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## **UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMATIC OF RACE THROUGH THE PROBLEM OF RACE-MIXTURE**

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### **Introduction**

"There is no ethnicity, here," declared Ernest Twahrwa, a Hutu resident of the capital city of Rwanda. "We are all Rwandan." Mr. Twahrwa's declaration came on the eve of the official commemoration of the genocide his country had endured ten years earlier, when his fellow Hutus slaughtered more than 800,000 Tutsi men, women, and children (along with any Hutu who tried to protect them). Mr. Twahrwa's words echo the official government policy designed to foster, through an aggressive campaign of reeducation, a national civic culture that henceforth will be "ethnicity blind." All traces of the ethnic self-identifications that presumably fueled the hostilities that led to the massacre are to be expunged. The impetus behind this policy does not appear to be simply top-down and coercive, however. Many Rwandans, like Twahrwa, appear to have been profoundly shaken by what happened in their country. The government's efforts to change the very way people think about their identity is legitimate, Twahrwa declared. "There have been many changes in this country. I need to change too. I need to be a new person."

Mr. Twahrwa's response to Rwanda's efforts to re-wire the ethnic consciousness of that African nation echoes a similar declaration made by an American of African descent a century earlier; together they frame, in time and space, the broad problematic of racial, ethnic, and national identification in the modern era. Over a two-week period in the late summer of 1900, Charles Waddell Chestnut, one of the first major African-American professional writers, published a series of three articles in the Boston Evening Transcript, under the title "The Future American." Chesnut's thesis was amazingly provocative for its time, a moment when a Jim Crow social order was taking shape. Challenging the basic premises of that order, he declared that scientific evidence had demonstrated conclusively that purity of race was a myth. The only future open to America, moreover, was as a "miscegenated" people. Not only was this future inevitable, he insisted, it was desirable. With racial amalgamation there "would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals." Social struggles would proceed along other lines than race

conflicts, because “all would be tarred with the same stick.” The coming amalgamation would produce “a composite and homogenous people, and the elements of racial discord which have troubled our civil life so gravely and still threaten our free institutions, would have been entirely eliminated.”

Chesnutt's prophecy seems to have been quickly consigned to obscurity, finding traction in neither the black nor the white community, nor for that matter in historians' accounts since. Indeed, until very recently, its basic premise, though much distorted, echoed only in the diatribes of rabid segregationists who sought to defend Jim Crow by arguing that its demise threatened the ultimate racial death of white America. Ending job discrimination, integrating schools, providing equal access to the voting booth, they argued, would dissolve racial differences and thus open the way to a “mongrelized” society. Interestingly, the silent premise underlying the segregationists' nightmare scenario—which would surely have horrified them to state explicitly—was that state power stood like a dam channelling unconscious private desires along their “proper” courses. The growth of mixed-race populations since the breakdown of state-ordered racial separation might well be interpreted as confirming their fears.

I begin with these vignettes because I think that together they frame many of the issues this conference is intended to address. “Does the destruction of racism require the destruction of what we commonly understand to be racial identities?” “And is state power, by omission or commission, inevitably implicated in determining this issue?” More fundamental still, one might ask: “What is race?” “What is ethnicity?” When Mr. Twahrwa declares “I need to be a new person”—which by the way echoes a phrase, “a new people,” from Chesnutt's first novel—he suggests that his ethnic identity is something learned and thus can be unlearned. Is race also learned? Is racism? If so, will the elimination of racial identification also eliminate racism, as Chesnutt hoped?

As I understand my assignment today, it is to address the long history of the race concept. That being a somewhat unwieldy undertaking, I propose to approach that history via a part of the whole, the phenomenon of race-mixing. This approach is justified, I think, by the fact that the very possibility of the mixture of races frames—indeed has always framed—the larger problematic of race as such. That possibility forms one of its essential components, at once enabling and destabilizing racial thought and racial regimes. All of the things taken for granted about race are brought into question when races mix—not least of them the physical-biological reality of race itself (i.e., what is race?); as well as whether and to what extent race is best understood as biology or culture; and, indeed, what motivates racism (i.e., the relation between racial identification and racism). Moreover, the phenomenon of mixture complicates what is often assumed to be the uni-dimensional, asymmetric trajectory of racial thinking, that is, one of unmediated antipathy, hostility, and distance. I would argue, in fact, that the idea that racial purity and racial mixture stand at diametrically opposite ends of a continuum needs revision. Historically, they too are more likely to be interactive and mutually constitutive. Race mixture has been—and continues to be—viewed as a source of cultural regeneration as well as degeneration, and sometimes by the very same persons. Indeed, from the first, putatively superior groups have often sought to appropriate aspects of, even assimilate members of ostensibly inferior racialized groups. For their part, the subordinated groups generally find it difficult to respond to their racial proscription

without recourse to the fundamental paradigms encoded in their own racial differentiation. Given conditions of life in the modern world, which puts a premium on self-identification, they often find themselves racializing the group experiences that ground their identities, and thus lending perhaps inadvertent support to the racial project.

I have organized the discussion that follows to address three different historical moments, with the hope of providing through these concrete histories material for exploring some of the questions posed for this conference. Among those are the historical origins of the modern race concept and the internal contradictions that have been present from its beginnings; the problem of defining race, especially of distinguishing between biology and culture; and finally, the conundrum posed by contemporary invocations to abandon the race concept altogether.

### **The Problem of Purity: Ambiguity and Ambivalence**

I suspect that there is little serious dissent among historians today from the proposition that race is a social and historical construction. And although there might be quibbles over the precise historical moment of its inception, that moment clearly must fall within the modern era and is causally linked to European expansion, which began at the turn of the sixteenth century. The modern race concept, then, is not some hoary thing of the deep dark past; rather it is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, inextricably linked with the advent of modernity, its institutions, and its ideas. Its very conditions of possibility emerge from the global movements of people, labor, and goods, and with the emergence of nation-states. It was within this historically “modern” era that African, Native American, European, and eventually Asian, peoples have come into intimate and sustained contact on a massive scale. Relations among these groups account for the most broadly relevant racial conflicts over the past four centuries.

It follows, then that the principal site for examining the origins of the race concept is the Iberian Peninsula, where Spain—and to some extent its junior partner Portugal—rested their consolidation as nation-states on a policy we would today call “ethnic cleansing”—the expulsion of their Jewish (and sometime later Muslim) populations. The idea of purity of blood provided the ideological justification for this policy and became an instrument of state-enforced racial control. Thus, from the outset the race concept has been inextricably connected with anxieties over racial mixture whether it would lead to the regeneration or degeneration of the social order, whether state power should be deployed to encourage or interdict it.

Upon closer inspection, however, one finds that it was not so much Jews per se who were to be cleansed from Spain’s body politic as those Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity when confronted with the choice of death or expulsion. These converts, or New Christians, were always subject to suspicions about the sincerity of their conversions and that suspicion was visited on the children and the children’s children of the original converts.

One of my favourite examples of this way of thinking are the words of a Franciscan cleric, instructing his peers in how to identify New Christians:

To be enemies of Christians, of Christ and of his divine law, it is not necessary that both the father and mother be Jews. One is enough. The father need not be Jewish; enough that the mother is. And even she need not be entirely so; half is enough, and not even that; a quarter is enough. Or even an eighth. In our day the Holy Inquisition has discovered that even at a distance of twenty-one *degrees* [of blood] a person has been known to Judaize.

What we have here is the idea of the “one-drop” rule in spades, so to speak.

What on its face, then, seemed a matter of religious intolerance—read cultural practice—was in fact biologized. The adjective “New” that modified “Christian” could not be shed by parent nor child, but was, like race, transmitted across generations. Thus, even at its moment of origin, racial thinking conflated biology with culture.

This conflation would be exposed further as the concept of purity of blood was reformulated under New World conditions. Fearing the contamination of their newly discovered Eden, Spain prohibited New Christian immigrants. Africans, on the other hand, were brought to America by the thousands, but set apart there as a race rendered impure, in part, because of its Old World associations with Islam. Again, a biological signifier referenced a cultural phenomenon.

The natives of the American Eden were another matter. Marriages with the daughters of Indian nobility, or the elite families and leaders who were taken to be the counterparts of Spanish noble lineages, was approved and encouraged. By one estimate roughly a third or more of the original Spanish settlers of New Spain married Indian women. And the gender asymmetry was important. Through such marriages the Spanish legitimated claims to the new lands in both a practical and a symbolic sense. For much like the land, Indian women embodied the “natural” essence of an untamed world; both were to be conquered and domesticated.

One can follow a similar counterpoint between Old World ideologies and New World realities in the French possessions of North America. In Canada, for example, the French stigmatized Indians as “sauvage,” a state of cultural inferiority premised on lack of progress along some imaginary timeline of human development. Notwithstanding the cultural idiom, however, racial ideas in early modern France were rooted in their imagery of class, a central component of which was the notion that moral virtues were transmitted—like physical characteristics—through “blood.” Again, biology and culture were conflated; class was, in effect, biologically determined.

As in the Spanish case, French racial ideas emerged out of concrete historical conflicts (which I cannot take time to detail here) in which a mythical purity of blood was deployed to sustain the claims of an ostensibly natural (and thus racialized) aristocracy. <cite Aubert> Thus French ideas about the character of the *métis* and the virtues and dangers of *métissage* developed at home among white folk before being imported to the colonies and colored folk. All of which suggests, perhaps, something of the enduring plasticity of the concept of race, as well as its inherent links to the articulation of power relations.

Like the Spanish, too, French colonial officials recognized strategic, demographic, and political advantages to encouraging intermarriage with the Native

American population—in this case with the Algonquins in the Great Lakes region. In time, however, these alliances were condemned, as evidence accumulated that rather than the Indians assimilating to French culture, the Frenchmen involved in marital and concubinage relations with Indians tended to “go native.” French governors wrote home complaining about the laziness, licentiousness, and other bad habits Frenchmen were picking up, ostensibly from their Indian wives (including the fact that the Indian women were said to be unnaturally independent as compared with white women). Thus tensions developed between, on the one hand, the hope that mixture could be politically expedient and productive of a population of compliant, assimilated Indians and, on the other, fears of political chaos as Frenchmen were absorbed into Indian culture and their métis offspring became a threat to social order. Embedded in the seemingly aesthetic preference regarding cross-racial alliances, therefore, were deep anxieties about power relations.

What this history suggests, moreover, is that in the Americas—and from the outset—there were signs of fissure in racial thought regarding mixture. It could be envisioned either as a source of regeneration or of degeneration, as something to be embraced or as feared. It could give warrant for securing a colonial order, but it could also plant the seeds that might ultimately destroy that order. These contradictions in racial thinking would continue until the present day.

### **What is Race? The Case of Alexis Morrison**

In January of 1857, a woman named Jane “Alexina” Morrison was sold in the slave market in New Orleans. The man who bought her was James White, a long-time New Orleans slave trader, who had recently sold his slave pen and bought land just up river, in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. White was in the process of fulfilling the dream of every slave trader, and perhaps every southern white man: he was going to become a planter, the highest social and economic status available in antebellum southern society. Like the fictional character Thomas Sutpen in William Faulkner’s classic novel Absalom, Absalom, White had pulled himself up from nothing by securing land and “niggers,” the key prerequisite for social mobility in the antebellum South. Morrison’s body was one of his last speculations as a slave trader and one of his very first investments as a planter.

But also, as with Sutpen, the whole thing unravelled just as he reached for the brass ring. Sometime shortly after her sale, Morrison ran away—thus robbing White of his capital investment. By the time White saw her again, nine months later in October 1857, they were in the parish courthouse, where Morrison had filed suit against him. For Alexina Morrison was a 15-year old girl with blond hair and blue eyes, and the grounds for her suit was her claim that she was white and thus could not be legally held as a slave. Once one wades through all the evidence and counter-evidence offered in the three different trials that ensued over the next five years—back and forth between local jurors and the Louisiana state supreme court—the judgment of whether she was right or wrong boiled down to that very body she had stolen from James White: in short, to how she looked and how she behaved.

When Alexina Morrison brought suit against James White, she carefully elaborated a narrative to explain her physical whiteness. She was born of white parents, she claimed, but had been kidnapped from her home in Arkansas and forced into slavery. Her documentary evidence to support that story was relatively

weak, however. The letters that her lawyer sent to ostensible family and friends in Arkansas were not answered, which he explained away by claiming that they had been "intercepted" by ill-designing persons.

Meanwhile, James White's lawyers presented testimony contending that she had been held as a slave previously, which carried the legal presumption that she was of African descent. Contemporary historians, with recourse to the 1850 manuscript census, have also found evidence suggesting that, indeed, Morrison probably was the child of a mulatta slave in the household of Moses Morrison in Matagorda County, Texas. Notwithstanding the documentary evidence of African ancestry, however, for Alexina Morrison's contemporaries her case rested in the final analysis on her physical appearance, or more accurately, on how she enacted her supposed white identity. As her lawyer put it, her whiteness was "on view . . . [it was] manifest." <italics added>

But even as Morrison's lawyers drew the jurors' attention to her appearance and behavior to support her claim of whiteness, these were in turn silently buttressed by the idea that "black blood," if present at all, would necessarily be visible somehow. Many of the witnesses testifying in support of her claim simply confirmed the "manifest" evidence of their eyes: she looked white. Many of the other witnesses, however, emphasized more subtle, behavioral criteria: she acted white. She "conducted herself as a white girl," one witness declared, and "her conduct and actions. . . [had] none of the features of an African." If there had been any of "the African race" in Alexina Morrison, the witnesses all agreed, it would have been outwardly and objectively visible in the way she looked and acted, but from the moment she had made her initial claim of whiteness, there had been no such outward sign that she was anything but white through and through. As one witness graphically detailed Morrison's behavior on the night of her escape, she had the "air and manners" of a white woman in distress. Thus the jury was being asked to see Morrison through a lens framed by conventional images of white femininity: modesty, gentility, and fragility. In short, her performance of their stereotypes of white womanhood was as crucial to their judgment of her whiteness as her physical appearance.

Indeed, the only telling blows the defense could land were their efforts—working within the same ideological paradigm about the link between inner racial essence and outward behavior—to prove that Alexina Morrison was not white by likening her sexuality to that of a black woman. Morrison's biggest supporter was the jailer she first encountered when she ran away. She had moved into his household, and her status there was somewhat ambiguous. James White's lawyers tried to insinuate from these actions suspicions of adultery and loose morals, with the implication that this was black female behavior, not white. Similarly, they introduced as evidence of an inner blackness the fact that during the period of the trial Morrison had attended local dances--without a chaperon. For most Louisiana whites such behavior was reminiscent of the quadroon mistresses of elite white men in New Orleans. In the end, however, Alexina's demure appearance in court countered these efforts to blacken her with allusions to a hidden black sexuality.

Through three different trials, reflecting conflicts between juror's verdicts and the State Supreme Court's reading of the law of slavery, Alexina won her case before the local courts every time. The final one was by a 10-2 vote in her favor in

January 1862. This time slaveholder James White's appeal came up against the changed reality of civil war. Union troops captured New Orleans early in 1862 and one year later Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Two years later when the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, cases like *Morrison v. White* were rendered moot. No one could be held as a slave any longer, regardless of their color.

Central to *Morrison v. White* was the question: "What is race?" In this courtroom theatre one can see clearly how the various answers offered by contemporaries turned on fine discursive distinctions, socially-conditioned visual perceptions, and deep symbolic tropes. It is equally evident, however, that on this question turned Morrison's civil status – whether she would be slave or free, whether her body and its offspring would be her own or at James White's disposal. Thus relations of raw power, as well as discursive turns, were imbricated in both the answer and the procedures for answering the question—"What is race?"

The adjudication of Morrison's suit also underscores the conflation of biology and culture, which has long confounded the possibility of thinking clearly about race. Whiteness and blackness were articulated through cultural as much as physical-biological attributes. Indeed, the indeterminacy of the later exposed the centrality of the former to racial thinking. Physical features were simply markers, standing in for a bundle of social attributions, capabilities, dispositions, and knowledge that would be revealed in their performance. And since these attributes all had to be learned rather than genetically received, they can only be understood as "cultural." But since no racially ordered society could possibly concede that race was really just a matter of performance, the segue between biology and learned behaviour is an essential feature of its dogma. Indeed, I would argue, that this conflation of biology and culture has been foundational to the modern racial project, in both a temporal and a conceptual sense. It was not only an essential aspect of the evolution of racial thought historically, but functionally constitutive of it. Quite simply put, that conflation is not just a category mistake; it is how race works. Furthermore, I will suggest, this conflation problematizes the distinctions social analysts often attempt to draw between race and ethnicity. As fast as one tries to sort social phenomena into their respective boxes, biological or cultural, they come tumbling out again, one amorphous mess.

*Morrison v. White* exposes the social as well as discursive contradictions of the antebellum racial regime. For southerners like James White, the outcome of this case undermined their particular social order by depriving them of property. Unfortunately for White, his neighbours were less concerned with his property loss than with the boundary between whiteness and blackness and the prospect that any one of them might fall over its edge, given the wrong circumstances. If someone as white—and white-acting—as Alexina Morrison could be enslaved, so might they. Thus behaviour and culture—something within their own self-fashioning—seemed a more sensible basis for determining an obviously "white" woman's status than archival documentation of origins, which many of them might have been as equally hard-pressed as Morrison to produce in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America.

Race concepts, as Stuart Hall suggested sometime ago, are not only plural but historically specific. Certainly, Morrison's fate turned specific power relations of her historical moment, one in which slavery determined the social significance of race. And yet, it is also clear that the broad category of case-law from which

Morrison's case is drawn suggests how the larger problematic of race remains stable over time even as its specific significations changes over time. Morrison's case involved urgent questions of slavery and freedom, but the end of slavery did not end such legal contestation of racial identity. Efforts at racial determination in a social order premised on the certainty of racial difference continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>. Like Alexina Morrison's—these later cases also involved contests over property rights: claims to inheritance, divorce settlements, or alimony, as well as slander or access to public accommodations that presumed at their core the property value of "whiteness." More recently, a new class of cases of racial determination have emerged from disputes over interracial adoption. Arguments in such cases often presume that there is some immutable racial essence or capacity of either child or parent, or that an oppressed community has an investment in its racial integrity that requires protection. The power relations within which these cases are embedded might be very different, but they all turn on fundamental conundrum of trying to certify as real a social fiction.

### **Ending Race by Ending Racism?**

I began this talk with a description of the current Rwandan government's reaction to its recent ethnic violence. Although most people would condemn the horrendous consequences of racist differentiation in our own era—such as the genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990s—most would probably also hesitate to embrace the Rwanda government's drastic solution, the total obliteration of group differences, even though it would logically seem to follow. Indeed, the dilemma Rwanda faced may well describe a more general problem, intellectual as well as political.

By way of elaborating that dilemma, I want to turn to a personal experience some years ago that stimulated my initial ruminations about the puzzles I have attempted sketched out here. The occasion was a conference I was attending in Australia in the early summer of 1998. Speaker after speaker at that conference rose to condemn Australia's genocide of its aboriginal population. The specific content of that charge, however, had to do not with wars of extermination as occurred in the United States but the policy of putting Aboriginal children out for adoption by white Australians. I was puzzled, since such "crimes" did not comport with my sense of what a genocide charge entailed. After searching out and reading the recent government report on this matter to which everyone was referring, my views became more unsettled still.

It became clear that "genocide" was perhaps not too strong a word for what the Australian government had done. Almost from the outset the British settlers had gotten the idea in their heads that the people they found there, the Aboriginal or Indigenous, were a "dying race." And even those most sympathetic with their plights often saw their efforts to ameliorate conditions as simply action, as it was poetically phrased, to "smooth the dying pillow."

By late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it became evident that although the indigenous population was still declining, a mixed-race population (part indigenous and part white) was growing dramatically. The Chief Protector declared a two pronged policy—one in which the full-blooded indigenous people would be confined to reservations where they were expected to die off, while the mixed-bloods would be



merged into the Australian mainstream. By forcibly removing indigenous children from their families (at age four) and sending them away from their communities to work for non-Indigenous people, the mixed-descent population would, over time, 'merge' with the non-Indigenous population."

These policies did not change until 1972, when a Labor government was elected and pursued a policy of promoting self-determination of indigenous people. By the late '70s the policy in place dictated that indigenous children should only be placed with indigenous families. As an influential policy paper declared:

For the Aboriginal child growing up in a racist society, what is most needed is a supportive environment where a child can identify as an Aboriginal and get emotional support from other blacks. The supportive environment that blacks provide cannot be assessed by whites and is not quantifiable or laid down in terms of neat identifiable criteria.

As this statement suggests, undergirding this policy was the idea that parents of the same race would possess "the cultural competency" to raise a child of their race, whereas parents of a different race would not. One jurisdiction (Queensland) went so far as to write this idea into the law.

This history, then, was the backdrop of the conference I attended in 1998, when the issue was still live and raw at that time. One cannot read this history without being shaken. Under the guise of "protecting" them and looking out for their welfare, a whole people was being systematically destroyed. It was not genocide as the Nazi pursued it, to be sure, but given a small population of Aboriginal people, it could be argued that this amounted to their obliteration.

But there is another side to all this that is also disturbing. There was an aura of nostalgia and death in the way even the supporters of Indigenous peoples' rights spoke of them. The forms of protection proposed and adopted not only mirrored some of the more controversial policies around adoption then brewing in the US at that time (so-called race-matching) but more starkly the discussions about protecting endangered species in the contemporary Environmental movement. Indigenous people were being talked about as if they were "snail darters," or rare "orchids." And this applied not simply to their genetic heritage but the cultural legacy as well. And so, I left Australia with my ideas about the future of race more unsettled than ever. In a sense, I now realize, the paradox I confronted there forced me to choose between the troubling truths of the relatively ignored Chesnutt and my lifelong intellectual hero Du Bois (who was celebrating the "souls of black folk" at about the time Chesnutt wrote his essays). Taken together they posed the conundrum formed by a history that suggests that we can only end racism by getting rid of the concept of race altogether and yet realizing that ideal of "racelessness" may entail a loss of history, of connectedness, of ones very being that—given the anomie of modern life—grounds us all.

I have no easy answers for resolving this conundrum? I would suggest, however, facile declarations of "color-blindness" are even less hopeful than the Rwandan government's reeducation programs. A sense of group identity and destiny remain important, so perhaps we should be about finding ways to retain pluralism even as we reject racism and all the horror that racial/ethnic hostilities in their various forms have brought us. Perhaps we might begin with a simple

discursive/conceptual shift—from the bankrupt ideas of racial lineage to the notion of peoplehood. The latter is openly recognized as a social-construction because it comes of a shared historical experience or a willful, purposeful identification with that experience. It is open and inclusive rather than exclusive, and necessarily so, because being historical it is premised on constant change rather than stasis and preservation. Being hybrid it is necessarily open and adaptive. Indeed, at its best African-American peoplehood has been of that character, built as it was—as it had to be—out of a *mélange* of peoples, cultures, and human potential. Perhaps, in the end, both Chesnutt and Du Bois were looking from different perspectives at the same model of human destiny.