



THE POLITICS OF RACE
AND ETHNICITY IN THE
UNITED STATES

Americanization,
De-Americanization,
and Racialized Ethnic Groups

Sherrow O. Pinder

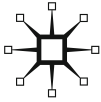


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For Amber Chambers
And Anthony and Alyssa Greaves

With Love

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Acknowledgments

The idea for this book grew out of a class that I teach on race and ethnicity at California State University, Chico. Based on this, I submitted a proposal on race and ethnicity at the Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting and presented the paper there in April 2007. After a meeting with Anthony Wahl, who was then a senior editor with Palgrave Macmillan, about expanding my paper into a book, I started to think seriously about America's cultural identity and the question of where and how racialized ethnic groups fit into such an identity. In this respect, I would like to sincerely thank Anthony Wahl for supporting my book project.

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In the white man's world the [person] of color encounters difficulties in the development of his [or her] bodily schema.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

The history of American [colored] is the history of this strife.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Introduction

The Brevity of the Argument

From the very beginning of America's formation, there has been a witting attempt to forge a single American cultural identity in spite of the presence of culturally and physically diverse groups of people in America.¹ First Nations² were already in America before the arrival of Europeans; blacks were, by force, transported to America; Chinese came during the gold rush; Mexicans were, in the beginning, enclosed by America's expanding border.³ Racialized ethnic groups including First Nations, blacks, Chinese, and Mexicans, viewed as unlike whites, were looked on as racially and culturally inferior. Nonwhites' presumed inferiority served as a basis for their exclusion from an American cultural identity, which justified the discriminatory practices toward them. This I openly dub as the Americanization of America's cultural identity. Accordingly, the quest to construct a homogeneous American cultural identity was paramount.

Multiculturalism has been developed to recognize and celebrate America's cultural manyness (cultural heterogeneity), which conflicts with America's cultural oneness (cultural homogeneity). For the antimulticulturalists, multiculturalism represents a threat to America's cultural homogeneity. The presumed threat, I maintain, is another way to reclaim America's cultural identity as white. Even though nonwhites have been in America since the very beginning of America's founding, nonwhites are always viewed as foreigners, alien to America's cultural oneness/homogeneity. This is what I call the de-Americanization of racialized ethnic groups. What are some of the implications of de-Americanization for racialized ethnic groups and America's society as whole? Is multiculturalism as a racially charged strategy equipped to deal with the underlying consequences of the all-encompassing de-Americanization? What is at stake in the very discourse of multiculturalism seeking to recognize "otherness" and retain the normative thinking that "otherness" is celebrated as un-Americanness? Is multiculturalism contributing to de-Americanization? Is there a need to transcend multiculturalism and move in the direction of "postmulticulturalism"? In other words, can

postmulticulturalism recognize “otherness” as Americanness? Even though there are no simple answers to these questions, they will serve as the foundation on which to frame the discussion that I present in this book.

The purpose of this book is to examine and analyze Americanization, de-Americanization, and racialized ethnic groups in America. More specifically, it will show the distinctive effectualness that Americanization and de-Americanization serve in harboring and maintaining the racial status quo where “whiteness” as fundamental to an American cultural identity is established and maintained. I take on a more practical investigation of Americanization and de-Americanization as I attempt to reconcile the reality that America’s cultural identity based on the notion and persistent affirmation of whiteness has been instrumental in denying racialized ethnic groups their American identity. This has important consequences for nonwhites in America. At the heart of this study, who is an American becomes overriding. Although racialized ethnic groups remain unassimilated into America’s cultural oneness, the celebration and recognition of cultural manyness in the face of an oppressive cultural oneness is an important element of multiculturalism. Yet multiculturalism is flawed because of its emphasis on the recognition of cultural “otherness” where “otherness” is looked on as un-Americanness. For this reason, there is a need to move beyond multiculturalism. Postmulticulturalism, then, would be the new possibility.

From the foregoing analysis, various indications of well-being—social status including cultural differences—are tied to the racialized bodies, bringing to the surface the substantial racial inequality that operates in the United States of America. “It is like a plague,” to use the much cited words of the political activist and professor Angela Y. Davis. “It infects every joint, muscle, and tissue of social life in this country.”⁴ This is not to say that all racialized groups in America are monolithic or reductively compartmentalized. The range and complexity of gender distinctions, for example, are played out in different and important ways due to a dominating and belligerent masculine ethos. This is essential because, to borrow the words of Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, an English professor, “everyday life regularly contests gender’s ‘essential’ meanings.”⁵ Women, because of their embodied social status, are situated differently from men. The oppressive sex/gender system that is in place, in many ways, interacts with other systems of oppression including racism, classism, and homophobia to extensively make invisible and marginalize women of color. Women’s experiences, to a great extent, are linguistically contained, socially constructed by relations of cultural ascendancy, and discursively mediated.⁶ Their experience continues to be defined in accordance to the white hegemonic discourse that has made nonwhite groups inferior. Particularly exemplary in regard to nonwhites’ position is the work of the postcolonial francophone scholar Frantz Fanon on racism and culture in the

book *Towards the African Revolution*.⁷ Fanon's work, which is by far one of the most rife and systematic attempts to reveal how power works within the paradigm of the colonized/oppressed and colonizer/oppressor dichotomy, is important for understanding the doctrine of "cultural hierarchy" and how this hierarchy is manifested in the United States. Cultural hierarchy is established so as to socially and culturally protect and privilege the very dominance of those in power.

In the United States, all major institutions are intended to support those who have habitually been in power, or the groups that are perceived to be dominant. It is no coincidence that the French philosopher Michel Foucault's notion that power is dispersed and it is everywhere is developed by feminist theorist and scholar Elizabeth Spelman. She indicates, with unmitigated certainty, that within the United States, every avenue of power is mostly in the hands of heterosexual, white males, a fact that is likely to prevail. For the first time in America, a black man, Barack Obama, has been elected to the highest position of power. Does having a black man as president disrupt the power structure that is already in place? In an attempt to answer this question, we need to understand fully how power works. I will come back to this topic in the course of this book but for now, the straightforward observation is that concession, as a marker of a civilized society, is necessary to keep the power structure in place. This is a good example of what Professor Louis F. Mirón calls the "moral exercise of power."⁸ Nonetheless, in the United States, whites continue to disproportionately occupy positions of power.

Power produces certain forms of epistemology that are consequential, and it legitimizes and extends the interests of those served by the effects of such operative power.⁹ In other words, power is despotic. It fastens the marginalized to the effigy of the inferiors, an image that imprisons and determines them, especially their social position in society. On the other hand, it can be generative, in the sense that the oppression experienced by marginalized groups can be transformed into unmitigated action. In order to appease the antagonized and maintain stability within the system, some concessions (i.e., antidiscrimination laws) as a set of stratagems are proposed, at least in theory, to appease these groups through visible representations.¹⁰ Yet, as we understand from Foucault's theory of power, power must remain indeterminate since it is this indeterminacy that is the very state of its existence. Critical Race Studies, a new school of legal thought that developed within the auspices of African American Studies, uses a method that is especially helpful and effective in documenting the dynamics of such unrestrained and undeniable power.¹¹ The many ways in which crime, for example, is defined benefits those in power. It is not surprising, then, that a large percentage of men in prisons are blacks and Mexicans.

Because, for the most part, “power is somehow always invisible,” in the sense of what the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes as “a tyranny of the transparent,”¹² the question, then, on how to relinquish power becomes a necessary one. Power cannot be separated from the complexity of power itself or the “polymorphous techniques of power,” as Foucault puts it.¹³ Foucault further tells us that “there are no relations of power without resistance.”¹⁴ Even though resistance to power is inevitable, and it does make a difference since it can reallocate the temperament of power, it is constantly regulated and policed. If Foucault is correct, then, according to the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, power must be understood “as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition on its existence and the trajectory of its desire.”¹⁵ Power, then, is not merely what whiteness goes up against—in this case nonwhiteness—but also, in a real sense, it is what whiteness depends on for its daily maintenance and existence. Any resistance on the part of whiteness to power is in itself a cherished part of that power, because power is not “given up,” it is just transformed into another form of domination. “Whiteness” is maintained and privileged greatly by institutionalized power. While there are different meanings of “whiteness” that are espoused by many whiteness scholars,¹⁶ I am inclined in this discussion to analyze whiteness, as the anthropologist John Hartigan Jr. explains it, as a normalized, unmarked structural position maintaining white privilege and authorizing systematic power.¹⁷

Instead of privileging whiteness, the African American poet and historian Maya Angelou’s important insight, as cited by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, sees it “as evil threats to the well-being and real identities of people within their sub-national groups,”¹⁸ because, for the most part, whiteness is internalized and is reproduced in conflicting ways between and within nonwhite groups. Professor Keith Osajima, drawing on Fanon’s formulation of how the colonizers imposed their depreciating image of inferiority onto the colonized, explains it best when he writes, “The oppressed internalize an identity that mirrors or echoes the images put forth by the dominant group.”¹⁹ For this reason, many racialized groups have presented an unconcealed predilection toward whiteness and have expressed their ambivalence toward their “blackness,” “First Nationness,” “Chineseness,” or “Mexicaness.” Consequently, for the most part, they have alienated themselves from developing significant interaction with members of their own groups.²⁰ On the other hand, others endlessly have challenged the dominant representations through the use and practices of resistance in their everyday lives, which can become a site for agency. The Ghost Dance was employed by First Nations in their effort to uphold an oppositional culture. Also, blacks have developed a culture of resistance based on music and religion.²¹

In terms of histories, situatedness, and cultural distinctiveness, racialized ethnic groups are separate and distinctive from the dominant group. It is true that all racialized ethnic groups have faced and continue to undergo gross discrimination and hardships in America. First Nations, who were already present in America before the arrival of Europeans, were looked on as uncivilized and lacking in “culture” and religion by the European newcomers. Blacks who were imported from Africa were also looked on as “different.” The fact that the inferior status of First Nations and blacks was already embedded in the Europeans’ cultural psyches at the very beginning of America’s existence as a nation is not without signification. Blacks’ inferiority, which would later on become institutionalized through slavery and the Jim Crow South, is vastly important. It stood as the model for the harsh treatment of all other racialized groups in the United States.

The struggle of racialized groups to be incorporated into America’s politics and political life was recognized through civil rights. This was the first step in a historical process whose present phase is the complex interchange of identity politics and multiculturalism.²² Because identity categories are normative, they are exclusionary. Given a certain ineluctability and directionality of multiculturalism’s locational dimensions—in the sense that it is directly situated in oppositional relations to Americanness or whiteness—the projection of the specificity of cultural otherness is appropriated and reappropriated, and is eventually alienated from cultural oneness or Americanness. While some individuals within their designated group identity deviate from regulatory group norms and form separate identities within these collective identities, the individuation from group authenticity, it is quite clear, can inevitably lead to “misrecognition.” Yet the apparent conundrum is not a communitarian cultural and racial formation that unites a diasporic community of ethnocultural purity or authenticity—“blackness,” “Chineseness,” or “First Nationness,” for example—it is the capacity of racialized ethnic groups in America to generate opposition to an oppressive and repressive status quo. Hence, I argue that the task of multiculturalism, which is to recognize and celebrate cultural differences, does not resolve assumptions about identities that are formulated from racialized differences, and thus it remains limited as a racially charged strategy equipped to deal with the underlying consequences of America’s cultural identity as white. For the most part, the celebration of cultural differences is restricted to the private sphere, a point that I want to return to later. The Labor Day parade in New York City is an example of how the public sphere is transformed into a private sphere.

In an effort to emancipate multiculturalism from the racist ontology from which it has evolved, then, a sound and realistic option to multiculturalism must first be guided by the recognition of multiculturalism’s

divorce from the long-standing and broader struggles for racial/cultural inclusiveness that had, to a large degree, produced it in the first place. Instead of the recognition and celebration of cultural “otherness” as the discursive condition for exchange and acknowledgment of the politicized subject position as “other,” an important goal of multiculturalism must be to celebrate cultural inclusiveness. But first, the monocultural United States has to be transformed into a multicultural United States where the social and political institutions no longer identify with America’s single cultural tradition that is based on whiteness.

This transformation, in part, would permit or require a new form of multiculturalism, one that does not buy into the racial script of America, where racialized groups, especially blacks, are the ones responsible for America’s “race” problem. The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva understands this too well. He points out that “many whites insist that minorities (especially blacks) are responsible for [America’s] racial problems.”²³ Postmulticulturalism, then, is the new possibility. It is not a leaving behind the past, or an erasure of past and present aesthetic practices that maintain whiteness as the status quo. Postmulticulturalism will capture fully the vexed history of whiteness that self-evidently works incongruent to nonwhiteness and maintains an American cultural identity as white. Postmulticulturalism would embark on a racialized ethnic identity as an American identity that would permanently dislocate the association with “otherness” as un-Americanness. This undertaking, for good reasons, is, routinely, an entirely complicated one. The monocultural state would have to be transformed to a multicultural state. Also, whiteness would have to be denormalized in order for postmulticulturalism to be effective. Is “whiteness studies” a form of denormalizing whiteness? I will return to this question later.

The Extent and Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 conceptualizes the politics of Americanization, de-Americanization, and racialized ethnic groups in the United States. While in this discussion’s contextual reflection, even though I have no training as a historian, a historical perspective is taken into consideration. And a sociopolitical approach is particularly helpful, that is, the need to reflect on Fanon’s classic formulation of “cultural hierarchy,” where the dominant culture as white, which remains unmarked and invisible, is fundamental. Any thoroughgoing and fundamental analysis, then, that is not structural or systemic and does not focus on the complex experiences of racialized groups in America by employing a racialized discourse runs the risk of being limited.

The intersectionality of gender, class, race, and ethnicity as a primary and organizing principle of America society, which locates and positions nonwhite women, is an important factor. Although difference is the very momentum of such categorization, at the same time, it intrinsically brings to the forefront the foundation of these identity categories, that is, race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Since these identity categories are homogenizing and universalizing, those who do not fit these categories would be “misrecognized.” Because of the homogenization and universalization of women in terms of identity politics and the politics of recognition, intersectionality situates women of color differently from white women.²⁴ Its aim is not to set up a “series of equivalences between race, gender, and class”²⁵ or to privilege a particular facet of experience.

Nonwhite women’s experiences cut across gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, religion, and nationality lines, and these identity categories are experienced in rather complex ways. In fact, Spelman’s “popbead metaphysics” is relevant here because women experience themselves in multiple fashions that are not detachable from one another.²⁶ At the same time, the interesectionality of race with other kinds of identities, such as ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality, for example, is disadvantageous for nonwhite women. Race as an identity category, however, is not a unified and exclusionary category. A black, lesbian, single mother welfare recipient, living in the Bronx in New York City, for example, will, for the most part, experience race differently than will a heterosexual, black, male lawyer on Wall Street. Nonetheless, the saliency of race in determining one’s position cannot be readily discarded.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how whiteness functioned as an ontologically nonaligned social category that advanced and promoted whiteness as the norm, raceless, and invisible. Looking back at America’s history, racialized ethnic groups were considered to be racially inferior and were denied an American cultural identity, which justified the discriminatory practices toward nonwhites. Besides, nonwhites’ inferiority, especially blacks’, was codified into law in slavery and the Jim Crow South, which no doubt was one of the fiercest acts of racial discrimination. The treatment of blacks served as a template for the treatment of all racialized groups. Whiteness, even though it was a part of everyday discourse, eventually became institutionalized. It functioned as a rationale for whites to sharply distinguish themselves from all nonwhite groups. The “them” and “us” scenarios and their binary logic operated in conjunction with each other and created hallow, racial boundaries between the relational white self and the nonwhite “other.” The self, nonetheless, can only be socially and intersubjectively constituted; it is implicit in the social and cultural context that gives it its meaning.

For racialized ethnic groups, racial inequality is compounded with ethnic inequality. It is for this precise reason that it is necessary to problematize and expose the binding constraints of the ethnicity paradigm where the emphasis is based entirely on an assimilation that means “becoming the same.” As a matter of fact, the utilization of the European experience and its extension to nonwhites in America lay bare, indeed, “an American dilemma.” In interrogating the compelling evidence that, unlike European whites, for whom assimilation is possible, for racialized ethnic groups—First Nations, blacks, Chinese, Mexicans,²⁷ and other racialized groups—assimilation is, for the most part, impossible, because these individuals are always viewed as non-Americans, and in many cases as *new immigrants*, a racially inflected term that characterizes the newcomers as belonging to an inferior culture. This characterization has been employed in everyday social relations shaping the very ways in which nonwhites are wittingly viewed in America.

Who is an American? This is the crucial question. A careful scrutiny of American identity confirms that American identity is based on whiteness. In fact, it has been complicit with the prevailing conditions of the domination of blacks and other nonwhite minority groups. It is not a secret from anyone that nonwhites are consistently denied an American identity. It officially started with the Naturalization Act of 1790, granting citizenship and incorporation into the body politic only to white men. Blacks, First Nations, other racialized groups, as well as women, were excluded from democratic citizenship and thus did not benefit from the evolution of modern civil society. Racial classification, an obvious and complex occurrence, has always functioned as an opprobrious device for the construction of an American identity as white. Chapter 3 examines how whiteness continues to shape and determine today an American cultural identity. It shows the clear interlink between whiteness and Americanness, and how it continues to discursively determine who is an American.

Given that multiculturalism has developed, shaped, and conditioned the binary cultural domination and marginalization, it apparently carries the inevitable marks of that oppression and subordination. Chapter 4 examines the pitfalls of multiculturalism. It demonstrates that the main task of multiculturalism is to celebrate cultural “otherness” instead of cultural oneness. Cultural “otherness” is viewed as un-Americanness, and it goes up against whiteness. Nonetheless, if one willingly ignores and disguises the various strata of its conceptual complexities, surely multiculturalism is one of the most significant political achievements in America in recent years. In fact, its emphasis on cultural recognition and differences is at the forefront of America’s race and ethnic relations. The important point here is that the integration of racialized groups into America’s political life has taken

place without confronting the very basic structures of cultural domination and marginalization. Even though marginalized groups are struggling for inclusion and recognition by reclaiming their so-called blackness, Asianness, or Mexicanness, for example, it is in fact tempting to conclude that multiculturalism masks accountability for the problematic of whiteness as a structure that is solidly in place.

The emphasis on multiculturalism, with its emphasis on cultural pluralism, has been, for many observers, a threat to an American cultural identity. A clear reason for this unnecessary concern is that cultural pluralism has come to signify cultural “multiplicity in a unity,” in the phrase of its official source, Horace Kallen, who wrote an article titled, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality,” in 1915. This seeming threat to America’s cultural identity, I argue, is another attempt to egregiously reclaim an American identity as white. Since whiteness must be contextualized in an analysis of power, domination and its specificity cannot go unnoticed.

It is necessary to rethink and reframe multiculturalism. Chapter 5 serves this purpose. It calls for another form of multiculturalism, post-multiculturalism, which is not a signal of sequentiality. Postmulticulturalism serves as an important backdrop for recontextualizing and analyzing the history of whiteness that works incongruent to nonwhiteness in order to address the exclusion of nonwhite people from America’s cultural oneness (cultural homogeneity). Instead of celebrating cultural otherness as un-Americanness, as does the focus on multiculturalism, postmulticulturalism would embrace America’s cultural manyness (cultural heterogeneity) as Americanness. It would open up a liberatory space to challenge America’s cultural oneness and truly embrace America’s cultural manyness. However, political theorist Wendy Brown’s concern that “it is possible as well that this ostensible tool of emancipation carries its own techniques of subjugation—that it converges with unemancipatory tendencies in contemporary culture, establishes regulatory norms, coincides with the disciplinary power of ubiquitous confessional practices; in short, feeds the powers it meant to starve,”²⁸ raises important and unavoidable questions. Emancipation is, without a doubt, inextricably linked to liberation. In the end, in order for postmulticulturalism to be realized, two things have to take place. One, America’s monocultural state has to be transformed into a multicultural state; two, whiteness has to be denormalized in order to produce a postwhite subject. Since the historical legacy of “otherness” binds all racialized groups in America, even though racial meanings are challenged both within and between groups, as a part of my preliminary conclusion, I think the first task at hand is for all racialized groups to be ready and willing to engage in discursive

practices that would promote and celebrate cultural differences in the name of “respect,” as opposed to “disrespect,” as the direct indicator for the recent social crises among African Americans, Mexicans, and Koreans in California, especially in south-central Los Angeles, for example.²⁹ However, articles such as “Black vs. Brown: African Americans and Latinos,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which Jack Miles contends that Latinos are taking jobs from African Americans, do not help.³⁰

Even though some marginalized groups are driven by the willful intention to conceive of themselves as the “model minority,” and imagine that they are “different” from the other marginalized groups, as Stuart Hall puts it, it is “the kind of difference that doesn’t make a difference of any kind,” especially when juxtapositioned against the majority.³¹ Indeed, the discrimination that any racialized group experiences, for the most part, has direct consequences for the other racialized groups.³² Accordingly, there is a need for a shared sense of purpose among racialized groups. The “model minority” espoused by those in power has to be recognized for what it is; it is a way of keeping racialized minorities tied to a false sense that they are accepted by the majority. Racialized groups, if they are willing to shed such colonized thinking, can open up a space for reflecting and thinking about what the postcolonial and feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines as the egalitarian “political community.”³³ It will refocus and call into question the seemingly paradoxical liberal principles of equality, individual rights, privacy, and autonomy, which are positioned within relations of power that reinforce the interests of the most privileged. This is not to say that power remains static. By extracting from a Foucauldian conceptualization of power, we can clearly see that power of various types circulates throughout society and cannot be viewed as originating within a particular milieu.

Even though a fully inclusive cultural community is indeed impossible given that, as Chantal Mouffe reminds us, “there will always be a ‘constitutive outside,’ an exterior to the community that is the very condition of its existence.”³⁴ Iris M. Young’s concerns that the very term *community* relies on sameness “and on the desire for social wholeness and identification” is significant.³⁵ “Once it is accepted that there cannot be a “we” without a “them” and that all forms of consensus are of necessity based on acts of exclusion, the issue can no longer be the creation of a fully inclusive community where antagonism, division, and conflict will have disappeared.”³⁶ Even so, it provides an analytic framework for the revisiting and recontextualizing of the relationship between the histories of racialized groups and how it gets played out in today’s society.

The complicated history of racialized ethnic groups in America is, in many melancholic ways, about America’s past and present, where nonwhites have been relegated to the margins of society because, for many ill-conceived

reasons, they have been categorized as non-Americans and inferiors. This history is a pretty ominous and often daunting one. Can “we” undo this long, vexed history of substantial Americanization? Multiculturalism is a good starting point for the recognition of multiethnic identities, but it has to move beyond the politics of recognition and confront the all-encompassing dominance of whiteness if we are to choose a “politics of every day resistance”³⁷ in an effort to reprove racist, cultural formation, especially when such a formation becomes commonsensical. Whether America would meaningfully embrace nonwhites as Americans is not a pseudo-question but a familiar one that should concern all of us. Given the recent racist hysteria as an unwarranted response that nonwhite groups are threatening America’s cultural identity, the nature of race relations in America is justifiably worrisome.

As an understandable opposition to the collective consequences of Americanization, de-Americanization, and their manifest impact on both racialized ethnic groups and the American society as a whole, in this book, I am faced with a rather sobering and inspiring task of critically elaborating such a rather complicated but necessary perception. It is only then, I hope, that we can accurately begin to explore the true meaning of a multicultural society. This book remains a privilege and safe space for these issues to be discussed and reflected on.

Conceptual Framework

In the context of my discussion, a historical perspective is taken into consideration and a sociopolitical understanding is necessary. However, I make use of Frantz Fanon's remarkable insight of "cultural hierarchy," which shows how the dominant group dictates the norms, values, and ethic of society to the masses. "The doctrine of cultural hierarchy," as Fanon puts it, "is thus but one aspect of a systematized hierarchization implacably pursued."¹ To a greater extent, it organizes and strengthens the configuration of the normal (dominant) and the abnormal (subordinate) cultural practice, which is then locked in immutable conflict and structurally irresolvable differences; the main one being racialized difference as a preapproved allegory for culture and its signification.²

Even though there is a need to transcend the dichotomy between normal and abnormal, good and evil, civilized and uncivilized, which has revitalized itself after 9/11, this very dichotomization of dominant and subordinate relations is at the point where ethnocentrism and its glaring desire to privilege the normal (dominant) over the abnormal (subordinate) continues its propagation and preservation. In post-9/11 America, ethnocentrism has been revamped and made shamelessly discernible. I am attempting here to explain and define ethnocentrism as the cultural practices and values that are viewed as natural and as a result are normalized. The fundamental process of normalization is explained accurately by John Caputo and Mark Yount in their article "Institutions, Normalization, and Power."

Normalization does impose homogeneity, but at the same time makes it possible to individualize, to measure gaps to differentiate according to the norm whose function it is to make differences intelligible as such. The norm has tolerances for a vast range of individuals, ample enough to promote diversity even as it constrains all deviations by its standard measures. Normalization keeps watch over the excessive and the exceptional, delimiting the outcasts who threaten the order of normalcy.³

While the veneer of naturalness/normalness, in itself, defends power/knowledge⁴ as a form of cultural practice, which is always hedged in by the cognitive process of metonymy and projection, it brings into play the comparison and measurement of the countercultures against the dominant culture. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall, with palpable dejection, reflected at length on this depiction in “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in which he hauntingly writes,

There is the powerful opposition between “civilization” [white] and “savagery” [nonwhite]. There is the opposition between the biological or bodily characteristics of the [“nonwhite”] and “white” “races,” polarized into their extreme opposites—each the signifiers of an absolute difference between human “types” or species. There are the rich distinction which cluster around the supposed link, on the one hand, between the white “races” and intellectual development—refinement, learning and knowledge, a belief in reason, the presence of developed institutions, formal government and law, and a civilized restraint in their emotional, sexual and civil life, all of which are associated with “culture”; and on the other hand, the link between the [non-white] “races” and whatever is instinctual—the open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of “civilized refinement” in sexual and social life, a reliance on custom and ritual, and the lack of developed civil institutions, all of which are linked to “Nature.”⁵

This is truly a good description of the “us” and “them” scenario that functions to classify whites (usual) as superior and nonwhites (unusual) as inferior. However, does the white/nonwhite framework oversimplify how racial categories are positioned in the United States? Should there be rather a multidimensional representation? Even though there is the “other” within the “them,” in post-9/11 America, the “us” and “them” paradigm seems to be fixed.

In this new discourse—new in the sense that culture is reconfigured as a substitute for race—a nonnegotiable space is created so as to maintain and propagate highly politicized cultural categories and stereotypes, or “controlling images” of the “them” as separate from the “us.” The “us” and “them” model has continued to be a “signifying practice,” where Muslim Americans and people who “look” Middle Eastern are among other things viewed and treated as the “them.” The “them” and “us” model is far from being redundant. More importantly, this model remains crucial for one’s exclusion and inclusion into the dominant culture. Since the “them” is perceived as culturally different from the “us,” it is in this instant of differentiation that domination in the form of cultural supremacy is produced and propagated.

Does racial hybridization complicate the white–nonwhite model? In other words, does it create an autonomous space for the neither white nor nonwhite, not fully one or the other? Is racial hybridization another way

of claiming whiteness? It was not so long ago that the one-drop rule was imposed on an individual through law as well as practice. Nowadays, racial in-betweenness, neither white nor nonwhite—unless he or she passes for white—has become a site for identity self-definition, that is, an alternative way of thinking about oneself. Identity formation, in this sense, is not self-determined, and works autonomously from the racial ordering of society. The racial hybrids have to transgress the boundaries between whites and nonwhites and reach a space in which racial signification remains at the forefront. Yet the signification of race, for good reasons, continues to be deeply contested and remains a bothersome term causing a tremendous amount of apprehension. It is toward this dilemma that I now turn. But first I will draw on Hall's careful reading and problematization of race as is modeled on Claude Lévi-Strauss's "floating signifier."⁶ "Signifiers," as Hall explains in his canonical text, "refer to the system and concepts of a classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their meaning not because of what they contain in their essence but in the shifting relations of difference which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning because it is relational and not essential can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation."⁷

In fact, the media never-ending enthusiasm for racial image and account is essential to its yearning to signify. A plethora of research and studies have shown how racialized images circulating in the media can alter the nuance and complexity of human identities and social issues into one-dimensional stereotypes.⁸ As I have argued elsewhere "the media have chosen the idealized images of full-faced pictures of welfare cheats as the 'others' to make the headlines in the newspapers and the six o'clock news."⁹

The Legacy of Race and Its Consequences

John Hartigan Jr. draws on the historical legacies of race in America: "The middle passage, slavery, and the experience of racial terror produce a race of African Americans out of subjects drawn from different cultures. Genocide, forced removal to reservations, and the experience of racial terror make Native American subjects drawn from different linguistic and tribal affiliations: a race. War relocation camps, legal exclusion, and the experience of discrimination make Asian American subjects drawn from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds: a race. The process of forming the southwestern states of the United States through conquest and subjugation and the continued subordination of Puerto Rico constitutes Chicanos and Puerto Ricans as races."¹⁰

In addition, there are a number of ways in which race thinking unfolded and was, and still is, reflected in America. Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* referred to blacks, whites, and First Nations as distinct races. As a matter of fact, it was fixed in Jefferson's mind that blacks and whites could never coexist in the United States of America because the difference between these two races "is fixed in nature. . . . And is this difference of no importance," Jefferson reasoned in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.¹¹ For Jefferson, then, "blacks whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind."¹² Jefferson's ontological claim that blacks are inferior helped him to reconcile with the idea that whites are superior to blacks. In the end, Jefferson, in order to cure America from the presence of blacks, proposed a form of "ethnic cleansing." Blacks should be shipped to an "all black state."

Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, published in 1994, provides an illustration of the assumed inferiority of blacks and other nonwhites. Using statistical evidence, they claimed, quite unabashedly, that when compared with blacks, whites achieve higher test scores.¹³ Three years later, Lino Graglia, a law professor at the University of Texas, following in the footsteps of Herrnstein and Murray, points to the bell curve's rendition that "blacks and Mexican-Americans are not academically competitive with whites in selective institutions."¹⁴

For some scholars, the concept of race has been discredited. In fact, race as a category seems basically hard to define because of the new emphasis on multiracialism. Given that race is the determinant of social relations in the United States, I think that race requires some serious contemplation. Race is not understood in secure or abiding terms, but its workings are manifested in the tangible cultural milieu in which it exists. The uniqueness of race, its historical liveness and immediacy in daily experience and social conflict in America is hard to dismiss. First Nations' battles, slave riots, lynching, and race riots are some illustrations of racial strife.¹⁵ If we dismiss the significance of race in America's past, we fail to comprehend the specter of racism and how it has shaped America's present perspective on race relations. Professor Cornel West's warning is taken quite seriously when he writes that in order "to engage in a serious discussion of race in America" it is not fruitful to start with people of color "but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historical inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes,"¹⁶ and, I would add, social practices and relations. Race has always been, and continues to be contentious. It is this contention that I will now briefly examine.

The Debate about Race

Recently, Paul Gilroy in his book *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race*, sincerely begs us to move in the direction of a color-blind position on race, transcend race thinking, and get rid of what he describes as “raciology.”¹⁷ On the other hand, West’s work *Race Matters* (2001) suggests that race indeed matters in America and is a concern that remains fundamental.¹⁸ “Race matters,” West tells us, because “race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely” because it is central to contemporary relations. “It forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair, and distrust.”¹⁹ In fact, “it matters so much that it has become almost impossible for one to think outside of ‘racial’ categories”²⁰ and decontextualize or ahistoricize the conception of race. Since race matters, as Professors Robert Miles and Rodolfo D. Torres explain, then, truly “races,” as categories originating from racial classification, must exist.²¹ And since races exist, even though an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “A Growing Number of Scientists Reject the Concept of Race” denies their existence, there needs to be a concept of race.²² Race in the United States is far from over, and David R. Roediger, in *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*, draws our attention to that fact.²³ Race and its historical specificities continue to shape the disreputable presence of race and racial meanings in America. In other words, race is just as active in America’s present as it has been in America’s past. In 2007 the fact that six black students at Jena High School in central Louisiana were sentenced to prison without parole after a school fight, in which a white student was brutally beaten, is also illustrative. In addition, on April 21, 2009, “The U.S. Supreme Court Tackles Race” appears as a headline in *USA Today*. Indeed, race thinking, race as an aesthetic idea, a social phenomenon, does exist. One of the consequences is racial difference.

Racial difference is the groundwork for racism.²⁴ It is a structure that is in place, benefiting all whites. Limiting our understanding of racism as ideological would only amount to an unwarranted and disingenuous oversimplification of racism.²⁵ More so, it does not explain, in full, the persistence of institutionalized power in disadvantaging and subordinating nonwhites. It is challenging for blacks and other nonwhites, for the most part, to acquire resources including education, housing, and high income on an equal footing with whites. In this sense, an adequate analysis of racism has to consider the working of power. Power’s tendency to subordinate nonwhites shapes the very conditions of nonwhites’ daily existence and makes room for whites to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which nonwhites stand out, stand apart from whites, “unless they pass, which means passing through space by passing as