Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century

EDITED BY

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Dedicated to the memory of Peggy Pascoe (1954–2010) and Clyde Woods (1957–2011)
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When we initially advanced our concept of racial formation in the mid-1980s, we did not have the slightest inkling that it would prove both durable and flexible as a framework for understanding the changing meaning of race. The credit for its vitality goes not to us alone but also to scholars and activists from a wide range of fields who have creatively engaged racial formation theory and given it much of its ongoing significance, coherence, and utility. The contributors to this collection are among those leading the way in deepening our understanding of ongoing processes of racialization and interpreting the broader political meaning of “racial projects” both historically and in the present.

With this essay we seek both to situate racial formation theory in the historical period from which it first emerged and to apply it to racial politics today in the age of Obama. In the first subsection, “The Origins of Racial Formation Theory,” we consider the problems that the theory was initially designed to address, and the thinkers and movements who influenced us. In a short transition, “Breaking with the Past: Trajectories of Racial Politics,” we move to the present, drawing attention to the breadth and depth of the shifts in the meaning and social structure of race that the United States and the world as a whole have experienced over just the past few decades. In the following subsection, “Post-racial Scenarios?” we survey some contemporary analyses of changing U.S. racial dynamics and their implications.

After that, we present our own take on new patterns of race and racism. In “Racial Classification and Its Discontents,” we examine the ongoing
instability and changing meaning of the race concept and discuss such matters as census politics, the “new racial science,” and concepts of race in popular culture. In “The Racial Regime and Its Discontents,” we consider such issues as “colorblind” racial ideology, the U.S. demographic shift toward a “majority-minority” population, the role of race in electoral politics, race and empire, immigrant rights and resurgent nativism, and the racial dimensions of neoliberalism.

As this long list of topics indicates, we continue to see race and racism as fundamental dimensions of U.S. politics and society—deeply structuring social life at both macro and micro levels and profoundly shaping political discourse and ideology. Our concluding subsection, “Reconstructing Race,” looks at U.S. racial prospects: a combination of chronic racial crisis and glimmers of hope for an expanding and deeper democracy.

THE ORIGINS OF RACIAL FORMATION THEORY

Our concept of racial formation emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the then-dominant modes of theorizing about race in mainstream social science. We were trained in the social sciences; we were experienced anti-racist activists. We had come to reject the way race was conceptualized and operationalized, both in social science research and in left anti-racist thought and political practice. In mainstream social science, scholars failed to address the changing meaning of race over historical time and in distinct social settings. Race was ubiquitous, but the changing meaning of race and the “content” of racial identity went largely unnoticed. Conceiving race in a fixed and static way meant that researchers did not have to engage the very category of race itself and its social determinants. Treating race in a binary manner, for example as present/absent, 0/1, allowed researchers to correlate it simply and nonreflexively with the other variables in assessing patterns of residential segregation, income inequalities, health disparities, and so on. Of course, understanding racial inequality is important. But what is the meaning of race itself? How did race assume a given reality, a given significance, at a specific historical moment and in a specific social site? Such questions were rarely, if ever, asked.

Trying to address these problems ourselves led us to think of race as a social concept, something that needed to be critically engaged in its
own right. One could not effectively analyze patterns of residential segregation, for example, without considering the racial categories that were utilized and encoded in research, in public documents, and in legal decisions at a given place and time. One had to ask not only how race shaped segregation but also how segregation reciprocally shaped race, how it invested racial categories with content and meaning. To assert that race is a social concept marks the beginning, not the conclusion, of “doing” racial theory.

Our initial take was to emphasize the “political determination” of race. This emphasis came from our simultaneous engagement and disenchantment with theories of race and racism on the political left. While firmly committed to the democratic, egalitarian, and social justice goals espoused by the left, we were critical of several assumptions that guided Marxist analyses of race. Race was seen as epiphenomenal to class, while racism was regarded as a specific form of “false consciousness” that muted class-based opposition to capitalist exploitation. From this perspective, race was strategically utilized by the capitalist class to sow discontent and create divisions within the working class, thus preventing the emergence of unified class consciousness and organization.1 The task for the left was to challenge false racial consciousness and promote the primacy of class-based politics.

Skeptical of this position, we began to consider race as a legitimate and salient social category in its own right, on par with class. Adopting this approach allowed us to think about race as a fundamental principle of social organization in the United States. From there, we could discover how race could shape class categories as well as be shaped by them, and also how race was inextricably bound up with other axes of stratification and difference such as gender and sexuality.

Of course the concept of racial formation did not emerge out of thin air. We were inspired by some of the magnificent scholars who had gone before us, and we pillaged and borrowed from a variety of sources. The pioneering work of W. E. B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Oliver C. Cox, among others, helped us understand the multiple ways in which race was a foundational and organizing principle of U.S. society, and how profoundly it had shaped social stratification historically. In particular, DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness” (1969) was fundamental to how we thought about individual identity and collective consciousness. Bob Blauner’s concept of “internal colonialism” (1972) was also instrumental in our rethinking of race. Although we criticized that paradigm in Racial
Formation, Blauner’s treatment of the distinctions between “colonized and immigrant minorities” and the attention he directed toward the problem of cultural domination influenced us greatly. His efforts to link the “Third World abroad” to the “Third World within” continue to hold relevance for contemporary racial theory. Herbert Blumer (1958) and Troy Duster’s symbolic interactionist account of race and racism (Blumer and Duster 1980) allowed us to think about “group position” and the consolidation of racial hierarchy. They showed how racial stratification profoundly shapes relations between racially defined groups. A crucial insight we took from symbolic interactionism was its emphasis on individual and collective agency and the ways identities and relationships were continually forged in social interaction.

The writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971) spurred us to rethink Marxism and supplied the key conceptual frames for understanding the transition from racial dictatorship to racial democracy. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, constituted by a combination of coercion and consent, allowed us to explore the consolidation, depth, and persistence of racial power. Through Gramsci we were able to conceptualize historical changes in the U.S. racial system and the ways in which a “war of maneuver”—a pitched battle between clearly located antagonists, between dominant and subordinate racialized groups—had given way to a “war of position,” a pervasive conflict being fought out everywhere at once. Adam Przeworski’s concept of “class formation” (1977) not only helped us rethink class but also provided a reference point for theorizing about race. Przeworski critiqued the notion that class was a distinct location within a mode of production and instead emphasized the highly relational and contingent political dimensions of class conflict. Ernesto Laclau’s work (1977) demonstrated that ideological positions did not necessarily reflect discrete class positions but that themes such as populism and nationalism could be taken up and refashioned to express the interests and aspirations of different and antagonistic political blocs. Populism or nationalism could have authoritarian or emancipatory political framings. From such work we grasped the importance of political struggles over racial meaning and adopted the concept of rearticulation to illustrate how racial ideology could be refashioned to suit a variety of different and sometimes competing political positions.2 To us, these were “better” Marxian analyses.

The theoretical insights of feminist scholars such as Sheila Rowbotham, Shulamith Firestone, and bell hooks, among others, also shaped our ideas
in several important ways. Second-wave feminism was flowering as we wrote, and questions of race-gender “intersectionality” were first being raised. Thinking about gender as a distinct axis of stratification and difference prodded us to conceptualize the category of race in a parallel fashion. The feminist movement advanced an understanding of gender, both analytically and politically, as a social category—arguing convincingly that gender was not reducible to class. Feminism facilitated and deepened our critique of Marxist and left analyses of race and racism. Feminist theory also insisted on comprehensively linking both the micro and macro levels of social analysis. It dramatically revealed how concepts of gender were deeply embedded at all levels of human interaction and organization—from intimate relations within the family to the overall structure of pre- and postindustrial societies. Such an analysis was succinctly expressed by radical feminist Carol Hanisch’s notion that “the personal is political.”

We took such formulations to heart in our analysis of race. We paid attention to the ways race was conceived, constructed, and practiced at both the micro level of everyday social relationships and at the macro level of institutional arrangements and social structure.

Our concept of racial formation was forged in struggle. We were inspired by and engaged in the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: the black power movement, the feminist movement, the antiwar movement, the student movement, the insurgent labor movement, and the struggles for ethnic studies on university campuses. The insights, issues, and contradictions generated by these social justice struggles became foundational to our work. Racial formation also reflected debates between the two of us. We worked out our positions through intense discussion, endless rewriting, and compromise. Our collaboration, now more than thirty years old, is a model for collective political and intellectual labor. It sometimes seems like a miracle, a marvelous gift that we have been able to give each other. Our work has truly been sustained by a great friendship.

The concept of racial formation was first advanced in a two-part article, “By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States,” published in the journal Socialist Review, with which we were associated (Omi and Winant 1983). The first edition of the book Racial Formation in the United States appeared in 1986.

Then came disappointment. We were dismayed that our work was ignored for several years by the very social scientists we sought to influence. Anti-racist activists took no notice. Much to our surprise, our initial
fans were from other academic disciplines, notably history, literary studies, and law. Historians used our ideas to examine and periodize shifts in the racial order, literary theorists and critics analyzed racial representations and discourse in their canonical texts, and legal scholars interrogated the fluidity and ambiguity of race in doctrinal law, jurisprudence, and legal practice. The fact that contemporary introductory sociology textbooks on race and ethnicity now have a section on “racial formation” is quite gratifying for us. We can at last find validation in our own discipline—one that had initially ignored our call to critically examine the social construction of race.

Over the years, numerous criticisms have been made of the concept of racial formation. The political determinism we embraced early in our collaboration has often been challenged, but we continue to uphold our commitment to the primacy of the political. Such an emphasis, we think, allows us to discern the contours of the current racial order, to understand what racial hegemony looks like, to specify its contradictions, and to envision alternative scenarios.

We continue to emphasize the instability of the race concept. This condition derives from the multiply determined “social space”—both very broad and very deep—that race occupies. Race operates at the crossroads between social structure and experience. It is both historically determined and continually being made and remade in everyday life. In this sense, race is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic, as Lévi-Strauss (1966) might say.

The instability of race accounts for both the ongoing volatility and the continuity of the concept. Why, for example, are racial attributions so prone to violence, so “hot,” so fiercely upheld and contested, so necessary in the modern world as components of both self and social structure? Why is race so available as a “scavenger concept”: a default variable on the basis of which so many disparate phenomena are supposedly explained (Fredrickson 2002; Gilroy 1999)? How can a social distinction be both so determining—of life chances and status, of freedom, of social structure, of identity itself—and at the same time so undetermined, inchoate, and indeed unreal on so many levels? These are but a few of the many questions we were asking about race and racism more than three decades ago.

We are asking them still. And while racial conditions have changed dramatically since our book was first published, the legacy of the past, the
vast waste of structural racism, accumulated over the centuries, continues to weigh us down as well. We do indeed live in history.

BREAKING WITH THE PAST: THE TRAJECTORIES OF RACIAL POLITICS

There have been “cycles” or “trajectories” of racial reform and reaction since the rise of the race concept in tandem with the development of the “modern world-system.” But the post–World War II racial “break” was the most profound transformation in world racial history. Never before had there been a racial upsurge so wide: so comprehensively driven by extensive global conflicts—such as World War II and the Cold War—and so propelled by mass action, by vast demographic transformations, massive migrations, urbanization, and above all, by popular mobilization. Never has any racial upheaval cut so deep: indeed, under intense pressure that was often radical and sometimes revolutionary, many racial states officially “switched sides” in the postwar years, shifting from upholding apartheid, racial exclusion, and colonial rule to opposing—at least officially—these policies and practices (Winant 2001).

Enormous changes have occurred over the past few decades as parts of a shift, a rupture, a break that we called (pace Polanyi) the “great transformation.” De jure segregation and state-enforced Jim Crow were effectively challenged in the 1960s, and the South African apartheid system finally fell in 1994. Some explicitly “racist regimes” (Fredrickson 2002) have been overthrown, and the ideologies that undergirded them have been largely discredited.⁷

The U.S. encounter with race and racism in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond constitutes a case study of a global racial transition. The great transformation, the worldwide racial “break,” was the cumulative result of states, empires, and elites on a world scale being challenged by their own people—by “natives,” and by the descendants of former slaves and colonial subjects—to “pay up” for the practices of superexploitation, exclusion, domination, and nonrecognition to which they had been so long subjected. The former “wretched of the earth” demanded greater social equality, a fundamental expansion of democracy, and a dramatic extension of popular sovereignty. The great wave of postwar political movements—anti-imperialist movements, civil rights movements,
and the “identity politics” of the 1960s—all contributed to the radical transformation of the global racial order.

Not only was the vast upsurge of demands for racial justice more than merely a U.S.-based phenomenon, but the resistance to those demands, what we called the “racial reaction,” was correspondingly global in scope. Neoconservatism, nonracialism, neoliberalism, backlash, multiculturalism, rollback, colorblindness, and racial differentialism—to pick some of the key terms of that reaction—were responses, sometimes right-wing and sometimes centrist or even liberal, to the hugely disruptive, redistributive, democratic, and egalitarian demands of the worldwide racial upsurge. Here too the United States was but a “case,” however important, of a global process in which displaced elites, empires, and ideologies struggled to reconstruct and indeed reimagine their racial regimes after the war.

POST-RACIAL SCENARIOS?

This brings us to the present moment. Have racist regimes been dismantled as a result of the “great transformation,” or has racism simply mutated into new and perhaps more flexible and less discernible forms? Some political observers have interpreted the election of Barack Obama as the dawning of a new, “post-racial” era. Obama’s ascent to the highest post in the land is popularly regarded as stunning testimony of how far the nation has come in moving beyond the racial barriers and exclusions of the past. This post-racial optimism reflects contemporary “colorblind” racial ideology: the belief that the goals of the civil rights movement have been substantially achieved, that overt forms of racial discrimination are a thing of the past, and that the United States has successfully transitioned to a “post-” or even “nonracist” society. As an ideological frame, colorblindness denies that race should inform perceptions, shape attitudes, or influence individual or collective action. Indeed from a colorblind standpoint any hints of race consciousness are tainted by racism; hence, the most effective anti-racist gesture, policy, or practice is simply to ignore race. The hope is that by ignoring race, we can transcend racism and embrace a post-racial future.

Such an optimistic scenario, of course, misses the enduring persistence and significance of race, and the ways that structural racism continues to
The “colorblind” framework has been the target of scathing criticism across the social sciences, humanities, and professions that has demonstrated the persistence of racial inequalities and argued for “race conscious” policies and practices to address them (Carbado and Harris 2008; Brown et al. 2003; Feagin 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2006).

But while race still matters, changes are always afoot. The color line itself has been rendered more complex in the twenty-first century transition to a majority-minority society. How will racial transformations reshape issues of racial hierarchy and broader patterns of racial domination and subordination?

Many have speculated about these questions, peering through a glass darkly in their attempts to predict the racial future. Jennifer L. Hochschild (2005) assesses future racial trends and poses several possible scenarios contingent on different racial constructions and practices. In her “black exceptionalism” scenario, a black/nonblack racial divide is the crucial axis of racial division: Asians and Latinos are slowly drawn to the white side of the color line. An alternative is the “white exceptionalism” scenario, which posits a white/nonwhite racial divide in which groups of color would share a common subordinate status. Her third possibility is the “South African” scenario, in which the nation is re-sorted into three groups: whites and “honorary whites” (most Asians, some Latinos, and some biracials), coloreds (some Asians, most Latinos, some biracials and a few blacks), and blacks and almost-blacks. This last “triracial” system is similar to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s notion (2004) of the “Latin Americanization” of race relations. A fourth scenario Hochschild considers is the dramatic growth of a “mixed-race” or multiracial population with the requisite blurring of distinct racial and ethnic groups. “A crucial divide in this scenario,” writes Hochschild, “would be between those who identify as monoracials and seek to protect cultural purity and those who identify as multiracials and celebrate cultural mixing” (2005, 81).

Certainly persistent white supremacy has historically required that groups of color be politically and economically marginalized and subject to cultural forms of domination. Such a position of subordination found expression, for example, in the internal colonialism account: there, groups of color shared a common situation of oppression that offered a potential basis for political unity. But just as previous “outsiders” such as the Irish and Jews have been incorporated into prevailing notions of who is white, some scholars speculate that groups such as Asian Americans and Latinos...
are increasingly being included in an expanded definition of whiteness. For example, George Yancey (2003) argues that Latinos and Asian Americans are undergoing significant structural, marital, and identity-based assimilation and that a black/nonblack divide is emerging as these groups become “white,” while blacks continue to experience what Yancey calls “racial alienation.” The emergence of a triracial order in which some groups are positioned as intermediate buffers between black and white might at first glance appear more pluralistic and fluid than a biracial order shaped by the rule of hypodescent, the so-called one-drop rule. But, as Bonilla-Silva warns, a triracial system of stratification would also be an effective means of maintaining white supremacy. The “Latin Americanization of race” thesis anticipates a U.S. transition to a society with “more rather than less racial inequality but with a reduced forum for racial contestation” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 198).

We question aspects of the “Latin Americanization of race” thesis. Because the United States now relates to the global South and global East through a master policy of “accumulation by dispossession,” it fosters immigration. Displaced and impoverished workers and peasants from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as from the Pacific Rim, continue to immigrate, their human flow modulated but hardly contained by boom and bust, “bubble” and recession. And because the United States has also become more predatory domestically, practicing a similar policy of “accumulation by dispossession” in post-Katrina New Orleans or the subprime housing crisis—to pick just two prominent examples—it is less able to integrate immigrants than it was in previous historical periods. Where will the United States find an “engine of mobility” to parallel that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the epochs of mass labor recruitment to the industrial economy? In short, the country’s economic capacity to absorb enormous numbers of immigrants, low-wage workers and their families, and a new, globally based (and largely female) servant class (see Glenn 2002), without generating the sort of established subaltern groups we associate with the terms race and racism, seems to us more limited than was the “whitening” of Europeans a century earlier, this argument’s key precedent.

And then there is the question of “mixed-race” or multiracial individuals, another key aspect of the “Latin Americanization” thesis. The issue of multiraciality problematizes deeply held notions of race, racial classification, and racial identity itself. Indeed, the very concept of being
of “mixed race” presupposes the existence of clearly defined, discernible, and discrete races.\(^\text{16}\) Our view is that any discussion of multiraciality must resist “racial lumping”: the tendency to locate multiracial individuals in a collective category that fails to consider not only the enormous diversity within multiracial populations but also the varied political and cultural meanings of multiraciality itself. For example, the *mestizaje* framework conflicts with the white/nonwhite North American system. And in many social or institutional settings the experience and consciousness of being mixed-race white-Asian is significantly different from that of being black-Asian. Whether multiracial identity, consciousness, and organization will seriously subvert or merely reinforce racial hierarchy in the United States remains very much an open question.

An opposite and equally pernicious tendency is to reject group identity *tout court* by elevating social constructionist approaches to ethnicity, race, and nationality to an all-encompassing framework, a sort of universal solvent of all identity, all particularity. Perhaps driven by frustration that not only racial but also ethnic and national identities remain flexible and unstable and resist social scientific specification, Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov (1994; see also Brubaker 2004) repudiate “groupism” across the board. They argue that ethnic, racial, and national social categories can be more effectively conceived as matters of social psychology. Ethnic, racial, or national identities are thereby reduced to quite subjective processes: how one (or many) interpret their social location, their differences or similarities with others, and so forth. This has the consequence of diminishing the political dimensions of these themes, as well as relegating lived experience, not to mention world-historical events and widely distributed beliefs, to little more than commonly held illusions.

All these issues—the possibility or desirability of a post-racial society, the realities of demographic transformation and racial stratification, the varieties of multiracial consciousness, and the parameters of collectivity as well—continually and inexorably point to the continuing instability of the concept of race itself. This instability is a fundamental preoccupation of the racial formation approach. It is reflected, for example, in the endemic mismatches between state-based racial classifications and individual/collective social identities. Such inconsistencies are political in nature and embody profound differences over racial meaning—differences that reveal who wields power in establishing definitions and categories and how such boundaries are contested and negotiated.
Racial Classification and Its Discontents

Consider the U.S. census. As this is written the 2010 census is under way; we cannot yet evaluate its findings. But according to the Census Bureau, 40 percent of Latinos in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses filled out the race and ethnicity questions “wrong.” The bureau’s preference was to have Latinos respond both to the question “Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?” and the question “What is this person’s race?” A dark-skinned Puerto Rican, for example, might check off that she or he was “Hispanic/Puerto Rican” and “Black,” while a light-skinned Mexican might describe himself or herself as “Hispanic/Mexican” and “White.” But many Latino respondents did not understand, or perhaps did not accept, the racial and ethnic categories presented. They did not know how—or perhaps refused—to situate themselves within the choices the census offered. It is estimated that about 95 percent of respondents who simply checked “some other race” were in fact Latino (Omi 1997; Rodríguez 2000).

The shifting context of race has a profound impact on claims for recognition that are validated (or ignored) in state-sanctioned racial categories. In the mid-1990s, during the planning for Census 2000, key Arab American civil rights organizations unsuccessfully lobbied the Office of Management and Budget for a “Middle Eastern” category on the census. They were critical of the classification of Arab Americans as “white” and argued that with respect to hate crime reporting (among other social indicators and issues), Arab Americans should be a distinct racial category. We are not surprised that in the wake of 9/11 no Arab American organization is now lobbying for such a separate “Middle Eastern” category. The line between group recognition and racial profiling is a thin one.17

The issue of racial profiling reveals an intriguing contradiction in the meaning of race and its relationship to the racial ideology of colorblindness. Profiling raises questions of when and under what circumstances we want to “notice” race. When do we want to be race-conscious, and when do we want to be “colorblind”? After decades of touting colorblindness as the only appropriate guide to policymaking regarding race, some conservative political figures and commentators are now finding it expedient to make exceptions. In the context of the continuing “war on terror,” it is argued that our national security may rest on the state’s adoption of explicitly race-conscious policies. Since the 9/11 attacks, the July 2005 attacks in London, the 2004 Atocha railroad bombings in Spain, and various other similar
events, renewed calls have gone out for authorities to use racial and ethnic profiling to identify potential terrorists at airports and elsewhere. The “scavenger concept” of race resurfaces.

After the attempt to blow up a passenger jet in December 2009, New York assemblyman Dov Hikind (D-Brooklyn) introduced legislation to “authorize law enforcement personnel to consider race and ethnicity as one of many factors that could be used in identifying persons who can be initially stopped, questioned, frisked and/or searched.” In 2005 Hikind had sponsored a bill to allow New York state police to zero in on “Middle Easterners” when conducting terrorism prevention searches. “They all look a certain way,” he said. “It’s all very nice to be politically correct here, but we’re talking about terrorism.” This is a call for policies and practices that notice race and attempt to rationalize and justify such moves as serving a broader public interest. Law professor John Banzhaf states, “A very compelling argument can be made that the government’s interest in protecting the lives, safety and health of thousands of its citizens from another major terrorist attack similar to those carried out in New York, London and other cities . . . is at least as ‘compelling’ as a racially diverse student body.”

The pervasive instability of the concept of race is revealed not only in ongoing policy debates but also in the biological sciences. The dominant mantra in the social sciences and humanities is that “race is a social construction, not a biological one.” This view reflects scientific critiques of race as a biological concept that emerged at the close of World War II as a direct response to the eugenic ideologies and practices of Nazi Germany. An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2001 sought to provide the definitive word on the subject by flatly stating that “race is biologically meaningless.” But in the wake of the Human Genome Project, geneticists are once again debating whether race is a meaningful and useful genetic concept.

Geneticist Neil Risch contends that genetic differences have arisen among people from different continents and employs the term “race” to aggregate the human population into five major groups. This recognition of race, he contends, is important for understanding genetic susceptibility to certain diseases and receptivity to medical interventions such as drug treatments. This biological turn has repercussions in fields such as pharmacogenomics. The ultimate goal of pharmacogenomics is to deliver the precise type of medication—and the precise dose—to a patient based on her or his individual genome. Drugs would be specifically tailored for the
treatment of an individual’s specific condition. Given that an individual’s genome has yet to be sequenced in a quick and cost-effective manner, the question has been raised as to whether one’s race can serve as a suitable proxy for determining how one might fare with a specific drug.

The question is not an abstract one. Consider the introduction of BiDil as the first “ethnic designer drug.” Produced by the biotech firm NitroMed, BiDil is marketed to African Americans who suffer from congestive heart failure. Some medical researchers fear that BiDil sets a dangerous precedent by linking race and genetics in ways that could distract from alternative ways of understanding the causes of a disease and the means to treat it (Kahn 2004). Legal scholar and bioethicist Jonathan Kahn suggests that by approving BiDil, the federal government was “giving its imprimatur, its stamp of approval, to using race as a biological category. To my mind, it’s the road to hell being paved with good intentions.”

The issue of race and genetics finds expression in popular culture as well. In 2010, PBS aired Faces of America, with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a four-episode documentary series that traced the ancestral roots of prominent celebrities through “genealogy and genetics.” Gates’s series inspired a growing popular quest by individuals to find their “roots” through purportedly scientific means. There are currently at least two dozen companies that market “genetic ancestry tests”; more than 460,000 people have purchased these tests over the past six years (Bonick et al. 2007). In 2007 Gates stated: “We are living through an era of the ascendancy of biology, and we have to be very careful. We will all be walking a fine line between using biology and allowing it to be abused.” There is indeed a fine line. The rebiologization of race will significantly contribute to and trouble debates about the very concept of race.

Somewhat ironically, new patterns and developments in racialization, such as the rebiologization question, destabilize the prevailing racial ideology of colorblindness. It is hard to maintain a colorblind posture if there is indeed a “scientific” basis to race and racial categories. Given the inherent instability of the race concept, it becomes increasingly important to make clear distinctions between colorblind and race-conscious policies and practices, and to discern their larger purpose and intent.

In August 2006 Mark Burnett, the creator of CBS’s Survivor, caused a furor when he revealed that in the upcoming fall season, the twenty Survivor contestants would be divided into four “tribes”—Asian American, black, Hispanic, and white. Local and national protests ensued. Several
New York City Council members demanded that CBS cancel the show. Their demand prompted *New York Times* columnist Clyde Haberman to observe sarcastically that the very city officials incensed by the show were members of the black, Latino, and Asian caucuses that operate in New York City’s political system. “In other words,” wrote Haberman, “leading the condemnation of CBS for creating teams defined by race and ethnicity was a team that created itself using race and ethnicity as the definition.”

Haberman’s comment is indicative of the dilemmas of racial classification. Those engaged in challenging racial inequality need to specify with greater clarity (and consistency) when, where, and under what circumstances we want to be “colorblind” and when we want to be race-conscious in the broader pursuit of social justice.

**THE RACIAL REGIME AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

The instability of the race concept and the controversies it generates are emblematic of the *racially contradictory* society in which we live. In the United States a system of racial rule has always been in place, operating not merely through macro-level, large-scale activities but also through micro-level, small-scale practices. The racial regime is enforced and challenged in the schoolyard, on the dance floor, on talk radio, and in the classroom as much as it is in the Supreme Court, electoral politics, or the battlefield of Helmand province. Because racial formation processes are dynamic, the racial regime remains unstable and contested. We live in racial history.

While the “great transformation” contributed to the demise of explicitly racist state policies, discredited essentialist racial ideologies, and ushered in a set of (ostensibly) egalitarian reforms, it obviously did not complete those tasks. Given the persistence of structural racism and racial inequality in the “post–civil rights era,” is the racial regime’s supposed “switching of sides,” the supposed transition “from domination to hegemony” we described in *Racial Formation*, anything more than a thinly veiled cosmetic makeover? In the United States, after all, segregation proceeds quite effectively without explicit state sponsorship, and indeed still receives quite a bit of tacit state support. Anti-discrimination laws are barely enforced, and when an occasional plaintiff of color wins a rare victory in court, the costs to discriminators don’t even begin to offset the benefits derived from discrimination in the first place. The old forms of systematic voter
disenfranchisement—by terror—have largely ended, but new forms of election rigging (for example, “vote caging” and the permanent denial of voting rights to ex-felons) achieve many of the same effects. Since the enactment of civil rights laws, incarceration rates in the United States have increased so dramatically (nearly a tenfold increase since 1980; see Mauer 2006; Alexander 2010; Gilmore 2007), and with such extreme racial disproportionality, that carceral policy has now to be viewed as a prime example of “backlash” racial politics.

And come to think of it, how relegated to the past is the question of empire? In the modern world, empires are always distinctively racist; race and empire walk hand in hand. Occupying and subduing other nations is justified today by reference to the putative backwardness of the “natives” (Afghanistan) as well as by claims that they are suffering under horrific regimes that fail to provide elementary democratic or human rights (Iraq). How different is this from the French “mission civilisatrice” or the British “white man’s burden”—or for that matter, the U.S. “manifest destiny”—of past epochs?24 One notes that the effort to tutor these “backward” peoples in the “higher values” of advanced civilization also involves dispossessing them of resources and/or labor, not to mention mass slaughter (Mbembe 2001). As for popular sovereignty, forget it: in 2008 the United States maintained military bases in 132 countries; while publically fighting wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was covertly involved in military operations in at least a dozen other supposedly sovereign nations. The meaning and structure of race, both in the United States and worldwide, remain fundamentally unstable and troubled and are the source of unresolved contradictions and dilemmas.

The “great transformation” after World War II overturned the old racial logics, enabled anti-racist movements to enter mainstream politics and initiate racial “wars of position,” and resulted in the rearticulation and reorganization of racial regimes in more incorporative and less coercive forms. This shift transformed but hardly precluded the recurrence of “old school” racial repression and violence. In many respects it allowed the perpetuation of discrimination, profiling, nativism, empire, and other forms of racial injustice as it “regrooved” these practices, making use of the very racial reforms for which earlier civil rights and anti-imperialist activists had successfully struggled.25 Condoleeza Rice compared the U.S. occupation of Iraq to the 1963 movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in her native Birmingham, Alabama.
The crisis of race is now a chronic condition. “Crisis,” Gramsci wrote, “consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass” (1971, 276). On the one hand, the old verities of established racism and white supremacy have been officially discredited, not only in the United States but fairly comprehensively around the world; on the other hand, racially informed action and social organization, racial identity and race consciousness, continue unchecked in nearly every aspect of social life.

Given this, why doesn’t the manifest contradiction between the repudiation of race—both official and personal—and the continuing, constant, and near-ubiquitous recognition of race in virtually every aspect of social and political life provoke enormous uncertainty and confusion in public life, political activity, and personal identity? Why don’t our heads explode under the pressures of such cognitive dissonance?

The answer once again lies in the instability of the race concept, the processual characteristics of racial formation. Because racial categories remain unstable and subject to contention, and because the trajectory of racial reform and racial reaction remains volatile, the U.S. racial regime is permanently unstable as well. Here we note, necessarily very briefly, some of the major contradictions of the present U.S. racial system.

**Electoral Politics**

The election of Barack Obama transformed the U.S. presidency in ways we cannot yet fully appreciate. Obama is not simply the first nonwhite (that we know of) to occupy the office. He is the first to have lived in the global South, the first to be a direct descendent of colonized people, the first to have a genuine movement background. Without question Obama is by far the most progressive, the most “left” person ever to have occupied the White House. But he is no more powerful than any of his predecessors; he is constrained, as they were, by the U.S. system of rule, by the U.S. racial regime, by structural racism.

Not just the Obama victory but also a host of recent developments have demonstrated the isolation and marginalization of the Republican Party. It has become the white people’s party, driven in large measure by racial, religious, and gender/sexuality-based resentment. In U.S. history, there has generally been one political party that took charge of racial rule. This
has been especially true vis-à-vis black-white demarcations; for example, the organization by the Democratic Party of white supremacist rule in the Jim Crow era. But rapid swings are possible. After the critical election of 1932 U.S. blacks (those who could vote) shifted their loyalties away from the “party of Lincoln” en masse (Weiss 1983; Katznelson 2005). This occurred even though Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition effectively delegated control of the South to the plantocratic/agrarian/racist/Dixiecrat wing of his party. After the civil rights reforms of the mid-1960s, large numbers of white voters, particularly those based in the South, similarly embraced the Republicans.

The appearance of the “Tea Party” movement since the 2008 election signals a clearly reactionary racial agenda. This “movement”—white, predominantly male, and very much in the Republican Party orbit—is both an “Astroturf” phenomenon, a loose network of fake grass-roots organizations cobbled together by corporate lobbyists, and a genuine right-wing populist phenomenon rooted in resentment of Obama and the resurgence—still quite feeble—of the welfare state. Its whining politics—“I want my country back!”—incarnates a certain incredulity directed at present political conditions, both class-based and race-based. The “movement” has greater disruptive potential than it has adherents: just whose country is the United States, anyway?  

**Resurgent Nativism and Immigrants’ Rights**

Reforms in 1965 and 1986 removed many of the overtly racist components of the immigration laws that had shaped U.S. policy since the 1920s, and thereby set off enormous shifts in U.S. racial demography. These changes in turn have dramatically heightened nativist ideologies and mobilizations, reiterating racially framed political conflicts that stretch back to the founding of the U.S. nation-state (Ngai 2005; Chavez 2008).

The ineluctable demographic transition to a majority-minority population may impose some limits on the intensity and depth of contemporary nativist mobilization, however. Although nativism continues to flourish, it confronts other obstacles that did not exist in past cycles of alternating clampdowns and relaxations of immigration laws. In contrast to the sweeping anti-immigrant upsurges of the past (Higham 2002), a significant immigrants’ rights movement exists today in the United States; nothing like it has ever developed before. The civil rights connection to immi-
grants’ rights remains strong—most notably embodied in the legacy of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, a civil rights bill in its own right and a priority of the Kennedys. And immigration reform has huge consequences for voting patterns, especially over the medium and long term; this has been clear with respect to Latino voting patterns since 1994, when what had been seen as a swing constituency was pushed over to the Democrats as a result of California governor Pete Wilson’s promotion of Proposition 187 (R. Jacobson 2008; Ono and Sloop 2002; Wroe 2008).

In contrast, before the “great transformation” and the rise of the modern civil rights movement, exhortations on behalf of “Anglo-conformity” (M. Gordon 1964) were taken quite seriously. Virulent nativist assaults such as the anti-Irish movements of the 1840s (the American Native party or “Know-Nothings”), the 1870s and 1890s assaults on West Coast Asian communities (Saxton 1971; Pfaelzer 2007), and the 1930s mass deportations of Mexicans from Southern California (Balderrama and Rodríguez 1995) would prove considerably harder to stage today. The outcome of present-day immigration struggles depends on much political contention at the local, national, and global levels. Catastrophic events on the order of the 9/11 tragedy are always possible—and such tragedies remain susceptible to racialization. In the past the United States often recurred to “domestic foreign policy” in response to political threats. The country has tended to address major social conflicts (and sometimes international ones) by recourse to racist domestic practices. This is exemplified by the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the Palmer raids on Eastern and Southern Europeans in the 1920s, and the enormous waves of Islamophobia that followed the 9/11 attack.

In April 2010 the state of Arizona enacted SB 1070, an act “relating to unlawfully present aliens” that authorized police to stop suspected “illegal immigrants” and to demand proof of citizenship. National polls conducted in the wake of the law’s passage revealed significant popular support for the law—an ominous sign that immigration reform and the racialization of undocumented workers continue to be vexing issues. Does Arizona SB 1070 represent a new instance of “domestic foreign policy” in addition to being an obvious reiteration of U.S. nativism? Or is it a “gift to the Democrats,” as some political commentators have suggested, cementing the loyalties of Latino voters to the Democratic Party, much as Proposition 187 did in California in 1994?
As the Republican Party locks in its identity as the U.S. white people’s party, and as the rise in the U.S. Latino population continues, it is hard to avoid the impression that Arizona’s institutionalization of racial profiling via SB 1070 represents a last-ditch and probably doomed effort to deny brown people access to the ballot. But that’s in the medium to long term, when demographic trends favor another cycle of legalization, as happened in 1965 and 1986. The sheer impracticality of deporting large numbers of undocumented denizens from the United States, and the ferocious state repression that would be required to carry out such a policy, seem to rule out the strategy of la mano dura that SB 1070 implies. Numerous other negative consequences would also derive from such measures, notably massive disruptions in the labor market and untold amounts of personal suffering. In the short term, though, there are undoubtedly some political gains to be made through immigrant-bashing.

The Crisis of Neoliberalism and the Assault on the Welfare State

The shifting demographics of race also affect other key political and policy arenas, such as education, labor policy, and social security. The rise of neoliberalism, which began under Reagan, meant the vitiation of an already beleaguered welfare state: notably in the 1996 Clinton welfare “reforms” that abandoned AFDC in favor of the more draconian policies of TANF. By shredding the “safety net” that had been established in the 1930s and was only belatedly and grudgingly extended to racial minorities in the 1960s, the U.S. racial regime greatly widened the gap between the formal (“visible”), largely white economy and the informal (“invisible”), largely nonwhite economy. This trend also increased the distance between city and suburb, hardened policing and criminal “justice” patterns (often relying on a “national security” rationale), and reinforced segregation in schooling and residential patterns—vis-à-vis both blacks and Latinos (Boger and Orfield 2005).

Education is a key battleground in the racial restructuring of U.S. society. The student body in the U.S. public education system is moving toward majority-minority status, though it is still some decades away from that. Census Bureau estimates of that transition locate it around the year 2025. Who will teach these students? What career prospects will they have? As the U.S. economy becomes increasingly centered in the “knowledge
industries,” it will require major investments in public education and far more effective integration between curricular content and shifting patterns of employment. Neoliberal educational policy (“No Child Left Behind,” “Race to the Top,” the privatization of higher education) is headed in precisely the opposite direction: disinvesting; relying on mechanistic and formulaic testing of basic skills rather than teaching adaptive and creative thought processes (“intelligence” in the Deweyan use of the term); and abandoning large numbers of low-income children (disproportionately black and brown) to permanent subemployment.

A closely related question is the racial composition of the U.S. workforce. As informal labor markets grow (Vogel 2006) in size and importance, it becomes more difficult to assess employment patterns with specificity (Toossi 2002). Consider the Social Security system, perhaps the most durable element of the New Deal–based welfare state. Already there are fewer and fewer white workers paying the FICA taxes to support social security payments to largely white baby boomers. The Social Security system—forced savings through regressive payroll taxation, pay-as-you-go financing—has long been seen both as a powerful guarantor of political legitimacy and as a “third rail” of the welfare state: a New Deal achievement that worked to curtail and regulate excessive and highly ideological “free market” pressures from the political right. George W. Bush’s blundering campaign for Social Security “privatization” was but the most recent assault on that system from the HQ of reaction. But by the mid-twenty-first century a majority of U.S. workers will be nonwhite. To the extent that they are employed in the formal economy, they will be paying their FICA/payroll taxes (as of now still organized regressively, exempting annual incomes above $106,800 in 2009) to support those largely white retirees born in the mid-twentieth century and later. Well before 2050, in short, the calculus of cost and benefit in the Social Security system will shift: it will no longer afford political legitimacy or constitute an unshakeable pillar of support to many working people. We may very well see revolts against this remaining bastion of the welfare state (or against its inadequacy) on the part of people of color. Might we see future opposition to Social Security from the “left”? Now that would be something new!

Racial rule is increasingly difficult to maintain. The costs of racial repression—imprisonment and arming the U.S.-Mexican border, for example—directly compete with the costs of social investment. Postcolonial warfare—a distinctly racial policy—is perhaps the most egregious example
of this: the cost of U.S. wars since 2001 is now in the trillions. Cultural transformations generally tend to delegitimize racial rule, especially in the context of demographic transition toward a majority-minority society: in the arts, popular media, language use, “styles,” the dynamics of personal life and intimate relationships, and indeed in working concepts of identity, racial rearticulation is commonplace.

Racial rule requires repression, not because of some functionalist law, but because it inspires resistance. Exclusion, superexploitation, violence, and despotism inevitably generate opposition. In the past the opposition of those who were not white, who lacked citizenship rights and therefore could not access the political system, necessarily took subversive and largely spontaneous forms: sabotage, slacking, subaltern forms of action (Scott 1990). After “the great transformation,” after the movement “from protest to politics” (Kelley 1992; Tate 1993; see also Waskow 1966), however, the racially subordinate could both act within mainstream political parameters and continue to subvert those boundaries in search of greater democratic and human rights. Yet racial repression remains very much a part of everyday life and social structure in the United States.

RECONSTRUCTING RACE

The prevailing ideology of colorblindness is a failed attempt to construct a new racial hegemony, based on the limited reforms of the civil rights era. Center-right in political orientation, informed by an uneasy admixture of new right and neoconservative racial ideology, colorblind racial ideology cannot overcome the gap between the promises of reform and the realities of ongoing inequality and racial despotism.

While advocates of “colorblind” racial ideology vehemently argue against state policy “taking race into account,” the state also needs race to rule. This is true in virtually every area of state activity. Structural racism persists; democratic reforms have not undone the legacy of systematic exclusion, violence, exploitation, and marginalization that race embodies. Thus social control via race continues: in criminal “justice,” in corporate welfare as well as the evisceration of the welfare state, in the organization of labor, credit, and housing markets, and of course in the U.S. militarization of the world. Racial repression continues to furnish brutal reminders of the incompleteness of democracy and the shallowness of post-racial celebra-
tions. Consider the victims: who are the prisoners, the families dropped from the welfare rolls, the permanent residents deported, and those disproportionately dispossessed by the home mortgage crisis (Rivera 2008)?

But while the state needs race to rule, it is also confronted by anti-racist opposition and constrained by its own commitment to the achievement of racial hegemony through the colorblindness construct. In general, it is forced to exercise racial rule covertly. The effects of the “great transformation” still resonate. The contradictions of this situation, in which the racial regime must simultaneously disavow its raciality and deploy it as broadly and deeply as ever, is arguably the greatest single factor in the continuing instability of race in the state’s unavoidable ratification of neoliberal policies of superexploitation and “accumulation by dispossession.” Here we see the limits of President Obama’s post-racial appeals, the enormous difficulties involved in stemming, much less cleaning up, the ongoing accumulation of racial “waste.”

So what does the crisis of colorblindness suggest for the racial future? What does it mean for the United States that a new racial hegemony cannot be consolidated, that achieving some new post–civil rights era racial commonsense seems very unlikely, at least for now? Does it mean persistent structural racism, unremitting racial despotism, the impossibility of democratization? Or does our present racial condition contain hints and suggestions about alternative routes—not toward racial “progress” (a much too incrementalist, too meliorist term), but at least toward a greater and deeper democracy? Can we see new ways of situating the racial self, of inhabiting our racial identities—both individually and collectively—in greater freedom?

The desire remains strong—not only in our hearts but in those of millions—for a more emancipatory concept of race and a more fulfilling, less conflicted race consciousness. What would that look like? To be very specific, what do you want your race consciousness to be?

If the “colorblind” perspective has failed to achieve hegemony, failed to consolidate a new racial “common sense,” what comes next? From a “colorblind” perspective, one is exhorted not to “notice” race, not to see it, for if one did, one wouldn’t be “blind” to it, right? But what happens to race consciousness under conditions of “colorblind” hegemony? Quite clearly, awareness of raciality does not dry up like a raisin in the sun. Just as “colorblind” racial ideology serves as a means to occlude recognition of race beneath the veneer of a supposedly already accomplished universality,
race consciousness works to highlight racial differences and particularities. It can be linked to despotic or democratic ends, articulated in defense of coercion, privilege, and undeserved advantage; alternatively it can be deployed in support of inclusion, human rights, and social justice.

Yet despite our strong criticism of racism and of the “colorblind” racial project, race consciousness exhibits certain contradictions as well. We can make errors in conceptualizing race or in attributing racial identity. Just when does race matter, anyway? Always? Sometimes? If the answer is “sometimes,” what about those situations when race “doesn’t matter”? Are there situations in which we should not notice race? Isn’t racial identity often ambiguous and contradictory? What is its significance for transracial solidarity and alliance? What is its significance for transracial friendship, or indeed love? These old themes no doubt retain something of their transgressive and unsettling character, but they are also increasingly normal, regular, and unremarkable. Can trust and solidarity exist across racial lines? Is it possible either in individual or collective social practice to “get beyond” race, and what exactly would that mean? How definitive is racial identity, and what are the implications for democracy, humanism, and antiracism (Gilroy 2002)?

Parallel to the question, What do you want your race consciousness to be? is another: What would a racial justice–oriented social policy look like to you? What types of policies and practices—at the level of the state, civil society, and major institutions—would help us achieve a more comprehensive, deeper, and longer-lasting racial democracy in the United States?

Some General Answers to These Questions

Since racism is so large, combating it must also be a large-scale practice. The historically recurrent theme of racial reparations provides a valuable guidepost here (Henry 2007). Reparation means repairing, making whole, making good what was evil. As a sociopolitical project, reparations can be seen to extend from the large to the small, from the institutional to the personal (Yamamoto 1999). Clearly, abolishing the debt (not “forgiving,” for who is to forgive and who is to be forgiven?) fits within the reparations logic, as does affirmative action.

Redistribution fits as well, but here we must be careful: the politics of income and wealth distribution are “double-entry” bookkeeping items. Not only the allocation of resources but also the derivation of revenues
are involved. If reparations were to be paid for the crime against humanity that was African slavery, it would be important to look at both the inflow and the outflow sides of the process. On the outflow side, reparations should take the form of social investment (think of a “Marshall Plan for the Cities” or something similar). On the inflow side, there is a danger that reparations would be paid out of general revenues, unduly assessing present-day working people for the crimes of past colonialists and elites, perpetuating rather than attenuating racial conflicts, and allowing new variants of the “colorblind” argument to loom up in the future. An alternative revenue-oriented strategy would raise the money by means of a wealth tax, thus recognizing how many present-day capital hoards had their origins in slavery.

Beyond reparations, anti-racist practice can be understood macropolitically in terms of social citizenship and micropolitically in terms of acculturation and socialization. The concept of social citizenship was proposed by T.H. Marshall (1950) as an obligation of the postwar welfare state, the proximate stage in the achievement of popular sovereignty. Rights, Marshall argued, had been acquired by the populace in stages: first economic, then political. The time had now come for the achievement of social rights. Of course, this formulation was offered when the British flag still flew over Lagos and Singapore and Jim Crow still flourished in the United States; it was proposed when postmodern criticism of the limits of “rights talk” (in critical race theory, for example) had not yet been made; and it certainly did not encompass the diasporic and globalized issues anti-racists face today. Yet we can make use of it to think anew about political inclusion, social provision, even world citizenship.

By acculturation and socialization we mean the reawakening of the 1960s concept that “the personal is political” as a key principle of anti-racist personal practice. No one—no matter what their racial identity is—can be free of racism in their heads or hearts; it is too deeply ingrained a social structure. Yet a great deal of thought and action has been devoted to the problem of fostering anti-racist practice at the individual and experiential level. Developing these skills, fostering the interruption and interrogation of racism, and extending the reach of anti-racism in family, school, and cultural life constitute an important dimension of the practice we want to support.

While we have offered here some tentative and sketchy answers to these questions, on a deeper level such serious issues can be adequately addressed...
only through the creative thought and political action of many people—the masses, the multitudes, whose “freedom dreams” (Kelley 2003) can transfigure and rearticulate the unstable and conflicted racial system yet again. We begin this essay by noting that racial formation theory emerged from an earlier set of challenges to the system of racial oppression. Surely those movement-based challenges were not the last we shall ever know. If our approach has any value, it lies in the suggestion that racial politics is an ongoing creative practice, both individual and collective. Our actions and ideas—both individual and collective—should be seen as political projects that have the potential to undo racial injustice and generate broader racial equality, and indeed greater freedom in every way. Racial formation theory should help us think about race and racism as continuing encounters between despotic and democratic practices, in which individuals and groups, confronted by state power and entrenched privilege but not entirely limited by those obstacles, make choices and locate themselves over and over in the constant racial “reconstruction” of everyday life.

NOTES

1. A neo-Marxist critique of this approach that influenced us in important ways was Bonacich 1972.
2. In retrospect we can see that we were developing arguments that paralleled emerging perspectives in post-structural and in radical pragmatist theoretical approaches. This was not our primary purpose, though; we sought better explanations for race/racism dynamics, and reinvented the wheel only in pursuit of that specific aim.
3. There is some debate as to the origins of the phrase. “The Personal Is Political” was the title of an essay by Carol Hanisch, an early second-wave feminist activist and veteran of the civil rights movement. The essay was published in 1969 by the Redstockings organization. See Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html (accessed January 19, 2012).
5. In a well-known article (1997), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued for a “structural interpretation” of racism. Focusing on racism, he did not deeply explore the race concept, instead invoking the notion of “racialized social systems” to link race to racism. Lévi-Strauss’s approach effectively grasps the interplay between the everyday (synchronic) and historically imbedded (diachronic)
dimensions of “social structure”; that’s why we cite him here. Although we have some disagreements with the Bonilla-Silva piece, we still consider it a major contribution.


7. Of course, others remain: Israel-Palestine, Kurdistan, the conditions of many indigenous peoples . . . It’s a long list.

8. This term requires some clarification. Colorblindness is a problematic term, a neologism twice over. First and most obviously, it is rooted in an ophthalmic condition that has no relevance to race, unless we understand race as being “about” skin color, which involves a deep reductionism in the race concept’s meaning. Second, the term’s application to the race concept derives from its appearance in the dissent of Justice John Marshall Harlan in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case, where the justice’s insistence that “our Constitution is colorblind,” coexists blissfully with a range of support claims for eternal white superiority and supremacy (see Gotanda 1995).

9. We use the term liberal here in the U.S. sense, signifying “center-left.”

10. We discuss colorblindness more extensively later in this essay.

11. The structural racism perspective allows us to see racism in terms of its consequences, not as a matter of intentions or beliefs. In Racial Formation we describe it this way as well: “a structural feature of US society, the product of centuries of systematic exclusion, exploitation, and disregard of racially defined minorities” (Omi and Winant 1994, 69). Grant-Thomas and Powell offer a similar interpretation: “We can describe a social system as structurally racist to the degree that it is configured to promote racially unequal outcomes. For example, a society marked by highly interdependent opportunity structures and large interinstitutional resource disparities will likely be very unequal with respect to the outcomes governed by those institutions and opportunity structures” (Grant-Thomas and Powell 2006, 5).

12. Of the vast literature on this topic, see Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2005; and Guglielmo 2003.

13. “Accumulation by dispossession” is an idea taken from David Harvey (2004). Among its many theoretical and analytical applications, the concept effectively describes such exploitative and predatory practices as “payday lending” (spatially concentrated in ghetto and barrio locations) and “steering” of subprime mortgages to working-class black and brown borrowers.

14. Elsewhere in the global system, parallel patterns prevail, overlapping to a large extent with U.S. processes: Maghrebines and Caribbeans migrate to France, Spain, and Italy; sub-Saharan Africans and South Asians are on the move; in the Philippines the state exports labor (particularly female labor) systematically; the global economy of remittances constitutes the most reliable and “progressive” (so to speak) foreign aid. For a good overview, see Massey et al. (2005).

15. See also Perlmann and Waters 2005; Perlmann 2005; Foner and Fredrickson 2004.

17. In 2003 the Census Bureau shared data on Middle Eastern, Arab, and South Asian Americans with the Department of Justice and the newly created Department of Homeland Security. The details of this cooperation—which seems to have violated pledges on the confidentiality of census data and on the bureau’s abstention from politics—remain themselves confidential.


19. Ibid.


24. Indeed contemporary U.S. imperial misadventures generally take place on the very same terrains on which Americans’ European predecessors sought in vain to impose their will in the past. “Globalization” is hardly a new phenomenon.

25. Contemporary civil rights jurisprudence exemplifies these trends. The Supreme Court has proved unwilling, in case after case, to tackle the ongoing dynamics of racial discrimination, unless that discrimination is construed to harm the interests of white people (Kairys 1996). The Court now thinks that whites are the main victims of racial discrimination in the United States. In a 2007 decision on two school desegregation cases, the Court outlawed school desegregation plans that were voluntary and had substantial community support, on the grounds that they invoked racial categories. See Parents Involved in Community Schools Inc. v. Seattle School District No. 1, and Meredith v. Jefferson County (Ky.) Board of Education, 551 U.S. 701 (2007).


28. Conservative columnist Michael Gerson, writing in the *Washington Post*, noted opposition to the law from many Republican elected officials, and argued: “Unlike, say, a conservative magazine or blog, it is the purpose of a political party to win majorities within the broad bounds of its convictions. And each time a portion of the conservative movement demonstrates this particular form of ideological purity—in California’s Proposition 187, the 2006 House immigration debate and now Arizona—they create resentments toward the Republican Party among Latinos that will last for generations. In all these cases, Republicans have gained little, sacrificed much, and apparently learned nothing.” See Michael Gerson, “The Authors of Arizona’s Immigration Law Retreat,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2010.

29. Clinton’s welfare program (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF), which replaced the previous, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program in 1996, forced welfare recipients (particularly women of color) into “workfare” jobs and substantially eroded the well-being of low-income children across a wide range of health, housing, education, and indeed survival issues. See Edelman 2004.

30. For a good overview of these connections, see Hayden 2004.


33. We are indebted to Joe Feagin for first drawing our attention to this point.


35. New right and neoconservative racial ideologies are quite distinct; their political alliance remains shaky. The new right diverges from neoconservatism in its willingness to practice racial politics subtextually, through coding, manipulation of racial fears, and so on. De facto, it recognizes the persistence of racial difference in United States society. The new right understands perfectly well that its mass base is white and that its political success depends on its ability to interpret white identity in positive political terms. The resurgent nativism discussed above, the hostility and indeed blatant attacks on President Obama (and threats of violence against him), the return to talk of “states’ rights” and even secession in the “Tea Party” and Republican far right, all show that the strategy of authoritarian populism addressed to the mass base of the white people’s party (the Republicans) is far from exhausted. Neoconservatism at least professes post-raciality and “colorblindness.” It has not, and could not, deliver such tangible political benefits, and in fact lacks an equivalent mass political base. Thus the uneasy alliance between the two tendencies.
36. Insurance companies indemnified slave owners if their slaves escaped or ship-bound Africans revolted, for example. British slaveowners were compensated for their “losses” in 1833 when Parliament abolished slavery, and North American slavocrats regained their autarchic local autonomy in the “Compromise” of 1877, which DuBois (1998) called a counterrevolution.


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Collaborations—when they are as congenial, dynamic, and productive as this one has been—can be one of the most rewarding experiences in academic life. We are grateful to all of the contributors for the intellectual slabor and engagement that made the superb essays in this volume possible.

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This project began with a panel at the American Studies Association conference in Philadelphia in 2007, organized to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the original publication of *Racial Formation in the United States*, featuring Gary Delgado, Daniel HoSang, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Oneka LaBennett, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant.

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