

DAVID THEO
GOLDBERG

Are we all postracial yet?

DABATING
RACE

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Epigraph

“Goldberg's *Are we all postracial yet?* provocatively and powerfully interrogates the idea of the postracial as something more than an aspiration, but in fact the basis for a new phase of racial arrangements, shaped by shifts in the political economy, domestic and international law, and geopolitics. The work is theoretically rich and probing with both global and local implications. It deepens race critical theory, and furthers our understanding of the ongoing significance of race.”

Imani Perry Hughes, Princeton University

“This book reveals the neo-raciality masked by the claims of the postracial. The underlying structures of economic, political, and social inequalities have seen the afterlife of racism in police uniforms walk the streets of America openly amidst the cries of ‘I can't breathe’ from its victims. A must read.”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, University of California, Irvine

“Are we all postracial yet? David Theo Goldberg, in answering this question with a resounding ‘yes,’ explores the postracial as a logic and condition that enables racism to persist and proliferate. This book offers a sharp, wise, and unflinching critique of the racism of the postracial. It is also a deeply optimistic book: there is no better way of demanding an alternative than by demonstrating its necessity.”

Sara Ahmed, Goldsmiths

“David Theo Goldberg's trenchant meditation on the challenges to anti-racist remediation reveals a structured cultural silence about deep social shape-shifting forms of inequality. The very term ‘postracial’ places racism's harms beyond critical analysis, rendered unreachable because located in the past, indecipherable because erased from language, and ungovernable because assigned to private rather than collective address. This

excellent study explores the limits of 'postracialism' in an epoch of denial, unsparingly dissecting the common attributes of intersecting forms of prejudice."

Patricia Williams, Columbia Law School

"This pointed, thoughtful, and readable book is a bold intervention in the politics of undoing racial hierarchy. For too long, anti-racism has been inhibited by the difficulties involved in moving beyond critique. David Theo Goldberg has risen to the cosmopolitan challenge involved in breaking that logjam. With characteristic rigor and wit, he shows how anti-racist politics can be reconfigured in combative, practical, and affirmative forms."

Paul Gilroy, King's College London

Are we all postracial yet?

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Dedication

for the folks on the bus

Preface

I have been thinking about the postracial explicitly for some years now, at least since Barack Obama was first elected in November 2008. At the same time, my thinking about the racial, and the postracial in particular, has always exceeded any single nation-state experience. Any account of the anti-racial and the anti-racist today is also always about the postracial, if not explicitly named as such. My concern, it will quickly be seen, is not with how exasperatingly far we are from postraciality, conventionally understood, even in the face of its insistence. Rather, it is to make sense of how racisms can proliferate, can be so crudely persistent and obvious, in the face of their equally insistent claims to be over, socially irrelevant, no longer of real concern. This is the knot I shall address in this little book. I will be at pains to describe in some detail the threads constituting the knot, how they came to emerge historically, their socio-logics and force, their renewed subjects of expression and targets. I will suggest in conclusion ways of thinking about their critical address. The driving question is how racist expression can thrive at the very moment that racial configuration is claimed to be a thing of the past.

Although I have been thinking for a good while about these issues, the book itself was written very quickly. I was approached by Polity late in 2013 to consider writing a short book on the subject for the new series "Debating Race." By the time things had been worked out, March had rolled by and the book's delivery date was six months away. I was in the midst of co-organizing what would come to be a remarkable event in July 2014. The University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI), which I

direct, has been convening two-week summer institutes in different global sites, the Seminar in Experimental Critical Theory, for a decade now. The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) has been running a comparable workshop each July since 2009, with which I have also been engaged since its inception. We happily combined our resources to run a mobile workshop for two weeks across South Africa, fortuitously for the writing of this book, on “the archives of the nonracial.” I sat down to write the manuscript on the flight home from South Africa in mid-July. For better and worse, three intensive months later I delivered the manuscript. Sometimes the gods of intellectual production oblige.

The South African workshop was designed to engage key historical sites of anti-apartheid struggle across South Africa in addressing theoretical and global issues of race, racism, and the nonracial. The undertaking was to drive almost sixty intellectuals, artists, and activists from across the world around South Africa for two weeks to engage with each other as well as with local interlocutors at each of our stopping points in the interests of animating a sustained project of thinking (about) the nonracial. We started in Johannesburg, wound our way up to Mbabane in Swaziland, site of a significant anti-apartheid exile gathering, then drove down to Durban, on to Qunu, Transkei, overlooking Nelson Mandela's birth and resting places, and then to the Biko Centre for Black Consciousness in Ginsburg, King William's Town. We ended our remarkable journey in Cape Town. It was co-organized with my dear friends and colleagues Achille Mbembe, Kelly Gillespie, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, Zen Marie, Julia Hornberger, and Annie (Dhammamega) Leatt. The thinking of this book is deeply marked by this extraordinary experience and set of intensely generative engagements. No one on the bus was left unmarked by the interaction. I should stress,

though, that no one but me is accountable for any assertion or argument appearing in these pages.

I want to thank all of the bus people for an extraordinarily rich experience. It is to them and all they stood for in living the values of the critical nonracial that I dedicate this book. As the names to be rehearsed are too numerous, I restrict myself to those with whom direct interactions on and off the bus, and before and after the trip, impacted the way I may have thought about issues pertinent to the book. My co-organizers especially, both leading up to and extending beyond the workshop, had a profound charge on the argument, most notably, though not only, Achille and Kelly. A special shout-out also goes to Commandante Leigh-Ann, without whose vision and extraordinary organizational talents the bus would not have departed Johannesburg. The road allowed me to extend longstanding impactful critical conversations with dear friends Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Ghassan Hage, Ruha Benjamin, Sarah Nuttall, as well as Siba Grovongui, Francoise Verges, Michael Keith, Xolela Mangcu, Nisha Kapoor, and the inimitable (in their own ways) Neo Muyanga and Roberta Estrella d'Alva. New lines of engagement were initiated with Mark Matera, Ainehi Egoro, Azeen Khan, and Eric Reinhard.

Three events helped to reshape the manuscript as I was revising it. One was a follow-up workshop at UCHRI with Achille and Kelly, among others. Another, organized by Dilip Gaonkar at Northwestern University, took place as protests were breaking out in the wake of the grand jury decisions not to prosecute the police in the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. My thinking was renewed by both. The public conversation that Helena Chavez organized with dear friends John and Jean Comaroff (family really), Cuahtemoc Medina, and Federico Navarette at MUAC (the Museum of Contemporary Art) in Mexico City helped me clarify central points.

The gods of intellectual production include some very real people, in addition to those already named. I could not have done this without the support of the extraordinary staff of UCHRI. It is hard to say that administrative responsibility is a pleasure, especially when it so proliferates in and constrains academic life. And yet my colleagues at the Institute make it seem so, seamlessly ensuring that my distraction would leave no mark on the daily routine of institutional life. This book would not have been possible without their collective support, not to mention their interest in the work itself. I am grateful to Anna Finn for her careful research, editorial, and indexing contributions.

Over the past few years I have been in extended conversation about social and political theory, theories of race and racism with Diren Valayden as he completed his remarkable dissertation, "Outbreak Racism: The Embrace of Risk after Structural Racism," at the University of California, Irvine. The influence of Diren's thinking and work in opening up a line of analysis about new forms of racist expression will be evident in the pages that follow. Likewise with my dear friends Ackbar Abbas, Saree Makdisi, and Jenna Ng, who commented critically on bits and pieces of the argument and writing along the way. Susan Searls Giroux pushed me early on in my thinking about postraciality. A conversation with Fakhry Davids over a dinner in London late in the process impacted some revision.

The people of Polity Press have again been a delight to work with. The series editors, first Emma Longstaff and then Jonathan Skerrett, shepherded the book effortlessly through the process with thoughtful advice. The efforts of production editor Clare Ansell and tireless copy-editor Justin Dyer resulted in a much improved manuscript. David Roediger kindly reviewed the initial draft for the press, and

his insightful suggestions likewise made for a considerably better book.

No one has more readily and lastingly affected my way of thinking than Philomena Essed. Daily conversations and interactions around matters of race and so much else continue to exemplify what it means to live without the color line even while living very much in a world marked by it.

ONE

The pasts of the postracial

Race today is supposed to be a thing of the past. And yet all we do, seemingly, is to talk about it. We talk (about) race when not talking (about) it; and we don't talk (about) it when (we should be) talking (about) it. "The postracial," as filmmaker Michael Oblowitz recently put it to me with his characteristic rap-rhetoricity, "is the most racial." Such is the condition, the paradox, of postraciality.

A postracial paradox

The postracial is all about us. It was born – or in a sense raciality was born again, anew – when Barack Obama got elected in 2008. With America's first black President, postraciality went public, pronouncing itself the prevailing state of being, at least aspirationally. This quickly opened up a frenzied media discussion about whether America, in particular, and other once racially predicated societies globally, had become postracial. It seems that all it takes for a (once) self-proclaimed white country's racial history to be wiped clean is for a black man-hero – an Obama or Mandela – to get elected President. The Great Man version of history takes a new turn on stage.

The claim that we today inhabit – or have come close(r) to inhabiting – a postracial society embeds the insistence that key conditions of social life are less and less now predicated on racial preferences, choices, and resources. These include residential location, educational possibility and institutional access, employment opportunities, social networks and interaction – in short, life's chances overall. Postraciality amounts to the claim that we are, or are close