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You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. . . I think it’s important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that — that doesn’t go away. There are very few African-American men in this country who haven’t had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. And there are very few African-American men who haven’t had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me, at least before I was a senator. There are very few African-Americans who haven’t had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often. And you know, I don’t want to exaggerate this, but those sets of experiences inform how the African-American community interprets what happened one night in Florida.

Barack Obama

I am less concerned with Barack Obama than with the historical moment he has come to personify. His presidency provides an important opportunity to reflect upon the changing significance of racial divisions in US politics as well as to assess emergent patterns in how African American political culture becomes relevant to people located elsewhere in the world. The latter point qualifies the former because the POTUS and the FLOTUS are now prominent celebrity figures in a global culture: icons of recently diversified power whose well-groomed images lend meaning and charisma to the ideas of racial difference sourced in north America’s successful history of settler colonialism and racial slavery.

Whatever the complexities of his own postcolonial formation as, on one side of the family, a descendant of somebody who fought the British during the Kenyan emergency, Obama is, among other things, the principal
symbolic custodian of the old gift to the world represented by black America’s historic struggles for human and political rights. Regardless of his personal inclinations, he is also an embodiment of that history, its freedom-seeking, its pursuit of recognition and its eventual attainment of formal citizenship.

At home, his commitment to the development of supra-racial perspectives has corresponded to black America’s pursuit of its political goals via the channels provided by official institutions. To make sense of the different situation abroad, where the poll data suggests that Obama has been consistently more appreciated than in domestic politics, we can borrow from W.E.B. DuBois the idea that, against the odds, African Americans succeeded in assembling a hard won and utterly unique definition of modern freedom: wrought from the struggle to overcome slavery and then refined during their protracted battle to overthrow the institutionalization of the segregationist principle of separate but equal.

Like his Hegelian brother, the Trinidadian CLR James, Du Bois saw this culture of freedom as quite distinct from “liberté”, “freiheit” and their ancient antecedents. It was a unique, sui generis formation. Borne along by musical and other unanticipated vectors, its structures of feeling were transmitted abroad. They reached into the lives and imaginations of populations dwelling far from its places of origin who took it up and somehow, mysteriously, made it their own in processes that cannot be understood as forms of theft because culture is not property. Today, these jewels brought from bondage support the lingua franca of a near-global youth culture which is now occasionally at odds with the histories of dissent and opposition from which it sprung.

The counterculture of modernity, in which that burgeoning formation was rooted, had been aligned almost from its inception with the idea of a deep democracy available in forms that were not amenable to colour-coding. As it grew, it coincided with decolonisation and the reparative demands of indigenous populations. Though it contributed to the reach and appeal of the language of human rights, as that idiom took hold globally, its idea of freedom, derived specifically from US conditions and the pursuit of civil and political rights, was no longer a dominant motif. Different locations and new struggles in Ethiopia, Ghana, Southern Africa, Palestine and elsewhere began to capture and refocus the worldly aspirations towards
autonomy and self determination that had drawn inspiration from the progress of African Americans and the vindicationist and pan-Africanist messages it inspired.

One in three African American males can now expect to experience incarceration at some point during their lives.\textsuperscript{5} So we may contend that the buoyancy of the US prison-industrial complex suggests that African American citizenship still awaits its complete and final fulfillment. Meanwhile Obama’s crafted celebrity mediates and mystifies the fact that the political and juridical hopes of US blacks no longer coincide tidily with the spirit of the unipolar age in which their country is a tenaciously neoliberal power. Its exciting, black cultures—especially in sports and music—are often simply powerful weapons in an imperial and corporate armoury for winning hearts and minds in the huge public relations operation required by the prosecution of global counterinsurgency.

As the president is reported boasting that he is really good at killing people with unmanned aerial vehicles, the twentieth-century export of African American culture as double consciousness has been succeeded by its global dissemination in the new guise of military diplomacy.\textsuperscript{6} It does not stand outside the wars. It is part of them. The recently-announced collaboration between the Shawn Carter [Jay Z] Foundation and the US State Department captures something of this realignment which has been tracked by Hisham Aidi.\textsuperscript{7}

Towards a dynamic nominalism?

The historical and geopolitical contexts of these disenchanted observations must be clearly established. I want to acknowledge what the epiphany of a black president represents as well as to make clear that I recognise the lingering normative potency of white supremacist ideology, if not its fully theoretical or ideological, forms.

This is not an appropriate occasion on which to conduct a detailed evaluation of the president’s policies or to offer a denunciation of his obvious failures that is premised either upon a misplaced faith in his occasionally ambiguous electoral rhetoric or, more perniciously still, on the idea that because he is seen as a black man he is therefore bound to conduct himself differently in office. His shortcomings are even valuable in delivering critics
to an understanding of the difference race can reasonably be expected to make in governmental institutions conditioned by corporate diversity. There are things to be said on these topics just as there is a detailed critique to be made of what some have pronounced as his defiling of the idea of hope, his administration’s role in seeking the stability of an intrinsically unstable order as well as its apparently enthusiastic approach to endless war. Those dispositions have been combined with a cavalier line on the exploitation of the environment, a timidity on the politics of health inequality and aggression on immigration. There are other areas where the cost of US exceptionalism remains high.

Instead, I want to focus specifically on the difficulties associated with the dynamics of race and racism and to explore the possibility that Obama’s presidency has further changed political culture in an area which had already begun to be altered by the technological revolution in social media as well as new developments in the fields of communication, information and medicine and by the idea of inter-civilisational and cultural conflict as a successor to the Cold War. In particular, I would like us to focus upon the machinations of neoliberal capitalism which, in moving decisively towards the market state, re-configured the relationship between individuals and groups, altered the class inscriptions of economic inequality and corroded racial solidarity but was also inclined to invest in difference and diversity in ways that older, simpler commitments to racial hierarchy could not have entertained.

A number of additional factors should be acknowledged. First, there are educational effects involved in being confronted by the difference race makes or has failed to make in Obama’s attempts at conducting a populist strategy. He insists upon being above racial matters while simultaneously signaling his affiliation to the political constituency of African Americans whenever that historic connection becomes important in holding the Democratic electoral bloc together. Secondly, related to this, there is the issue of how, particularly during the last presidential election campaign, the informal consensus governing the deployment of overt racial discourse in US politics seemed to have collapsed. That tacit agreement was replaced by a torrent of racial insults directed against the president. He was presented as an illegitimate leader associated with welfare queens and food stamps as part of his opponents’ attempt to promote race-based identification among whites who were invited to discover themselves
as the primary victims of injustice. It is not incidental that these racial motifs are impermeable to what is now referred to loftily as “evidence-based” argument. Demonstrating the racial data on welfare recipients will not secure apologies, withdrawals or revisions. Indeed it is extremely important to appreciate that the very wrongness of these arguments is in fact their purpose and their power. Racial styles of thought have never been amenable to reason in that way and to imagine that they can be undone by corrective epistemological proclamations is to fail both to grasp their specificity as common sense and to comprehend the historical challenge posed by what we can call “agno-politics” and the patterned forms of ignorance and illiteracy on which they rely.8

It may be easy to chuckle over the fact that viewers of the Fox News network were found to know less about US politics than people who watched no television news at all.9 However, we need to be able to understand that systematic mystification and to appreciate its historicity and political geography as well as the conspicuous technological mechanisms involved in its reproductive cycle. It is bound to the novel notions of white supremacism that have circulated via the internet—reaching all the way to Norway and other far flung outposts of Europe’s counter-jihad movement. Those racial assemblages were sourced in interventions made by the US ultra-right which is currently awaiting the Supreme Court’s judgement in the case of Fisher v. University of Texas that is expected to place the stamp of rectitude upon the idea that the injustice suffered by wounded whites has its origin in the mire of institutionalised political correctness.10

Lastly, we must note the demographic data that confirms what we can call Samuel Huntington’s worst case scenario. As the US population moves towards 2050, the number of “non-Hispanic whites” is predicted to rise by seven million, from 196 million to 203 million, while the “Hispanic” population climbs from 36 million to 133 million.11 The accuracy of these figures can be contested but the anxieties this prospect has aroused, combine with the short term transformation of the electorate to shift discussions of the politics of race into a configuration that is altogether new.

None of these developments can be dismissed as trivial. An inventory of the substantive changes they have involved can be compiled without accepting that the US has moved into anything like a postracial mode. However, it bears repetition that we have to attend to the change from a polarised,
Manichaean approach to a much more complex multimodal model of diversity which has already brought new varieties of racism and racial hierarchy into being and transformed the fatal, simplifying opposition of black and white. Today we are told that more than half of the births in the US are to people of colour and that by 2050 the country will have no clear racial or ethnic majority.¹²

In raising these historic prospects, it is essential to emphasise that I am not for a moment suggesting that the effects of racism are finally over or that the forms of political agency based in African American social and cultural life are a thing of the past. The prison activist and radical geographer Ruth Gilmore has accurately specified that enduring racism in her influential definition of it as “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”.¹³ That durable operation is an everyday aspect of the control society or securitocracy that has been built upon mass imprisonment and combined with the conspicuous pleasures of consumer imperialism and its “military entertainment complex”.¹⁴

However, it is not as easy to divide the political field tidily into race-based and non-raced based, or more pejoratively, “color-blind” ways of seeing, as some commentators who are more charmed than I am by the ideals of identity-politics have suggested. Eyes have been trained to appreciate race over a long period of time in particular sets of historical circumstances. The unmaking of those systems, though possible, will take a long time and cannot be achieved—if it is desired—by fiat. Local historical difficulties aside, even theorizing those positive changes has not proved to be straightforward. Nietzsche was perhaps the first to point out the tactical, imaginative and ethical problems that arose in the dense interplay between objects and the lived cultures of their naming.

... what things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, the name and appearance, the importance, the usual measure and weight of things each being originally almost always an error and arbitrary, thrown over the things like a garment and quite alien to their essence and even to their exterior—have gradually, by the belief therein and the continuous growth from generation to generation, grown as it were on- and-into things and become their very body. What was appearance at the very beginning
becomes almost always the essence in the end and operates as the essence! What a fool he would be who would think it enough to point out this origin and this nebulous veil of illusion in order to destroy that which virtually passes for the world namely, so-called “reality”! We can destroy only as creators! But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and valuations and probabilities in order in the long run to create new “things”.\textsuperscript{15}

This insight should be taken as a warrant for developing an analysis of race politics premised upon what Ian Hacking has called a “dynamic nominalism”.\textsuperscript{16} Such a strategy has strong historical associations with African American struggles to win recognition as human outside of the restrictive terms set by the racial order and creatively to assemble a liberatory rhetoric or poetics of racial agency in the US—from nigger to Negro, to coloured, to black, to Afro-American, to African American, to Nigga and beyond.

The social operations in which people interact with racial terms and names, as well as the institutions that endorse and distribute those classifications, have offered a challenge to existing versions of “critical race theory” which have often been reluctant to renounce the idea of race as a matter of political ontology. From that popular perspective, race can and should be retained after its negative associations are purged. The world can be left in its racial shape but the conflict and disharmony, violence and injustice wrought by racism can be disposed of. They are nothing more than a skin which can be peeled away from the surface of things. Once it has gone, we may be expected to luxuriate in the cornucopia of diversity.

The meaning and salience of race are unevenly developed and distributed but the US polity retains all the features of a deeply, if largely informally, segregated society. Its spatialisation is still distinguished by the residues of racial slavery and settler colonialism even if there are signs that corporate multiculture from above and slow change from below have eroded the historic allure of the white supremacy that was dominant for so long.

“Not only there, but right here’s an Apartheid”: US racism and neocolonialism

A post- and neo-colonial ordering of the world has recently been fostered by civilisationist rationalisations of conflict, by the consolidation of securitocracy
and by the host of military adventures that now composes asymmetrical warfare as an unprecedented global counterinsurgency campaign. The nomos of drones and the routinisation of war as a programme of hi-tech manhunting encompass further struggles, both explicit and inferential, over the significance of an emergent racial hierarchy (that is often mapped onto differences of faith and language) and its relationship to capitalism, to global inequality and to the prosecution of an apparently endless war on terror and extremism.

Civilisational and racial alterity has long been part of the delicate calculus that assigns differing values to lives lost and lives taken. It specifies what may count as a legitimate, proportional application of violence as well as how much collateral damage is considered justifiable and legal in shifting circumstances. Where the United States, for so long the world’s primary source of racial common-sense, race-lore and what the Fields sisters have recently called US “racecraft” sits in this scheme, needs now to be re-considered carefully.

After all, an entirely corporate variety of multiculturalism is a notable feature of the distinctly neoliberal styles of thought which emphasise the value placed upon diversity and supply the favoured technologies for managing it. That multiculturalism lends a meretricious meritocracy to neoliberal rationalities and strategies for surviving in a global risk society where the tropes of human rights are essential to processes of privatisation, financialisation and militarisation.

Yet in postcolonial settings, the historic pressures of racial hierarchy and ethnic absolutism make judging who might be worthy of recognition as fully and authentically human and who gets relegated to the shadows of infrahumanity, into a perilous and contested deliberation. These problems have been augmented by the unipolar dominance of the US and are still being negotiated in the era of renditions: extraordinary and ordinary; of outsourced, non-governmental drone operations and of a privatised securitocracy. All of those processes still rely upon the institutionalised double standards that previously characterised colonial government. Similar tensions have been evident in discussions of torture: always denied but routinized nonetheless.

Civilisationist anxieties have emerged to discover new enemies not only under the banners of “Islamism” but also, as I have said, in the excessive,
threatening fertility of migrants and settlers like north America’s catholic latinidad. Huntington’s final book showed how those domestic fears corresponded precisely to anxieties further afield. Loose in the world, the exported logic of race-thinking lent its alchemical power to a misoxeny intrinsic to the distinctions between good and bad Muslims on one side and legal and illegal migrants on the other.

Neither whiteness nor blackness are what they once were. They have begun to assume increasingly generic forms that correspond to the exigencies of consumer culture and the dictates of absolute identity that can be habitually specified as life-style. Segregation remains, but the deep sediment of meanings generated by the US racial nomos and compounded by its gradual overthrow, no longer enjoys the same time-worn appeal.

Among African Americans the historic ballast endowed in their self-understanding by the legacies of slavery serves different functions. The Ethiopianist imaginary has faded and the grand Afro-Baptist tradition has ebbed, but they have not been replaced, as seemed possible at one point, by a wholly US version of Islam.

Thank you for talkin’ to me Africa

The changing significance of Africa in black America’s revised narrative of national becoming also requires reassessment. The US has been involved in discussions about the continent since Stanley met Livingstone under the stars and stripes in 1871. It’s often forgotten that, though they took no territory, their representatives sat down with European powers to deliberate the continent’s future at the Berlin Conference.

The colonial schemes of Martin Delany and his peers evaporated with the implosion of the Liberian state. Gradually, in a historical process that has been carefully mapped by scholars like Penny Von Eschen and James H. Meriwether, what we might call the pan-Africanism of return gave way to a pan-Africanism of solidarity. That is now, in turn, being eclipsed by the more attenuated and technologically mediated connections found, for example, on the minor public-sphere of black Twitter. Today, if pan-Africanism survives at all, it operates in those virtual forms. New patterns of identification have been established by the keyboard warriors. They often retreat from the challenge of decolonisation which had asked, first
whether the struggles of African Americans might be aligned with those of colonial peoples and secondly, how their solidarity could facilitate the process of rejoining the rest of the world across the fortifications of overdevelopment.

The establishment of Africom and the identification of new strategic goals in the acquisition and control of African minerals and other scarce resources in the face of competition from China is surely relevant here, as is the emergence, as part of the war on terror, of new threats to security in several locations on the continent. The prominent deployment of African American military personnel in the recent intervention in Mali and other central African conflicts is just one symptom of Africa’s increasing geopolitical importance to the United States. Mahmood Mamdani has described the Save Darfur campaign as a watershed moment in the realignment of popular African American opinion with a flow of information that supported the foreign policy goals of the US government. The globalisation of the conflict in Darfur projected the situation in Sudan as a racial war between non-black Arabs and black Africans that could become intelligible through categories sourced in American experience which corresponded on one side to local experience and history and on the other to the dictates of Manichaean conflict between cross and crescent. Apart from that, poll data has begun to suggest that having a black Commander in Chief has fostered a more belligerent foreign policy outlook among African Americans.

That is the context in which we become obliged to appreciate the deployment of African American culture as a diplomatic and military instrument—something that captures and can amplify the restless, intoxicating appeal of “team America” as well as the fantasy that all the distinctive freedoms and voracious patterns of consumption enjoyed by the most privileged people in the United States could be enjoyed by everyone else on earth.

**The human terrain of vernacular neoliberalism**

The problem of how black culture can stand for US culture as a whole while African Americans remain poor, precarious and vulnerable had been identified as a puzzle long ago. In 1936, long before their acquisition of political rights, the philosopher, Alain Locke, had noted that the culture of
black Americans was wholly, if sometimes inconveniently, to be understood as a locally-born phenomenon with potentially world-wide appeal. Taking jazz as the best example of that cultural possibility, he insisted that the music of black Americans was becoming a cosmopolitan formation: an “international ocean” and had been “in an important way . . . tinctured with modernism . . . as a purely Negro dialect of emotion it could not have become the dominant recreational vogue of our time”. He continued:

in its more serious form [this music] has also become the characteristic musical speech of the modern age . . . It incorporated the typical American restlessness and unconventionality, embodied its revolt against the drabness of commonplace life, put pagan force behind the revolt against Puritan restraint, and finally became the western world’s lifesaving flight from boredom and oversophistication to the refuge of elemental emotion and primitive vigor.

Locke’s intuitions about the universal character of this vernacular art were acute. In the Cold War, the qualities he had identified would become charged with geopolitical significance. They provided a means to demonstrate the freedom of African Americans to the world and to convey the democratic credentials of the US in opposition to the evils of Soviet communism. The last decades of the twentieth century differed sharply from that period because under the impact of civil rights and black power, African American popular, vernacular and sporting cultures were regularly and frequently channels for criticism of the US racial order as well as the imperial foreign policy manifest in Indo-China and the other torrid, postcolonial places where the Cold War was being conducted.

Today’s apparent reversion to the older pattern cannot be separated from the technological upheavals of our era. We must be especially alert to the role played by the revolution in digital communications. It has promoted notions of charisma and celebrity and, as the recent NSA debacle shows, assembled a new politics of information that punctures the borders of the national state and qualifies the power of governments while pressing them towards ever greater control of what can be known and when.

With all these changes in mind, I would like to turn towards the special status accorded to thinking about race as political ontology, social life, economic fate and culture which is based in or derived from the US. I suggest this corrective
reorientation mindful of the fact that while the economic and military power of the US is regularly debated, less attention is given to its cultural and intellectual power. Of course, the fruits of racial Americana that are now being disseminated worldwide must be considered on their own terms in the social and cultural ecology that shaped them but the essential circuitry of knowledge, through which those distinctive racial codes are dispatched, merits acknowledgement as part of the explanation of their unprecedented reach.

US race lore is being exported to the rest of the planet as a means with which to make the supposedly inevitable force of racial history intelligible. Its dissemination has been warranted by the iconic presence of President Obama who, in spite of all the venom directed at his presidency, ironically provides significant reassurance that the US has been able to place its racial problems in the past. Michelle Obama’s visibility in the role of First Lady, compounds that impression which has itself been an important asset as well as a source of technical and motivational expertise useful in amplifying neoliberal discourse on inequality and the all-conquering potency of the individual will-to-succeed. There is much more to be said, for example, on the private practices of role-modeling and mentoring as favoured instruments of neoliberal governmentality.

Rather than seeing those structures and their relationship to the seductions of the US—the embodiment of universal democracy—as a specific achievement of the racial nomos and a successful instance of settler colonialism, they are viewed as if they validate general laws governing the relationship between same and different, self and other which are projected with unique clarity in the fundamental example of the relationship between black to white.

The chapter of neoliberal transformation that has been entitled “The Age of Obama” endows hetero-cultural vitality in the project of globalisation as a process of “Americanisation”. Proof that US business culture is somehow ahead of the rest of the world can be discovered in the former’s apparent preparedness to divest itself of white supremacism in the interests of continued accumulation and access to new markets. Multiculturalism has been pronounced dead by mere politicians and its sovereign authority usurped by the expanding cohorts of diversity management who use racial plurality among the elite to show how much things have changed for the better. They trade in the pernicious notion that individual choice is always paramount. It says, in effect, that anyone can reorient themselves and thereby alter their life-chances through the sheer, dedicated force of their
own personality and desire. This notion is now fundamental to the legitimacy of neoliberal reform and the notions of meritocracy that it still seems to need.

My unpopular point is that this political idiom can operate very powerfully, and often entirely unrecognized, when it appears in blackface. As with previous varieties of popular racial drama, the principal audience for those performances is often located some distance away from the communities in which African Americans dwell. Among them, the forms of autonomy afforded by the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills, retain a special appeal in proportion to the memory of past injuries and insults. Trademarked stories of uplift and self-discipline endorse the parables of neoliberal theology.

For the Love of Money

African American culture has been both a conduit and a source of enduringly powerful examples of racial progress and individual uplift thanks to business acumen and financial gain. Contemporary heirs to the project of self-enrichment as collective vindication have pursued their activities even while the terms upon which individual and communal destinies can be connected have been recast by the economic, historical and demographic changes that have been analysed by William Julius Wilson and others.32

One of the best contemporary illustrations of this development is provided by the popularity of neoliberal, self-help literature that has either been penned by African Americans who are associated with hip-hop or is aimed at them. Though the appeal of uplift and self-improvement literature is an older phenomenon, Robert Greene’s 48 Laws of Power revived the genre in 2000 with a Machiavellian primer for power and success:

The feeling of having no power over people and events is generally unbearable to us—when we feel helpless we feel miserable. No one wants less power; everyone wants more. In the world today, however it is dangerous to seem too power hungry, to be overt with your power moves. We have to seem fair and decent. So we need to be subtle—congenial yet cunning, democratic yet devious.33

Just a few years later, the African American entrepreneur and businessman, Russell Simmons, sometime CEO of Defjam who adopts a less belligerent, more New Age tone, expanded this archive with Do You: 12 Laws to Access the Power in You and Achieve Happiness and Success. The sources of power
may differ along with the number of laws involved, but Simmons’ inclusion of happiness aside, the goals are the same: riches and self-determination which are always accessible only in the zero/sum mechanisms of the market. Simmons’ paean to the entrepreneurial creation of “classic American flava” was prefaced by his old friend Donald Trump. He modestly warns his casual reader “I’m not saying anything in this book that hasn’t already been said before. These are the exact same laws that Jesus Chris, Moses, Muhammad, Lord Buddha, Patanjali, Mother Teresa, and countless other inspirational people all shared in their own lifetimes”.34

There is a risk of taking the narcissistic rhetoric that distinguishes these texts too seriously and misinterpreting their metaphorical power. However, a significant threshold has been crossed when we move on from saying that an individual’s life is like a business to saying that it is, in fact a business like any, or all, others. There is a vast deal of difference between approaching one’s own life as a commercial operation and relating to it as if it were, for example, either a gift from God or a work of art.

Business seems to have taken over the space previously inhabited by those alternatives: the first sacred and the second profane. Of course, the supplanting of the “Afro-Baptist” tradition by forms of evangelical Christianity as concerned with the accumulation of wealth and power as with gaining access to heaven is another recent change which supports the generalization of neoliberal ideas.35

Enthusiasm for the selfish pursuit of riches has been disseminated through the medium of hiphop culture where it has been combined with ruthlessness and an explicit appetite for domination and manipulation that is also apparently now a business asset.

Robert Greene’s books became influential among hiphop’s organic intellectuals, many of whom were reported to have had his homiletic aphorisms tattooed onto their buffed-up bodies. Predictably, his work is name-checked in numerous hip hop tunes while his connection to 50 Cent which resulted in a co-authored effort in 2009, has rewarded the latter a welcome measure of respectability with which to lard his affected contempt for others judged weaker than himself.36 Unlike 50, Greene has consistently proclaimed himself to be a supporter of the Democratic party. He restated his liberal politics in a 2012 interview with The Guardian:
“I’m a huge Obama supporter,” he says. “Romney is Satan to me. The great thing about America is that you can come from the worst circumstances and become something remarkable. It’s Jay-Z and 50 Cent and Obama and my Jewish ancestors – that’s the America we want to celebrate. Not the vulture capitalist. These morons like Mitt Romney, they produce nothing. Republicans are feeding off fairytales and that’s what did them in this year and hopefully will keep doing them in for ever, because they’re a lot of scoundrels.37

In this context, it is important to mention that their jointly written volume *The 50th Law* was produced to resemble a Bible. The edges of its pages were gilded and the cover was embellished with an ominous gothic script in Latin: “Nihil timendum est” [fear nothing]. With that choice, the authors and the publisher’s marketing department tried to make a selling point out of the fact that their book was addressed to the crisis of meaning generated for neoliberal race politics by the disassociation of Ethiopianism, PanAfricanism and their Christian underpinnings.

Greene and 50 Cent attempted a comprehensive reformulation of African American history and its modern cultural canon. Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Malcolm X, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and a host of other notables were ventriloquised to facilitate the reconfiguration of African American culture as a paean to the psychological and moral attributes of the hyper-individuated, neo-liberal self, cast in the ideal form of the merciless and fearless business leader unencumbered by doubt of any kind.

Here I can only scratch the surface of a deep and complex cultural history. Like the relationship between individual success and the possibility of collective uplift, the strategy which suggests that the routine damage wrought by racial orders can be overcome privately, through the acquisition of personal wealth, remains an enormous issue. Their braided histories must be reconstructed with great care. They open eventually into larger problems bearing upon the ways in which successive forms of capitalism have been able to solicit the co-operation of their primary victims into their own exploitation and destruction.

I would like to be able to take for granted that these modes of domination always involve conflict but it is probably better to be more explicit and acknowledge that even sporadic and reactive resistance against them matters greatly. Those immediate reactions can carry the possibility
of alternative ways of organising life and work even in environments where such speculation has been forbidden. However, that resistance can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from accommodation. Its ambiguities mean that it should not be banalised but nor should we pretend that it is always likely to triumph in attractive, dialectical or teleological patterns. The elemental struggles for justice and human dignity can have no end point, so there is no final triumph to be won. Rather than focus on endless resistance supported by tireless criticism, I have asked not only how race fosters and lubricates a vernacular neoliberalism but also how racially marked people become resigned to neoliberal capitalism and how they have been induced to enter into its hall of distorting mirrors seeking the hope that by buying in rather than selling out, their lives and the world will become better.

I want to emphasise that the contradictory motivations of neoliberalism’s dupes and footsoldiers are not being ridiculed. This critique should be heard as a plea that their dismal reactions should be taken more seriously—certainly more seriously than the pedlars and celebrants of neoliberal theology are inclined to take the false hopes they evangelise with such cruel cynicism.

I do not regard African Americans as uniquely gullible or think that they are any more vulnerable than other people to being tricked by the operations of totalizing, neoliberal ideology. We must recognise that contemporary racism delights in personal uplift and redemption narratives which terminate in the idea that if individuals are prepared to graft, even deeply entrenched racial hierarchy and inequality can be overcome quietly and privately. I insist that the continuing effects of systematic racism on black life cannot be dismissed in that manner but, disturbingly, there are instances where that very impact seems—perhaps even where racism is to be sacrificed in capital’s interests—to have inclined people towards the solutions proffered by neoliberal styles of thought which can be pleasurable possessed and set to work.

In other words, I am asking whether the history of being denied recognition as an individual may actually have enhanced the appeal of particular varieties of extreme individualism? If so, that neoliberal victory is also registered in the way that the movement against racism appears to have stalled in a culture where nobody admits to being a racist and the old lines of enmity have been confounded by the intersectional complexities of
the racial nomos articulated with the protean dynamics of gender and the unstable equilibrium of class domination.

Much anti-racism has already yielded to the pressure to privatise thought and individualise analysis. Indeed if anti-racism survives and retains a political language, it is likely to borrow heavily from the lexicon of feminism and often centres on the idea of “privilege” unevenly distributed according to the specifications of colour hierarchy and lodged in the individual body. I object to placing the emphasis on the status of individual agents because in this context it is inevitably reifying and regularly degenerates into a competition aimed at discovering which actors and groups enjoy the least privilege and thereby acquire the greatest epistemological authority.

The rejection of class-based narratives over the last few decades has intensified these tendencies. Thought it was once a welcome corrective to unhelpful abstraction, today’s exclusive focus on interpersonal conduct changes the scale of critical analysis, turning away from the greater strength of approaches based upon the concept of “institutionalised racism” with its tendency to absole the individual by thinking the issue of their agency independently from their outlook or ideology. Feminist theory solved that difficulty by resort to a view of gender assembled through performative iterations of identity independent of the consciousness of those who play them out, so far the moralism of race politics has resisted that heuristic solution. Instead, reified privilege congeals and becomes the property of individuals rather than a contested aspect of the way those bodies come to life in the endless, restless interplay of structures and agents. That static view may briefly resonate with the age of Obama but the storms in front of us require that we will have to do very much better.
ENDNOTES


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