



RACE

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RACE IS A VOLATILE METONYM. ITS ETYMOLOGICAL formation spans several languages: sixteenth-century Middle French “*race*” (common descent), Italian “*razza*” (lineage), Spanish and Portuguese “*raza*” (family), Arabic “*ra’s*” (origin), Hebrew “*rosh*” (first), fourteenth-century Old Norse “*ras*” (rush), Old English “*raes*” (attack), and Middle Dutch “*rasen*” (rage). As these origins suggest, the word “race” is historically inseparable from “racecraft,” that “mental trick that turns racism into race” (Fields and Fields 2014). As Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently argued, “Our notion of what constitutes ‘white’ and what constitutes ‘black’ is a product of social context. It is utterly impossible to look at the delineation of a ‘Southern race’

and not see the Civil War, the creation of an ‘Irish race’ and not think of Cromwell’s ethnic cleansing, the creation of a ‘Jewish race’ and not see anti-Semitism” (2013).

Contemporary conceptions of “race” can be traced to two fifteenth-century religious colonization campaigns: the Protestant takeover of Ireland (Robinson 2000, 36–43) and the Christian Crusades in what is now the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa, which yielded the law of *limpieza de sangre* (cleanliness of blood, an early progenitor to the “one-drop rule”). According to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Before this time the concept of biological race based on ‘blood’ is not known to have existed . . . in Christian Europe or anywhere else in the world” (2014, 36–7). Nevertheless, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish Inquisition interrogators would demand that citizens be “Old Christians, of clean blood, without the race, stain, or descent from Jews, Moors, or conversos, or from any other recently converted sect” (Martínez 2011, 67).

During the Enlightenment, philosophers, scientists, explorers, and politicians devised racial classifications that perpetuated the Spanish empire’s fixation on purity. In 1733, Voltaire surmised: “The Negro race is a species of men different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds” (quoted in West 1999, 83). In his 1775 work *On the Different Races of Man*, Immanuel Kant defined “the white race, the Negro race, the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuck), and the Hindu or Hindustani race” as belonging to the same species (Goldner 1997). After traveling from France to help colonize North America, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in his *Letters from an American Farmer* of 1782 that “Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man,” an “American race” formed by a “mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” (Singh 2004, 21). Christoph Meiners, who coined the term “Caucasian race” in his 1785 work *The Outline of History of Mankind*, whittled humanity down further into two types: the “beautiful White race” and the “ugly Black race” (Isaac 2006, 105).

Although US settler-colonial expansion and capital accumulation during the early seventeenth century was made possible by

enslaved and indentured labor, the distinction between “free” and “slave” people was not yet legally designated by race. Resistance strategies between Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans disrupted racial categories and precipitated colonial policing methods. By 1661, a law forbade “English servants” from running away “in the company of Negroes.” Similarly, a 1691 law banished any “white man or woman being free who shall intermarry with a negro, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free” (Rose 1976, 17; 21). Europeans and Native Americans were designated “mulattos” not for having African ancestry but simply for communing with them (Forbes 1993, 2; 199). The response was clear. By 1811, after fellow Native Americans were forced to cede a large tract of land to the US government, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh gathered five thousand in Alabama to announce: “Let the white race perish. . . . Back whence they came, upon a trail of blood, they must be driven” (Zinn 1980).

By the time of the U.S. Civil War, claims to the mantle of “master race” were being hotly contested amongst Euro-descended elite men. Southern slave-owning settlers who identified as “Cavaliers, Jacobites, and Huguenots naturally hate[d], condemn[ed], and despise[d] the Puritans who settled the North,” since “the former [were] a master race—the latter a slave race, the descendants of Saxon serfs” (cited in McPherson 1999, 6). After Reconstruction, further legal and labor divisions were introduced to suppress affinities between poor Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans. According to W.E.B. Du Bois, “the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove . . . a wedge between the white and black workers.” As a result, “there probably are not today two groups of workers anywhere in the world with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently” (Du Bois 1992, 700). By the “late-nineteenth-century heyday of the Jim Crow regime,” Karen and Barbara Fields add, “the term ‘race relations’” had been introduced to finesse “the abrogation of democracy and the bloody vigilantism that enforced it” (2014, 39–40).

In the early twentieth century, women's liberation advocates and eugenicists alike sought to augment women's position by connecting it to the improvement of the race. In this moment, the concept became divided between its universal, human scope and its particular, hierarchical, and exclusionary one. In his labor anthem "Bread and Roses," James Oppenheim proclaimed that "The rising of the women means the rising of the race" (Oppenheim 1911). A year later, however, Myre Iseman warned in *Race Suicide* that waning birth rates would signal the "passing of this great Anglo-Teuton people" (Iseman 2010, 5). In 1914, Margaret Sanger (who would later found Planned Parenthood) began promoting contraception in the pages of *The Woman Rebel*, which bore the slogan "No Gods, No Masters" on its masthead. By 1920, however, she was arguing that, "If we are to develop in America a new race with a racial soul . . . we must not encourage reproduction beyond our capacity to assimilate our numbers so as to make the coming generation into such physically fit, mentally capable, socially alert individuals as are the ideal of a democracy" (Sanger 1920, 44). In contrast to this narrow vision, José Vasconcelos' 1925 publication *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) surpassed Kant's four racial types to advocate for a "fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past" (Vasconcelos 1979, 9).

Around this time, distinct forms of "race pride" also began coalescing among African Americans and Afro-Caribbean, European, and Levantine immigrants. In a 1920 *Negro World* article entitled "Race First versus Class First," Caribbean socialist Hubert Harrison wrote: "We can respect the Socialists of Scandinavia, France, Germany, or England . . . [but] we say Race First, because you have all along insisted Race First and class after when you didn't need our help" (Harrison 2001, 109). Across the Atlantic, and on the eve of the 1916 Easter Uprising, James Connolly similarly declared: "no agency less potent than the red tide of war on Irish soil will ever be able to enable the Irish race to recover its self-respect" (Connolly 1916).

Harrison tactically moved from his "race first" position toward one of "race consciousness" as race riots engulfed the United States

between 1917 and 1921. During this period, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) coordinated over a thousands divisions, and their newspaper *Negro World* circulated worldwide via Black dockworkers, sailors, and soldiers (Hahn 2009, 124–5). The UNIA embraced Ireland’s anti-colonial nationalist struggle, and Marcus Garvey even named Liberty Hall Harlem and *Negro World* after their Irish comrades’ Dublin Liberty Hall and *Irish World* (Hahn 2009, 220). Meanwhile, straddling the line between universal and particular conceptions of race, Zora Neale Hurston revealed in 1928 that, “At certain times I have no race, I am me.” However, “when I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty Second Street Library. . . .The cosmic Zora emerges” (Hurston 1979, 154–5)

Aware of the dangers posed by inter-ethnic solidarity between Chinese, Filipin@, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Portuguese, and Puerto Rican workers, the California Department of Industrial Relations reported in 1930 that owners preferred to employ “a mixture of laborers of various races, speaking diverse languages, and not accustomed to mingling with each other,” with the hope that this would prevent them from arriving at “a mutual understanding which would lead to strikes” (Takaki 1989, 30). Later, the 1964 Civil Rights Act aimed to quell protests by further enshrining both racial difference and nominal recognition within the national culture and legal order. Still, the typical Newark and Detroit rioter circa 1967 could be characterized as a young, educated, unemployed or underemployed Black man, “proud of his race, extremely hostile to both whites and middle-class Negroes and, although informed about politics, highly distrustful of the political system” (quoted in Zinn 1980, 460). In 1969, an emerging Chican@ movement adopted *El Plan de Aztlán*, claiming “the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny... Por La Raza todo. Fuera del La Raza nada (For the race everything. Outside of the race nothing.)” (Anaya and Lomeli 1998, 1–5). For its part, The Nation of Islam (NOI) condemned the “white devil race” and prohibited “race-mixing” (Malcolm X 1999, 167).

In contrast to these particularistic orientations, the Chicago-based Rainbow Coalition of the late 1960s and early 1970s aligned the Black Panthers, Brown Berets, Rising Up Angry, Young Lords, and Young Patriots to organize across race lines against police violence, urban poverty, prison conditions, and more (Sonnie and Tracy 2011). According to Rainbow Coalition leader Fred Hampton, “when I talk about the masses, I’m talking about the white masses, I’m talking about the black masses, and the brown masses, and the yellow masses, too. . . . We say you don’t fight racism with racism. We’re gonna fight racism with solidarity” (Hampton 1969). However, as the movements of the sixties and seventies were smashed, a politics of identity arose, which maintained that only the most immediate alliances were possible under conditions of embattled retreat (Springer 2005).

Under Ronald Reagan, the creation of a “color-blind” society meant confronting racism (purportedly directed against whites) by eroding affirmative action policies and racializing social programs like Open Admissions, affordable housing, and food aid (Omi and Winant 1994, 135). Some Black and Third World feminists sought to reverse these trends by deepening their critiques of racism: “we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe our total experience. Culture differences get subsumed when we speak of ‘race’ as an isolated issue” (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, 101). Meanwhile, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, formations like Anti-Racist Action (ARA), the *Race Traitor* journal, and the scholarship of figures like Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev, and David Roediger (who adopted an abolitionist perspective calling for “treason to whiteness”) set the stage for subsequent coalitions like Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and White Noise to organize self-identified white people against racism.

Much radical left dialogue in the US today invokes “race” as part of a rehearsed list of intersecting oppressions with scant historical explanation. Consequently, there is considerable skepticism regarding the possibility of multi-ethnic coalitions against racial capitalism. Part of the dilemma arises from race’s elusive role in language. While race has become more veiled, other terms have

become race-encoded: “diversity,” “good neighborhood,” “outside agitator,” “riot.” Poet Claudia Rankine dissects this daily racecraft: “Then flashes, a siren, a stretched-out roar—and you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (Rankine 2014,160). Meanwhile, the proliferation of terms coined by anti-racist discourse may obscure more than they explain, as when the intricate process of disinvestment from multi-ethnic urban centers, the creation of segregated middle-class Euro-American suburban outposts, and systematic rezoning get whittled down to the term “white flight.”

As many have come to view “race” as a “historically emergent lived experience, variegated, changing, and changeable” (Alcoff 2015, 7–8), some have warned that organizing movements “after race” may risk association with the neoconservative “colorblindness” that keeps racism intact (Darder and Torres 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2006). Major questions persist: How can anti-racists engage race without reaffirming raciology? (Gilroy 2002). How can revolutionary solidarity surpass allyship sensitivity trainings and potentially opportunistic claims to race-based leadership? Would the abolition of whiteness necessarily entail the abolition, or transformation, of blackness? As anarchist Black Panther Ashanti Alston offers, “I think of being black not so much as an ethnic category but as an oppositional force or touchstone for looking at situations differently” (quoted in Milstein 2015, 100).

For now, radical coalitions of different descents can begin to rupture hardened notions of “race” and racial pessimisms by learning to trust each other through action and reflection. Inspiring examples include the December 2014 Oakland Police Department blockade by The Blackout Collective, #BlackBrunch, #BlackLivesMatter, #Asians4BlackLives, and the Bay Area Solidarity Action Team, as well as the October 2015 “Black and Palestinian Struggle for Liberation” convergence organized by The Campaign To Bring Mumia Home, NYC Solidarity with Palestine/Direct Action Front for Palestine, Jews for Palestinian Right of Return, and Black-Palestinian Solidarity. Together, such

divergent compositions of old lineages and new families can rush, rage against, and attack racism, armed with the promise of transmuted lives and unfettered vocabularies.

SEE ALSO: Bodies; Colonialism; Gender; Liberal; Nation;
Representation