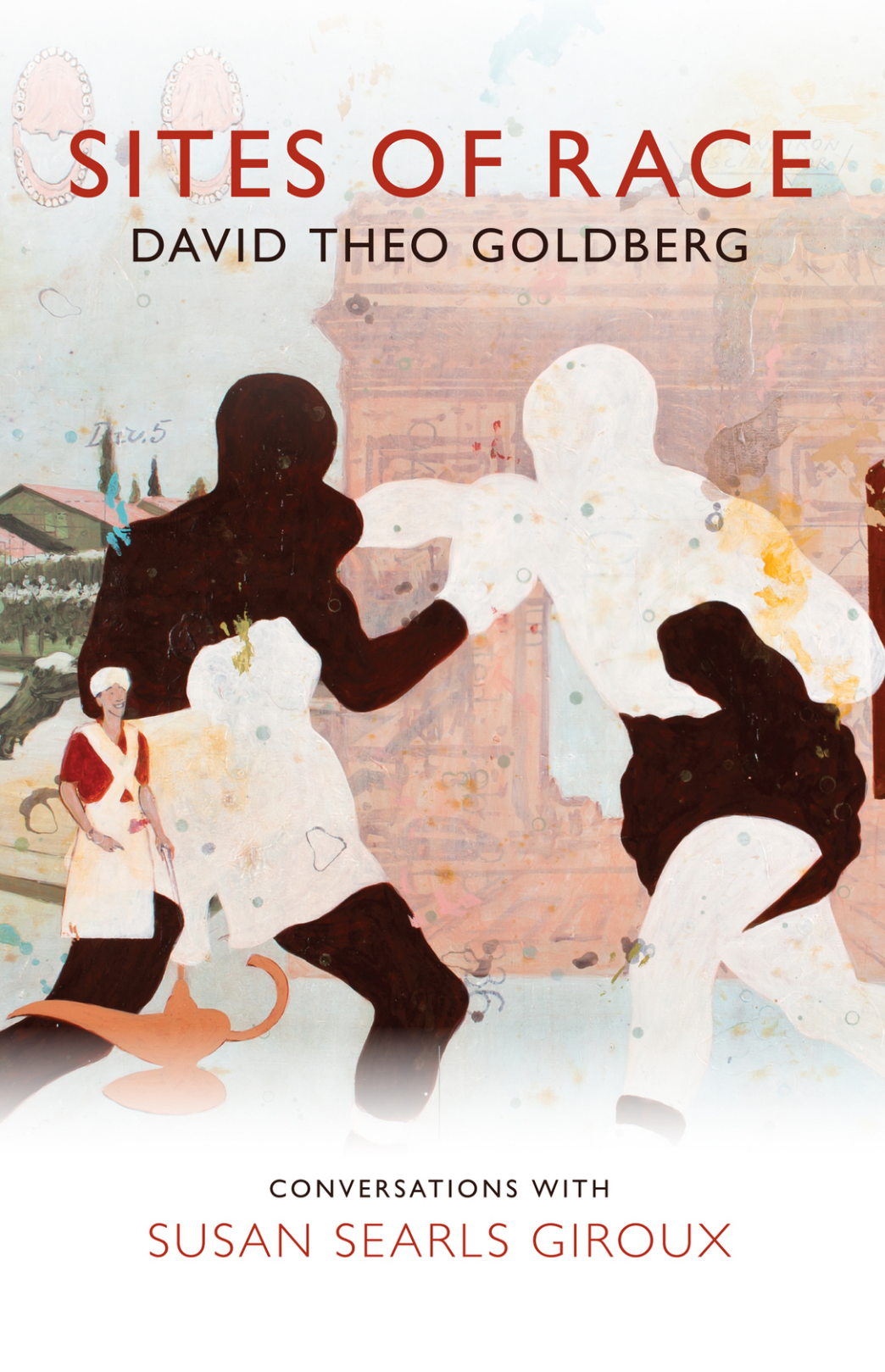




SITES OF RACE

DAVID THEO GOLDBERG

CONVERSATIONS WITH

SUSAN SEARLS GIROUX

Sites of Race

In the spirit of Stuart Hall
1932-2014

Sites of Race

Conversations with
Susan Searls Giroux

David Theo Goldberg

polity

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First published in 2014 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7178-9
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7179-6 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T.J. International, Padstow,
Cornwall

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Acknowledgments

This book started from a long conversational interview Susan Searls Giroux conducted with David Theo Goldberg in New York City in 2005. A version of that interview was first published by *JAC* in 2006 (“On the State of Race Theory: A Conversation with David Theo Goldberg,” *JAC* 26, 1–2: 11–66), and is used here with the kind permission of that journal. Two further conversations, both in Irvine, California, took place in 2007 and 2011. The three conversations, while engaging a broad array of issues and questions, were extensively edited to focus on race and racism for the purposes of this book.

Many have helped us in shaping the book. Henry Giroux pushed us at times to address questions we might otherwise have overlooked. Nisha Kapoor offered an insightful set of responses to our discussion on immigration, the revisions consequently significantly improving chapter 7. Nasrin Rahimieh graciously offered her home and warm hospitality. Noa Reich and Maia Krause did yeoman’s work in transcribing the interviews

Acknowledgments

for us. Maia and Claudia Caro Sullivan spared no effort in securing the rights from Cuban artist Alexis Esquivel for the cover image. Anna Finn creatively curated the index under tightly pinched deadlines and with a helpful but less than ideal digital app.

The folks at Polity Press have been delightful to work with. We are especially grateful to our editors Pascal Porcheron and Louise Knight, to our production editor Clare Ansell, and to our copy-editor Justin Dyer. The manuscript has been much improved as a consequence. We thank also a set of anonymous reviewers for the Press whose comments pushed us to clarify some things that otherwise would have remained less lucid.

All books tend to be more collaborative than is often acknowledged. This is especially so with one both produced out of a set of sustained conversations and that would not have materialized but for the engagement with each other over an extensive period. We hope that this spirit of engagement and the passion of critical exchange are reflected in the pages of the book.

Introduction

Susan Searls Giroux

Invited to address a forum hosted by the Liberation Committee for Africa in June 1961, James Baldwin opened with the following remarks:

Bobby Kennedy recently made me the soul-stirring promise that one day – thirty years, if I’m lucky – I can be President, too. It never entered this boy’s mind, I suppose – it has not entered the country’s mind yet – that perhaps I wouldn’t want to be. And in any case, what really exercises my mind is not this hypothetical day on which some other Negro “first” will become the first Negro President. What I am really curious about is just what kind of country he’ll be President of. (2010: 9)

Kennedy’s promise would come to fruition not thirty, but nearly fifty years later, and as Baldwin implied, times are indeed tough for America’s first black president and for the nation more generally. As this book goes to press, the US remains a house deeply divided, having recently suffered through a government shut-down and repeated threats to default on its credit for

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the first time in its history, internecine fights to derail implementation of Obamacare, the further slowing down of a fragile recessionary recovery, and all the while lurching from one Middle Eastern and Eastern European conflict to another that threaten to inflame these regions and ignite another wave of global terror.

What the nation long tolerated as the norm for the majority of its black citizens – creeping poverty; high unemployment; depreciating home values; no or minuscule health care, pension plans, and job security; and deplorable schools – has now spread to its once robust and mostly white middle classes. Too many Americans are confronted with the sting of poverty of a particular kind – a poverty that happens suddenly, seemingly without warning, and in the immediate aftermath of a debauched era of riotous, wasteful, and vulgar accumulation of wealth for the very few, while their glittering riches and lavish lifestyles, the very stuff of frenzied media spectacle, fuel the fever-bright fantasies of the rest. Too many, rich and poor alike, have embraced what Achille Mbembe calls “an idealized lifestyle that surrendered unreservedly to the world of things (wealth, luxury, and display)” (2004: 378). And now in the post-(or pre?-)recession morass, they lack the financial means to partake of its enervating pleasures and the intellectual means to imagine another mode of existence. People feel cheated and burn with resentment – a resentment all too readily inflamed by a racist imaginary that links white privation and pain with the phantasm of black ascendancy – apparently made all too real by the ascent of one, or “The One.” Indeed, neoconservatives have for decades primed their constituencies for investment in this form of “racial delirium” (Mbembe 2004: 380). By

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excoriating state concessions to “special interests,” implicitly understood to represent “blackness and the interests thought most directly to advance black life,” they created – in a time of protracted racial inequality – the strange paranoia of “inverted threat,” the panicked anticipation of “a black state” allegedly organized against the interests of maintaining white privilege, power, and control (Goldberg 2009: 337).

What country, indeed, is the US? No one has been more analytically attentive to Baldwin’s provocation than the South African-born, cosmopolitan philosopher of race David Theo Goldberg. His body of work has been devoted precisely to historicizing and theorizing the unprecedented damages incurred from nearly four decades of racially driven neoliberal policies that are Barack Obama’s inglorious bequest – and a set of crisis conditions only exacerbated by his complicity with, and participation in, the national commitment to willful historical amnesia. The colorblinding imperative that has marked the racial politics of the post-civil rights era both in the US and globally has effectively pre-empted individual and collective capacities to understand the connections between the racist exclusions of the past and the contemporary racially prompted transformation of state apparatuses, of sovereign power, of *raison d’état*, as it shifts from welfare to warfare. The racial fissures that have split US society migrate globally, translate locally, and return with a vengeance – what is “buried, alive” here, Goldberg (2009: ch. 1) reveals, finds fertile soil in a range of geopolitical sites the world over.

We live, thus, in a moment marked by widespread confusion over the meaning and political significance of

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race both within and outside of the academy. This I tell my students at the beginning of each semester. It is also why each semester in an undergraduate lecture hall or graduate seminar we commence with Goldberg's oeuvre; his innumerable contributions to race theorizing are as bold and capacious in their historical and geopolitical reach as they are exacting and meticulous in their modes of analytical engagement. With the dismantling of institutional, legal segregation in the US and of the formal apparatus of apartheid in South Africa, Goldberg argues that a form of common sense has emerged which renders the concept of racism an unfortunate – and bygone – historical transgression, a past that has been adequately redressed and is now best forgotten, even as informal, market-driven resegregation and exclusion proliferate in the private sector. This is a common sense further entrenched by the election and re-election of Barack Obama to the office of the US Presidency. If racial inequality persists today, so mainstream opinion goes, it is a function not of structural disadvantage in the form of dilapidated, dysfunctional schools; rampant and disproportional unemployment or underemployment; unequal access to loans and mortgages; unequal or no health care; police harassment, profiling, and mass incarceration of literally millions of people of color. It is a product, rather, of poor character. This commitment to colorblindness or racelessness, Goldberg asserts, is reinforced by – indeed an extension of – a neoliberal logic that translates all social problems into individual misfortune or misdeed. As a consequence, racist expression and exclusion are denied their social origin and systemic content, reduced to matters of private discrimination or predilection.

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Not only are racist commitments privatized, Goldberg asserts, they are also radically depoliticized. As a complex set of historical and contemporary injustices, racism is analytically banished from the realm of the political. The role of the state, political economy, segregation, colonialism, capital, class exploitation, and imperialism are excised from public memory and from accounts of political conflict. Politics, in short, becomes “culturalized,” to invoke Mahmood Mamdani’s useful phrase (2004: 17). Political antagonisms are transformed into reified cultural and religious differences played out in the private sector, while simultaneously “disappearing” or “evaporating” the workings of power altogether. The simultaneous individualization and depoliticization of the discourses of race and racism are symptoms, moreover, of the state’s supposedly waning power in the wake of globalization. The neoliberal attack on “big government,” coupled with the state’s withdrawal from formal and direct modes of racial governance, Goldberg observes, has generated extensive concentration on civil society, civility, tolerance, and their racially inscribed boundaries. The resurrection of the discourses of civility and tolerance bespeaks not only the neoliberal triumph of individualism over and against the state, but also its commitment to depoliticizing the sources of political problems, as it ideologically reconstitutes “difference” as a reified cultural essence rather than as an effect of structured subordination or inequality (Brown 2006: 46). As Wendy Brown observes, when emotional and personal vocabularies are substituted for political ones, when historically conditioned suffering and humiliation are reduced to “difference” or “offense,” calls for “tolerance” or “respect for

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others” are substituted for political transformation in the interests of social justice. Political action devolves into sensitivity training, and the possibilities for political redress dissolve into self-help therapy (Brown 2006: 16).

Conceptually challenged if not altogether analytically void, tolerance talk and tepid celebrations of multicultural diversity circulating within and outside the academy do not go nearly far enough in codifying or challenging ongoing racist violence and exclusion. Racial panics, especially against anyone identified (even mistakenly) as Muslim, have been spurred by terrorist attacks in an ever-expanding list of global cities, from New York, Washington, and Boston to Madrid, London, and Nairobi, and by acts of state terrorism in Guantánamo, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Headscarf hysteria has gripped Paris, and the Golden Dawn political party is emblematic of the return of organized fascism as a viable political bloc in Greece and beyond. Armed vigilante groups “patriotically” patrol the US border with Mexico as individuals assigned to neighborhood watch groups guard against racial non-belonging in gated communities in Florida, executing at will, as the case of Trayvon Martin attests. Proliferating encampments of the stateless number among the fates that await millions of economic migrants and political refugees. And the aftermath of manmade natural catastrophes blight the US Gulf Coast and Haiti, devastating communities of the racial poor. It is against all of these events that Goldberg’s nuanced, textured analysis of state commitments to racial homogeneity and to neoliberal economics must be understood as a significant event in the history of race theorizing.

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David Theo Goldberg's most recent book, *The Threat of Race* (2009), brings us closer still to what he calls the "racial global," and to war, violence, and death suffered in the name of race. The project was initially titled *The Death of Race*, a provocation meant to draw attention to a deeply disturbing contemporary paradox in which academicians, intellectuals, and political pundits across the ideological spectrum call for the conceptual "death of race" while contemporaneously racially produced death – as a result of avoidable war, state violence, crippling poverty, famine, disease – grows exponentially. Against rightwing logics proclaiming the end of racism or insistent calls from some on the left to return to the primacy of class and political economy, *The Threat of Race* seeks to unsettle theoretical concepts and modes of analysis that have passed uncritically into the common sense of recent "cutting-edge" race theory.

Yet despite such precise interventions, one notes in Goldberg's newest writing a different narrative voice, a shift in scholarly tone and analytic vocabulary, a passion and focus born of urgency yet committed to remaining "coolly critical, cutting and incisive" (2009: viii). The radical experimentation in prose style departs from predictable academic penchants and scholarly norms in an effort to draw readers' attention to argument rather than erudition – a genuine act of persuasion in an academy often enraptured with insular and arcane performance.

The stark assessment Goldberg issues and disturbing terminology he fashions to communicate the global "threat" of postracial presumption reflect his judgment of the securitizing logics at work in the US and similar societies he calls "self-strangulating" – societies

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in pursuit of the illusion of security and safety through power-assisted forms of social homogeneity that require the disappearance, the eradication of enemies, foreign or domestic, inevitably racially indexed. Against the fantasy of postracial global triumphalism, he compels our witness, and our critical response: to racially driven suffocation and asphyxiation (“buried, alive,” “self-strangulation”); industrialized, globalized mass violence (“ethnoracial purging,” “mutilation,” “genocide,” “duress,” “disposability”) capable of destroying, depriving, “evaporating death” itself; to marginality, segregation, and separation (the “warehoused,” imprisoned, encamped, the “permanently temporary” and “rogue”); and the horror of nonbeing (“racial erasure,” “racial evaporation,” the “depersonalization of the damned”). An underlying motivation in crafting such a bald and bracing new lexicon, one suspects, is to challenge scholars existentially untouched by contemporary global crises because insulated, politically and intellectually, in what Susan Buck-Morss uncomfortably calls “theory-world” (2003: 8).

To be sure, Goldberg’s bold yet comprehensive analysis of contemporary geopolitical sites of race points to a number of disturbing questions: How is it that we have arrived at a present so marked by racial humiliation, terror, and death, as these troubling images and tropes insist? And how have we come to imagine it as our moment of triumph, the achievement of a thoroughly deracinated new world order conceived variously in rubrics of “racial democracy,” “multiculturalism,” “ethnic pluralism,” and “colorblindness”? And what is our path back from the brink of societal self-destruction? James Baldwin felt the urgency of

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similar questions in his pitched battle against the long, terrifying history of legal segregation in 1961. Yet he concluded his address to the Liberation Committee with a sense of possibility:

We in this country now – and it really is one minute to twelve – can really turn the tide because we have an advantage that Europe does not have, and we have an advantage that Africa does not have, if we could face it. Black and white people have lived together for generations, and now for centuries. Now, on whether or not we face these facts everything depends. (Baldwin 2010: 15)

Against the relentless forms of market-driven segregation, social securitization, and containerization that mark the contemporary moment in North America and internationally, Goldberg urges us to a similar possibility, to “heterogeneous dispositions” and “dispositions of openness” which “offer an antidote to the conceit of holding things constant, to the arrogance of control” (2009: 368). Such dispositions require the forsaking of “guarantees of outcome” predicated on stability and predictability and acknowledging the inevitable and shared fact of our mutuality and vulnerability. North Americans still hold the advantage of their shared history of heterogeneity, if they could face it.

Part of the answer to societies historically and newly polarized and implosive lies in our refusal to participate in the willful amnesia that marks contemporary racial politics and engage rigorously the dense and diverse histories of modern globalizations. Extending the arguments elaborated throughout his work, Goldberg argues in the following conversations that post-racial or nonracial presumption marks the culmination

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of the regionally and often temporally specific racist logics – naturalist, historicist, and their colorblinding extension – constitutive of liberal modernity, its drive to state sovereignty, its political economy, its architectural design and social spacing, its socio-intellectual authority, and its moral reason.

Goldberg consistently rejects scholarly efforts to consign racism to the ancient or premodern past, as well as the inclination to concede its modern expression but isolate its manifestation in the singularity of the Nazi state or the South African apartheid state. Race is foundational to becoming modern. Indeed, the historic sweep from the medieval to the modern is in fact “reflected in the shifts from religion as a dominant public frame for structuring and interpreting social life to the *civic religion of race* as prevailing fabric of public arrangement and imaginative hermeneutics” (Goldberg 2009: 2, emphasis added). By the eighteenth century, as much in Europe as in its colonies, race, Goldberg argues, assumed the status of a political theology – compelling popular belief through intellectual illumination or, when necessary, more direct forms of persuasion – mobilizing every resource available from scientific rationality and moral philosophy to the edifying force of a police baton or a soldier’s bayonet. “The political theology of race,” he maintains, “seeks to account for origins, circumscribes rationality, motivates the social fabric and its constitutive forms of exclusion, orders police and grounds power, liberating cruelty from constraint” (2009: 254).

Throughout his body of work, Goldberg boldly and bravely addresses the most combustible issues of the day – the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the US-led war in Iraq and Afghanistan and its “born again

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racism” at home, the political theology of race in South Africa and elsewhere – in academic and public contexts where one is today all too often surveilled and harassed, if not overtly censored, for such views. This is the threat of race in a putatively raceless world. Such darkly challenging times well reflect what Goldberg has called “the paradoxes of racism”:

Never again, and yet again and again, even now, never more so before our very eyes. Seeing but not; seeing but not believing; believing but believing immediately not my problem, our problem; seeing and believing but frozen from action, too distracted or busy or unconcerned to do anything about it; acting but not in concert, not concertedly. (2009: 156)

Goldberg’s eloquent commentary carries both insight and warning, echoing with chilling appropriateness the powerful conclusion of Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*: “Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result. This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian; its hallmark is impotence insofar as power always comes from men acting together, ‘acting in concert’ ... isolated men are powerless by definition” (1951: 477). It is such horrible potentialities, increasingly perceived as inevitabilities in a contemporary context saturated with violence, terror, and authoritarian tendency, that Goldberg has passionately committed to both challenge and dissolve.

Throughout his career, Goldberg has written and spoken brilliantly and courageously about the history of race, racism, politics, identity, power, the state, and social justice. He has also been an ardent defender of

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higher education, one of the few remaining, as a site where such critical inquiry can take place. This, at a time when the university and specifically the humanities have been subject to ongoing decades-long assault, first, as Christopher Newfield (2011) explains, in the form of the “culture wars” and then in the form of the “budget wars.” As a public intellectual, Goldberg embodies in both thought and action the ideal and the practice of what it means to reclaim higher education in general, and the humanities more specifically, as sites of possibility that embrace the idea of a “fugitive” democracy, not merely as a mode of governance, but also as a means of dignifying heterogeneous populations of people so they can become fully free to claim their moral and political agency. This book accordingly is structured to bring together in clearly delineated and interactive ways both the relations and tensions around Goldberg’s theorizing of race and its sitings across various contexts of political economy and culture. The first five chapters thus focus more directly on theoretical lines of analysis, and the latter five on an analysis of various contextual articulations.

Goldberg has argued in theoretically insightful and profound ways what it means to defend the university as a potential counter-public sphere, one that opens up and sustains public connections through which people’s fragmented, uncertain, incomplete narratives of identity, history, and agency are valued, preserved, and made available for exchange, while being related, analytically, to wider contexts of politics and power. He has argued for a reinvigorated humanities alive to the challenge of regrounding liberal modernity’s racially inscribed notions of ethics, justice, and morality across existing

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disciplinary terrains. And he has raised both a sense of urgency and a set of relevant questions about what kind of humanities would be suited to the twenty-first-century university and its global arrangements as part of a larger project of addressing the most pressing issues that we face globally. As Baldwin reminds us, the time remains one minute to midnight.

I

Race to modernity

Susan Searls Giroux: You grew up in apartheid South Africa, where you engaged, as you have put it, in “years of struggle against apartheid on picket lines and around parliament, through the mists of tear gas and protest slogans and closing down the college campus,” then moving to the US to attend graduate school in New York City and finding there “Reagan’s brand of ‘new racism’ reeled all about too. There it lay, not quite invisibly,” you write, “in the conditions producing both homelessness and homeboys, dramatically differentiated employment rates across race and hypersegregation” [Goldberg 2002b: 422–3]. It is against this backdrop that you map the personal and political contexts that informed your transition from youthful activism to write on the “philosophical foundations of racism,” which, radically revised, became the basis for *Racist Culture* [1993]. You produced, in short, a comprehensive philosophical archeology of racial conceptualization where none had existed before, as part of your efforts to “throw down a gauntlet to the discipline of