more aggressive, too, more effective in censoring and controlling gestures, expressions, and behavior than anything charged against the political Left today. This p.c. decreed that I could not enter the front door of most restaurants and other places of public accommodation, could not sit in the front of a bus, could not attend the nearest public school. Of course, I was lucky; this p.c. had once decreed that my mother and father would not have the benefit of a public high school at all.

Yes, I know p.c., and because I know it so well, I can recognize its offspring in contemporary public discourse. It seeks again to dictate the minutest details of our lives—our sexual preferences and the nature of our families. It would seek to dictate the content of our history books and impose limits on how we might re-think that history. Under the guise of freedom, it seeks to re-exclude those only recently accepted as worthy of inclusion. It is this p.c.—not the alleged censorship of the powerless but that of the powerful and the privileged—that we should take note of.

We should take note because there is much at stake. A century ago, powerful men redefined America's political economy, its mores, even its possibility for thinking justice. In law, they fashioned the fanciful notion that to segregate people was to treat them equally. In politics, they excluded blacks—and not a small number of whites—from voting, claiming a need to protect the purity of the ballot box. In the economy, they tightened the screws of that massive expropriation that was sharecropping and blamed the theft on the alleged inadequacies of the worker. In theater, literature, and public discourse, they fostered a distorted image of black men as clowns or beasts.

Du Bois jotted some of the preliminary drafts of the essay with which I opened this talk during that final decade of the last century. It was clear to him, even then, that the twentieth century would be the era of the color line. An ocean away and five decades later, Fanon wrote passages that seemed almost to echo those of Du Bois. He did so in an era of violent and nonviolent revolution, each of which would take its toll in wasted lives and spilled blood. And yet, both men argued for a world that could be otherwise, even as they recognized how profound and pervasive were the injuries of race. Ultimately, though in different ways, both Du Bois and Fanon were revolutionaries, even as they recognized the powerful forces arrayed against revolutionary change. Both realized that emancipation must begin with self-emancipation because the self was the first victim of the politically correct racial orders in which they lived. They realized that despite the forces arrayed against us, we—especially historians—must provide some of the materials for that self-fashioning and thus self-emancipation. The burden of our history is great; the burden of our history-making is all the greater.

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