

Introduction: Race as Euphemism and Shorthand

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Abstract:

The essays in this focus on race and ethics approach the topic from a variety of perspectives. Yet they all advance a basic claim: race—a euphemism for white supremacy—is an ethical issue too often evaded. The essays demonstrate that the ethics of race is integrally bound up with religion, colonialism, and secularism.

Keywords: slavery | race | religion | colonialism | ethics

Article:

Race and ethics might appear an odd couple. What does one have to do with the other? Is race not a vexed and controversial subject that properly belongs to a nonethical order of discourse? If race is a biological illusion, as contemporary science holds, then why address it at all? These questions suggest the need for clarity. To that end, as many analysts have noted, even if race is not a “natural kind,” it is a “social kind.” It is part of how we actually live. Despite an intense desire to do so, race cannot be willed or ignored into nonexistence. If ethics is inquiry regarding how we ought to live, then confronting race seems unavoidable, if not obligatory. I should note at the outset that the word “race” is an evasion, a subterfuge, or at the very least a misleading abbreviation for what in fact is the legacy of racial ideology structured by global white supremacy. Race is the contemporary shorthand for the apparatus of white supremacy and racial ideology: the conjoined twins of modernity. Within these context-formative constraints, persons are constructed and construct themselves racially. These constructs are habit-forming. They enable and disable racial selves in a differential manner. More powerful than explicit beliefs, race is the imbrication of powerful institutions (family, religion, school, market, state, etc.), Foucauldian disciplines, and unconscious, deeply ingrained, and tenacious habits of thinking and acting. However counterintuitive (as odd, perhaps, as enslaved Africans converting to the

religion of their captors), people discover and invent meaningful lives through their differentially racialized identities.

Though racial distinctions have premodern antecedents, a confluence of events produced race at the inception of modernity. Stimulated by European voyages of discovery, conquest, and enslavement in the late fifteenth century, Europeans produced race through encounters with Africans along the west coast and, shortly thereafter, through contact with the First Nations peoples of the Americas. Rooted in the othering discourses (of idolators, demon-worshippers, heretics, and monstrous races) of premodern Christendom, modernity was a racializing phenomenon from the very beginning. It was also an imperial/colonial phenomenon. Modernity had many fathers (and mothers), among which was a global system of trade driven by a European desire to find a sea route to the spice lands of Asia. This desire triangulated India, Africa, and the Americas within an imperial/colonial imagination. This desire was made concrete through the race-making practices of slavery, colonialism, and religion.

India, Africa, and the Americas became data mines for the projection of Christianity-derived categories worldwide: for the distinction between religion on the one side, and secularism, the state, politics, society, and economy on the other; for the identification of religion proper with subjective interiority over against ritual, ceremony, and institutions; for the very notion that religion is a distinctive domain of ethical life and reflection. In short, these continents and subcontinent were the workshop for the construction of religion. The discipline of religious ethics ignores this history at its own peril. In their various and distinctive ways, the authors in this special issue on ethics and race are determined to ensure that this important aspect of ethical subject-formation in the modern world is neither ignored nor forgotten.

The essays in this focus trace the ramifications of race across centuries, continents, and various discourses. The history of race includes, among others, discourses on orders of rank, national character, and aesthetics. There are scientific discourses on the intellectual, evolutionary, and genetic inferiority of racial deviants—that is, nonwhite people, including *white* people “of a different color” (see Jacobson 1999)—and social scientific discourses of cultural pathology. There have been several iterations of race: from unselfconscious assertions of white supremacy and a color-coded order of dominance that inscribes the most explicit denials of liberty, property, and prestige to the regime of separate but (legally) equal. In the late twentieth century a new regime emerged, defined by the cynical, post-civil-rights revanchist politics of so-called reverse racism. Directed against deviant racial bodies within the American body politic, proponents of this regime opposed the civil and cultural territory that these foreign bodies, on their view, had “illegitimately” won. The newest regime is the purportedly race-neutral, granular, and often hyper-sophisticated practice of color blindness that operates hand-in-glove with the crudeness of color-coded mass incarceration. These practices demand inquiry into who “we” are and how we should live; ethical reflection in the broadest and most boundary-transgressing sense of the term.

Five themes intersect these essays: the imperial/colonial matrix of race; the African and American Indian as archetypal markers of racial difference, that is, deviance from the white somatic norm; religion and secularism as Christian discourses and their relation to the emergent category of race; the persistence and protean character of race; and, finally, race as the occasion for artful, noncanonical, and counterintuitive forms of ethical reflection. While all the essays are artful, Shannon Sullivan's piece, which shows, on the level of hormone secretion, the differential effects of race on health, exemplifies counterintuitive ethical inquiry. She literally (not figuratively) pushes ethical inquiry into the viscera and secretions of the body. Meanwhile, Sikivu Hutchinson interrogates the idealized construction of America as home: a *Read with Dick and Jane*-like space of drama-free, perfected domesticity. She shows how race, which is always already there on both sides of the white picket fence, creeps up and cuts through our mendacious innocence. She troubles what we like to think of as natural affinity groups with shared interests—women of all colors, black people of all genders, religious people of all confessions, and atheists regardless of politics—by tracing the effects of race on solidarity within them. She reveals the insidious effects of race within the intimate relations of the family: whether the singular family of a prominent, white supremacist politician who concealed and carried to the grave his paternity of a black daughter, or the collective American family that cares for the youthful innocence of its missing white children while criminalizing black children for behaving like children. Regarding the persistence and protean character of race, Hutchinson and Vincent Lloyd converge on the importance of religious institutions and practices but diverge on their ethical consequences. Intersecting these themes differently, Hutchinson and Hart explore the effects of race on black women and their comparative denigration and subjection (as welfare state parasites and criminals) in relation to the haloed and rights-bearing fetus. Finally, there are interesting convergences between Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Hart on the first three themes: colonialism, the black/white somatic norming of race, and, though construed differently, the place of religion and secularism in the production of race.

In “Race, Religion, and Ethics in the Modern/Colonial World,” Maldonado-Torres offers the following thesis: “Secularism and colonization worked together in the production of ‘race’ as a category” (2014, 701). He also makes an arresting claim about the relation between “religion” as a false universal that could not encompass the cultural differences between Africans and American Indians and that fundamentally misunderstood them, and the emergence of race as a successor category. The new category of race inscribed an ontological gap between European Christians and the cognitively and morally deficient Africans and Native Americans they encountered (2014). Maldonado-Torres's response to the complexities he canvasses is to call for a “decolonial ethics.” He advocates reconstructing the category of religion to allow non-European and non-Christian people to appear as they are. This act of ground clearing that enables the authentic appearance of European and Christian others entails canalizing new pathways and habits of thought.

Speaking of habits of thought, Sullivan's "The Hearts and Guts of White People: Ethics, Ignorance, and the Physiology of White Racism," addresses anti-black racism as "habits of the body." She provides an intriguing if not a novel account of the ethics of racial perception and appraisal. Her essay is a sobering account of why contesting white supremacy and racial ideology is more than merely a cognitive problem, a matter of getting our concepts right; indeed, the essay reveals the way that embodied habits, habits of the body, operate below thought and in opposition to evidence-based ideas. They burrow into the recesses of our amygdala, our "primitive brain"; they cascade through our endocrine system. They live in places (Sullivan uses the metaphor "guts") that are deeper and less accessible than the heart.

Lloyd's "Organizing Race" is the most practical and policy-oriented essay in this collection. He focuses on the distinctively black tradition of community organizing. Against organizing models of liberal multiculturalists that fail to address the race-specific interests of black communities, he accents the virtues of the black organizing tradition. Even though Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) groups have a radical pedigree, they have long since lost their trouble-making edge. Yet Lloyd includes these kinds of community organizers in his critique of the liberal multiculturalists. As a discourse of ethnicity that inscribes optimism, the multicultural model of community organizing obscures the historically informed pessimism at the heart of racial difference. It minimizes the specificity of racial harm and the virtues of the black organizing tradition. Driven by a life-preserving racial pessimism and paranoia, black skepticism of the liberal multicultural organizing model is well earned.

If Lloyd speaks of organizing race by leveraging Black Church-based traditions of community empowerment, then Hutchinson casts a jaundiced eye toward the ethical and political work of religion and the Black Church. Indeed, she is troubled by its authoritarian policing. A self-described atheist, Hutchinson provides an ethical-political critique of the moral damage perpetrated by religious communities and their relation to white supremacy and racial ideology. In "White Picket Fences, White Innocence," Hutchinson takes the story of South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, the archsegregationist; Carrie Butler, the sixteen-year-old black family servant he impregnated; and their daughter Essie Mae Washington-Williams as an allegory for race in America. This allegory, an act of "moral combat," provides a tour of America's racialized landscape, teasing out what is often hidden in plain sight and covered with a veneer of innocence. Hutchinson fingers the sore points and perhaps irritates them along the way. She gives the reader no quarter. Shuttling between this particular family drama and the larger social drama of black and white, she explores the psychosexual and gendered realities of race, ethics, religion, and politics in America. Though twisted, William Faulkner knew something about this subject; Hutchinson reminds us of Faulkner who remarked: "The past is never dead. It is not even past" (1994, 73). The past that cannot die—refuses to die—is part of the ethics of race. This ghost, an undying witness from the past, troubles every narrative of white picket fence decorum and innocence.

William David Hart, in his contribution “Slaves, Fetuses, and Animals: Race and Ethical Rhetoric,” argues that the struggle against the enslavement of African descended people “provides the model for social movements against abortion and the unethical treatment of animals” (2014, 662). Under this rhetorical appropriation, the image of the African in bondage morphs into images of aborted fetuses and slaughtered animals. Thus we have a paradoxically left/right appropriation of African slavery. Hart explores the ethics of this rhetorical appropriation. He worries that the fetus/slave analogy trivializes the enslavement of African descended people. While embracing the kinship of all species, he worries that the animal/slave analogy humanizes animals even as it animalizes black people. Like Maldonado-Torres, he traces discourses such as these to the enslaving and colonizing matrix of modernity. Hart regards the discourses of both religion and secularism as artifacts of Christendom. On this view, secularism and religion are complicit with the enslaving and colonializing matrix in race-making.

There is an interesting parallel between the concepts of race and religion: neither quite do what we want them to do. Religion resists efforts toward universalization and timelessness. Despite efforts to employ the term as a descriptive rather than a redescriptive universal,¹ its Christian provenance and assumptions continue to shine through in the most inconvenient ways. Likewise, efforts to generalize race cannot quite banish the structuring reality of the black/white binary and the way we return to it as if under the sway of a repetition compulsion. Despite the largely salutary effort to say that everyone is a subject of race, the black body as archetypically *raced* and the white body as unmarked (invisible) norm dominate our use of the term “race.” On my Wittgensteinian view, the use of a word determines its meaning; this includes efforts to extend the scope of meaning. The essays in this special focus on race and ethics invite us to think about this inconvenient truth.

Footnotes

1. For an account of this distinction, see Nongbri 2013.

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Biography

William David Hart (PhD, Princeton University, 1994) is Professor of Religious Studies and Department Head at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. Hart is a “critical theorist of religion” whose interests include the construction of religion and its ethical-political uses. He is the author of three books: *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge, 2000), *Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis* (Palgrave, 2008), and *Afro-Eccentricity: Beyond the Standard Narrative of Black Religion* (Palgrave, 2011). Hart is an affiliate of the African American and African Diaspora Studies Program.