The Conservation of "Race" 1

Kwame Anthony Appiah

So far at least as intellectual and moral aptitudes are concerned we ought to speak of civilizations where we now speak of races.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, "Races" 14

I

The intellectual autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois was, he insisted, the "autobiography of a race concept" (Dusk of Dawn): a struggle to articulate an understanding of race. More often, more intelligently, and with more passion and purpose than anyone before or since, Du Bois strove to capture the meaning of race for Afro-Americans. And we who seek to teach and to explore Afro-American expressive culture are obliged, surely, to continue in his footsteps, seeking to develop our own understanding of race. Race—and a constellation of concerns centered around it—emerges as thematic epicenter in much of that literature. It determines, in a sense, the space of narrative action, and an ideology of race informs—and sometimes, one could argue, deforms—those fluid "images of kin" that pervade black American writing.

Theories of race and its meaning are bound, as a result, to play a role in Afro-American literary criticism and theory—perhaps, indeed, to set the stage. We should share Du Bois's concern to understand the truth about race, just because the idea has played so crucial a role in the self-understanding of Afro-Americans.

I believe, however, that there is an equally important reason that we should reflect on race with the same careful passion as Du Bois—namely, that most of us see the study of Afro-American

Kwame Anthony Appiah is a member of the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell University. He is the author of Assertion and Conditionals, For Truth in Semantics, Necessary Questions, and (forthcoming) In My Father's House.

Black American Literature Forum, Volume 23, Number 1 (Spring 1989)
© 1989 Indiana State University
literature as part of a project of cultural politics. We are engaged in making available the Afro-American literary heritage, in teaching ways of reading it. But this is something we do not just because we think of these works as repositories of literary value, or just because they make available to readers an Afro-American "experience." We wish to harness the institutional power of the academy to the struggle against racism, and we see the teaching of Afro-American literature as part of that struggle. For anyone who shares this project, an adequate understanding of racism, and of the conception of race it presupposes, is fundamental.

And so in this essay, I should like to pursue that project, taking as a point of departure some reactions to an earlier foray into this field, reactions that I take to be symptomatic of anxieties that recur at many points in the study of Afro-American literature.

In an earlier essay on "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," I considered some of Du Bois's voluminous writings on race, writings from "The Conservation of Races," published in 1897, to Dusk of Dawn, his 1940 autobiography. I argued that Du Bois never finally accepted what he came gradually to grasp intellectually—namely, that there was no scientifically recoverable notion of race. The logic of his argument and the evidence he offered—evidence that, as I showed, has continued to accumulate since his death—lead naturally to the final repudiation of race as a term of difference: to speaking "of civilizations where we now speak of races." As I also tried to show, however, Du Bois never quite made the transfer of affect that he recommended: He died a "race-man," but he sketched the vision of a world that only "speaks of civilizations."

II

One doubt I had had about "The Uncompleted Argument" was that much of what I wanted to argue seemed to me uncontroversial, at least among educated Americans. It is true that Nei and Roychoudhury, for example, co-authors of a major survey of the evidence on human genetic diversity I cited, insisted on using the word race, but they also insisted that they used the "words race and population interchangeably without any social implication" (4). Talk of "race" in evolutionary biology is usually defended as a harmless reflex of old lexical habits. But I have tended to take it for granted that the concept of race that has done so much damage in our era is now widely known to be a biological fiction—a "dangerous trope," in the words of Henry Louis Gates (who edited
the issue of *Critical Inquiry* in which my essay first appeared) that "pretends to be an objective term of classification" (4-5). And so, as I say, I was worried that what I was saying was familiar, too familiar to bear repeating.

This worry was obviously shared by Professor Joyce Joyce, who observed in a discussion in *New Literary History* of "Race," *Writing and Difference* (apropos of my exposition of the most recent biological views) that "we are so appreciative at having come through the experience that we do not become angry about being told, in such a dilated fashion, what most Black people have always known: that the division of mankind into races is a biologically unsound contrivance" (377). Even if there is something of an irony in Joyce’s ascription of epistemological privilege to "Black people" in the course of a rejection of the categories of race (and it is only an irony, if, as Joyce seems to claim, she is speaking of a cultural tradition), I should be glad to have so substantial a population on my side. Unfortunately, of course, Joyce’s claim is preposterous.

Like her, I have never taken a poll of "most Black people," but I have taken the trouble to read the leading Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Edward Wilmot Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Martin Robinson Delany, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois—as I was at pains to show, Henry Highland Garnet, Marcus Garvey, and Booker T. Washington, among others—wrote essays, speeches, sermons, or books that presupposed the opposite of what Joyce alleges "most Black people" have always known. And my experience in conversation since I published the piece is that many of those American students and scholars who normally discuss Du Bois’s work did not know that it was a biological truism that Afro-Americans (or Jews, or whites) do not constitute a "race"; those who did "know" often didn’t know why. I doubt that any disinterested observer would argue that what these scholars did not know was known to the wider public.

Worse than this, however, Joyce’s own essay proceeds as if we should ignore these facts. She begins symptomatically with a speech by Haile Selassie (an African emperor), as sung by Bob Marley and the Wailers (from the Afro-Caribbean), as a counterpoint to a citation of Tina Turner (Afro-North-American) by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ditto). If there is no race here, what binds these texts together?

The answer, of course, is not "nothing." There is a complex history of relations between Africans and the descendants of those Africans who were transported as slaves to the New World, a history that explains why Marley quotes Selassie, and Joyce quotes both
of them. But it is a story in which a belief in race plays a central role. If you do not yourself believe in races, you cannot simply inherit the received account of what binds these various “Black people” together; you owe yourself and the rest of us—what Joyce apparently doesn’t have—a new and different story.

Joyce tells us that “Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Amiri Baraka, and others” do not waste their intellectual energy on “rationalizing” themselves “out of what is dubbed the Negro race” (377). But if there is no Negro race, then arguing that you are not a member of it is not “rationalizing,” it is simply telling the truth. And, so it seems to me, the truth about Joyce is that she doesn’t want this truth told. The question is why, and I shall return to this issue at the end of this essay.

But I should say at once that an answer to this question hovers in the air, an answer that I should like to pin down at once and reject. It is that a statement of this truth is politically inopportune. I am enough of a scholar to think that the truth is worth telling and enough of a political animal to recognize that there are places where the truth does more harm than good. But, so far as the United States is concerned, I can see no reason to believe that racism is advanced by denying the existence of races; and, though there is some reason to suspect that those who resist legal remedies for the history of racism might use the nonexistence of races to argue, for example, against affirmative action, that strategy is easily opposed. For, as Todorov points out (in an essay on “‘Race,’ Writing and Culture” in the same volume of Critical Inquiry with which I find myself pleasantly in almost total agreement), the existence of racism does not require the existence of races. (You don’t have to believe in witchcraft, after all, to believe that women were persecuted as witches in colonial Massachusetts.)

Even if I am wrong, I should resist the establishment of a level of discourse in the academy that refused the truth for strategic purposes, not least because we need the truth if we are to work out appropriate strategies. Academic consumers also have a right to “truth in labeling.”

In reading those who resist attempts to disrupt the conceptual economy of “race,” we should always ask this question: Do they object because they believe that there are races or because they do not want their nonexistence articulated? I am, as I say, an optimist about speaking the truth in most cases; and I am willing to offer more reasons for truth telling in this case specifically if anyone asks me. For, as I shall argue at the end of this essay, I believe that truth here is in the service of justice.
III

But my essay elicited another response: one that will provide us with a route to an understanding of a deeper level of resistance to the truth; a response that must, at any rate, be taken seriously. For its author—Houston Baker, doyen of Afro-American literary critics—is a figure of great authority in the study of Afro-American culture; and his response seems to depend on misunderstanding the position from which I and other Africans address those cultural issues that so centrally engage him. As an Afro-American literary critic, responding to an African philosopher’s analysis of the way the greatest Afro-American social scientist understood what Africans and Afro-Americans share, he recapitulates, in my view, the history of misunderstanding that binds together the intellectuals of the black diaspora.

The dispute between us is central, I think, to a question that has itself been central to Afro-American culture: the question of how Afro-Americans are to conceive of their relation to other “Negro” peoples, and, especially, to Africans. (It is important to remember, however, that a relation to an ancestral “homeland” is central as well to the cultures of many other American ethnicities: Jews, Irish Americans, Polish Americans . . . even, dare one say it, Anglo-Americans. This, too, is an issue to which I shall return.) Even if Baker did not occupy so powerful an institutional position in the American academy, his response would be important as a symptom of anxieties over this issue. For, though Baker’s work derives sustenance from a variety of recent critical trends and from an anthropology of culture that was unavailable to Du Bois (let alone to Blyden or Crummell or Delany), it seems to me that his response confirms my claim that the argument I discussed in my earlier essay does, indeed, remain to be completed. Du Bois knew but never felt that we should “speak of civilizations where we now speak of races”; and Baker similarly resists the erasure of the term “race.” For both, it seems, its absence simply threatens to leave too vast a discursive void.

IV

Baker sets his analysis within the framework of a claim about the persistence in Western culture—the culture which is part of the double heritage of African and Afro-American intellectuals—of a certain “dualism” in academic discourse. This dualism—a legacy, he suggests, of the Enlightenment—issues in a set of allegedly parallel oppositions between “debunkers,” on the one hand, and
“rationalists,” on the other; ideological criticism and a scientistic claim to a value-neutral objectivity; passion and cold reason; even, at one point, body and soul (381).

Baker sees us “rationalists” as having listened “to explanations from the overseers” (381). In the neo-colonial context, the overseers are the colonizers or their colonized agents; to say that we have listened to the overseers’ explanations, and to imply that we have accepted them, is to suggest that we have been co-opted by the ideology that is the instrument of our domination. For, as Baker and I are agreed, imperialism is by no means over. When he links me (and, by implication, all “rationalists”) with Sowell and Loury and Wilson in the United States (387), whose overseers are the ideologues of “whitemale hegemony,” we know that he means that, in being so co-opted, they, like me, are at the service of those who exploit in the name of “race.” And, in case we do not gather the implication, he makes the accusation almost directly.

The cover [of the Critical Inquiry volume in which my essay appeared] portrays the British explorer David Livingstone as a saint reading to inhabitants of whatever turf it is he has just invaded. One of the inhabitants leans forward eagerly; the other looks unutterably depressed. We hear the learning native exclaim, “He is teaching us! He is teaching us!” . . . In the presence of Appiah’s essay, one wants to exclaim, “He is teaching us! He is teaching us!” (384)

This African, Baker tells us, sounds like his colonizers.

Baker’s point invokes a powerful objection: that the hegemony of the West over the conceptual world of the colonial intellectual may blind him or her to the realities of power. I shall argue at the end of this essay, however, that it may be those who accept rather than those who reject the language of “race” that risk co-optation by the hegemons.

V

Baker also sees “rationalists” as “coolly instructive and intelligently unflappable” (381). But though we do not burn with “the heat”—the “palpable” heat—“of the debunker’s passion” (381), I think he mistakes the urgency of our analyses. He seeks to foreground the issues I was discussing with some reflections on what Du Bois called (in words from Dusk of Dawn I quoted in my earlier essay) the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult,” the heritage that “binds together . . . the children of Africa” (116-17). We live, Baker says, “in a world where New York cab
drivers scarcely ever think of mitochondria before refusing to pick me up" (385). And he goes on to retail an anecdote:

Not long ago, my family and I were in a line of traffic moving along Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. On the corner, six or seven cars ahead of us, was a deranged, shabbily clad, fulminating white street person shouting obscenities at passengers and drivers. His vocabulary was the standard repertoire of SOBs and sons and mothers directed at occupants of the cars ahead, but when we came in view . . . he produced the standard “Goddamned niggers! Niggers! Niggers!” (385)

It is indeed an American scandal that these insults and the hurt they engender persist in the United States, as in many places elsewhere. But the insults of a New York taxi driver and a lunatic in the City of Brotherly Love are really not the core of the issue. I would be willing to take more insult if it would bring more justice in the world’s dealings; but we who are not “white” will not get full justice (here, in America, or in the wider world) until racism is destroyed, and the insult is only made possible by racism.

For it is only the power of racist ideology that accounts for the fact that a crazy, impoverished street person can use these words to do harm. If we did not know that this insult was a petty part of a wider pattern that threatens us, we could pass by in silence: Sticks and stones may break bones, but words—words that evoke structures of oppression, exploitation, and brute physical threat—can break souls. Draining the power of those words—contesting the dangers that give them their power—was a central part of my project in discussing Du Bois. So if there is, as Baker alleges, a “thermal gradient” (381) from passionless rationalist to red-hot debunker, then my position on it has failed to register on his thermometer.

But, perhaps, this is an instrument on which one would rather not register. For Baker’s heat is a passion that leads him to say: “Gentrification and black genocide go hand in hand with the ‘science’ of Sowell and others” (387). I am reminded here of the figure (pseudonymous, I trust) of Cousin Irwin that Edward Pechter writes about, who, whenever he is losing an argument, ends conversations by enjoining his gentle interlocutor to “remember the six million” (170).³ As Humpty Dumpty might have said: “There’s a nice knockdown argument for you.” For the fact is—and how odd it is to have to say it—that there is a substantial difference between policies of segregation—gentrification—and policies of extermination—genocide—, and it doesn’t help us deal with either problem to conflate them; it would take an argument to show that
there is a slippery slope from the country-club bigot to the technocrats of the Nazi slaughter.4

It seems to me, then, that Baker, like many others today, while rightly angry at the destruction that racism has wrought, has the wrong analysis of what is at stake. At the risk that I shall hear a chorus of "He is teaching us! He is teaching us!" I would like, in this essay, to see if we can put the issue more clearly.

VI

At least three distinct doctrines might be called "racism." One is the view—which I shall call racialism—that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, in the racialist view, a sort of racial essence; and it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the "Races of Man" account for more than the visible morphological characteristics—skin color, hair type, facial features—on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. Racialism is at the heart of nineteenth-century attempts to develop a science of racial difference, but it appears to have been believed by others—like Hegel, before then, and Crummell and many Africans since—who have had no interest in developing scientific theories.

Racialism is not, in itself, a doctrine that must be dangerous, even if the racial essence is thought to entail moral and intellectual dispositions. Provided positive moral qualities are distributed across the races, each can be respected, can have its "separate but equal" place. I argued in my earlier essay that racialism is false; but, by itself, it seems to me to be a cognitive rather than a moral problem. The issue is how the world is, not how we would want it to be.

Racialism is, however, a presupposition of other doctrines that have been called "racism," and these other doctrines have been, in the last few centuries, the basis of a great deal of moral error and the source of a great deal of human suffering.

One such doctrine we might call "extrinsic racism." Extrinsic racists make moral distinctions between members of different races, because they believe that the racial essence entails certain morally relevant qualities. The basis for the extrinsic racists' discrimination among people of different races is their belief that members of different races differ in respects that warrant differential treatment,
respects—like honesty or courage or intelligence—that are uncontroversially held (at least in most contemporary cultures) to be acceptable as a basis for treating people differently. Evidence that there are no such differences in morally relevant characteristics—that Negroes do not necessarily lack intellectual capacities, that Jews are not especially avaricious—should thus lead people out of their racism if it is purely extrinsic. As we know, such evidence often fails to change an extrinsic racist’s attitudes substantially, for some of the extrinsic racist’s best friends have always been Jewish. But at this point—if the racist is sincere—what we have is no longer a false doctrine but a cognitive incapacity.

I said that the sincere extrinsic racist may suffer from a cognitive incapacity, but many who espouse extrinsic racist doctrines are simply insincere intrinsic racists. Intrinsic racists, in my definition, are people who differentiate morally between members of different races, because they believe that each race has a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence. Just as, for example, many people assume that the fact that they are related to another person—a brother, an aunt, a cousin—gives them a moral interest in that person, so an intrinsic racist holds that the bare fact of being of the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another.

For an intrinsic racist, no amount of evidence that a member of another race is capable of great moral, intellectual, or cultural achievements, or has characteristics which in members of one’s own race would make them admirable or attractive, offers any ground for treating that person as one would treat similarly endowed members of one’s own race. Just so, some sexists are “intrinsic sexists,” holding that the bare fact that someone is a woman (or man) is a reason for treating her (or him) in certain ways.

The spirit of intrinsic racism infuses Baker’s rousing call to turn from normative anthropological writing to “a unifying discourse” that would “produce a black group initiative contrary to the interests of academically isolated whitemales . . .” (386). The thought here, surely, is that solidarity in this in-group is intrinsically worthwhile. More ominously, racism—perhaps intrinsic, perhaps extrinsic—seems also to animate his casually insulting remarks about Sander Gilman’s essay “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” which, Baker says, presents, “and so dreadfully embarrassingly, a whitemale confessional. ‘Look what we have done,’ it naughtily delights, rubbing its hands and looking pruriently sidewise” (388).
There is enough here to raise the temperature even of a "rationalist." It is hard to believe that one should have to remind a sensitive reader that, for example, there is a distinction between discussing and endorsing an image—that to fail to recognize this distinction is to risk "shooting the messenger." If I am with Thomas Sowell, because I do not believe in the biological category of race, then, I suppose, by a similar logic, Baker is with Ed Meese, because he cannot distinguish between the different purposes one can have in attending to a degrading image of woman's body. If we cannot discuss the structure of modern sexist discourse, its iconography and its genesis, how on earth are we to dismantle it?

It is distressing enough to find oneself having to say that one does not share Baker's judgment that the author's glance in the essay is either "prurient" or "sidewise," but I worry more—and here my blood reaches a temperature that even Baker's thermometer will register—that we have come to a point where "whitemale" can be seen as a proper predicate to apply in impugning a scholar's motives, after the long struggle to establish that "nigger" is not. What are we to make of the implication that Gilman's interest must be "confessional" because he is "white" and male?\footnote{Gilman} Nowhere does Gilman claim or express an affiliation with those who "have done" this merciless medicine. Are we being asked to conceive of Gilman as inheriting the collective guilt of the past of a race (and a gender)? In the end these words have a simple subtext: White men should keep silent.

You do not have to live in South Africa to be reminded of the threat that racism still poses to human decency. British immigration laws, French police practices, American income statistics—all point inescapably to the same shameful conclusion. In these circumstances it no doubt seems politically inopportune, at best, and morally insensitive, at worst, to use the same term—race—to describe the attitudes we find in Du Bois and many of his heirs, and, more particularly, to see this use of whitemale as a racist attack. But this natural reaction is based, I believe, in confusion.

What is appalling about Nazi racism—the racism that more than any other informs the current anti-racist reflexes of the West—is not just that it presupposed, as all racism does, false (racialist) beliefs, not simply that it involved a moral incapacity—the inability to extend our moral sentiments to all our fellow creatures—, but that it led to oppression, first, and then to mass slaughter. And though, as I have already insisted, South African racism has not led to killings on the scale of the Holocaust (even if it has left South Africa judicially executing more [mostly black] people per head of population than
most other countries), it has led to the systematic oppression and the economic exploitation of people who are not classified as “white,” to massive differences between the life chances of white and non-white South Africans, and to the infliction of suffering on citizens of all racial classifications, not least by the police state that is required to maintain the exploitation and oppression.

Part of our resistance, therefore, to calling Baker's racial ideas by the same term that we use to describe the attitudes both of Nazis and of many Afrikaners surely resides in the fact that Baker would not for a moment contemplate using race as a basis for inflicting harm. Indeed, it seems to me that there is a significant pattern in the rhetoric of modern racism in which the discourse of racial solidarity is usually expressed through the language of intrinsic racism, while those who have used race as the basis for oppression and hatred have appealed to extrinsic racist ideas. This point is important for understanding how someone can fail to see how dangerous whitemale and blackmale are as terms in a discourse that intends to revise and remedy the history of racism.

VII

The two major uses of race as a basis for moral solidarity that are most familiar both in Africa and in the West are varieties of black nationalism and Zionism. In each case it is presupposed that a “people,” Negroes or Jews, has the basis for shared political life in the fact of being of the same race. There are varieties of each form of “nationalism” that make the basis lie in shared traditions. But however plausible this may be in the case of Zionism, which has, in Judaism (the religion, and its associated cultural heritage), a realistic candidate for a common and non-racial focus for nationality, the peoples of Africa have a good deal less culturally in common than is usually assumed. What blacks in the West, like secularized Jews, have mostly in common is the fact that they are perceived—both by themselves and by others—as belonging together in the same race, and this common race is used by others as the basis for discriminating against them: “If you ever forget you’re a Jew, a goy will remind you.”

Though race is at the heart of black nationalism, it seems, therefore, that it is the fact of a shared race, not the fact of a shared racial character, which provides the basis for solidarity. Where racism is implicated in the basis for national solidarity, it is intrinsic, not extrinsic.
It is this that makes the idea of fraternity one that is naturally applied in nationalist discourse. For, as I have already observed, the moral status of close family members is not normally thought of in most cultures as depending on qualities of character: We are supposed to love our brothers and sisters in spite of their faults and not because of their virtues. (That is why what we feel for our families we call “love” and not “liking.”)

Intrinsic racism seems so much less objectionable than extrinsic just because in the modern world (unlike the nineteenth century), intrinsic racism is acknowledged almost exclusively as the basis for feelings of community. So we can, surely, share a sense of what Blyden called “the poetry of politics” that is “the feeling of race,” the feeling of “people with whom we are connected” (197). The racism here is the basis of acts of supererogation, the treatment of others better than we otherwise might, better than moral duty demands of us. I think it is because he senses this poetry, feels this connection, that Baker does not recognize the dangers hidden in his signifying re-inscription of older racial epithets.

But the positive character of the acts to which much intrinsic racism leads is a contingent fact. One could conceive of racialists whose moral beliefs lead them to feelings of hatred against other races while leaving no room for special love of members of their own. And to maintain the terminology of difference is to make possible the continuance of extrinsic racism, which has usually been the basis for treating people worse than we otherwise might, for giving them less than their humanity entitles them to. This too is a contingent fact. Indeed—to offer but one signal example—, the guarded respect that Alexander Crummell (who is widely regarded as one of the fathers of African nationalism) had for white people derived from a belief in the superior moral qualities of the Anglo-Saxon Sprachgeist.8

Intrinsic racism is, in my view, a moral error; however, the harm it threatens is mitigated by its largely supererogatory operation. Even if racialism were correct, the bare fact that someone was of another race would be no reason to treat him or her worse—or better—than someone of my race. In our public lives, people are owed treatment independently of their “merely” biological characters: If they are to be treated differently, there must be some morally relevant difference between them. In our private lives, we are morally free to have aesthetic preferences among people. But once our treatment of people raises moral issues, we may not make arbitrary distinctions. Using race in itself as a morally relevant distinction strikes me as obviously arbitrary: Without associated
moral characteristics, why should race provide a better basis than hair color or height or timbre of voice? A common ancestry might account for differences in moral character, but then it would be the differences in moral character which justified the different treatment.⁹

It is presumably because most people share the sense that intrinsic racism requires arbitrary distinctions that they are largely unwilling to express it in situations which invite moral criticism. But I do not know how I would argue with someone who was willing to announce an intrinsic racism as a basic moral idea (except of course by challenging the racialism it presupposes). To expose individuals to the recognition that intrinsic racism is a presupposition of their views is not, alas, to guarantee that they will escape it.

VIII

The disappearance of a widespread belief in the biological category of the Negro would leave nothing for racists to have an attitude towards. But it would offer, by itself, no guarantee that Africans and Afro-Americans would escape the stigma of centuries. Extrinsic racists could disappear and be replaced by people who believed that the population of Africa had in its gene pool fewer of the genes that account for those human capacities which generate what is valuable in human life—fewer, that is, than in European or Asian or other populations. Putting aside the extraordinary difficulty—both evaluative and biological—of determining which genes these are, there is, of course, no scientific basis for this claim. A confident expression of it would, therefore, be evidence only of the persistence of old prejudices in new forms. But even this view would be, in one respect, an advance on extrinsic racism. For it would mean that each black-skinned person would need to be judged on his or her own merits.

Let me put the claim at its weakest: In the absence of a racial essence, there could be no guarantee that some particular person was not more gifted than any or all others, even in the populations of other regions. That is why I believe Baker is wrong to regard the scientific debunking of race as a negative gesture. What Baker calls "science" (in scare quotes [386, 387, 389])—which is simply science (without them)—is one, but only one, of the instruments in the arsenal of necessary reform.

Indeed, Baker's persistent bracketing of the word science, with those oft-repeated scare quotes, indicates, I think, an awareness,
on his part, of this fact. If the analyses of Sowell and Loury and Wilson are wrong, in the ways that Baker suspects, it is in part because they have failed to live up to the aim of science: to seek to limit the influence of partiality and prejudice on the understanding. It is a misconception—on which the policy intellectuals of the social sciences certainly trade—to suppose that the fact that something is offered as a scientific claim relieves us from the obligation of establishing its impartiality. Of course, the very opposite is true. An accusation of prejudice or partiality strikes at the heart of a scientific claim. It is one thing to say—with Mary Louise Pratt—that science, that purportedly “informational” discourse in general, is very often not neutral, another to give up the goal of neutrality.

I hope that it will now be clear why I think Baker is wrong, too, to object that I discount the “racial markers” “as mere ‘gross’ features of hair, bone and skin” (384). (This phrasing was one I borrowed from Du Bois [75].) That this is, indeed, an error is evidenced by the shabby racism of the New York taxi driver. But I had not argued that racial insult was unreal—even with my thick brown skin and my privileged history, I have occasionally experienced the insult—, but that the insult presupposed a series of falsehoods I was trying to diagnose and reject.

IX

Why then does Baker want to resist my claims? Because a “proudly emergent sense of ethnic diversity in the service of new world arrangements is disparaged by whitemale science as the most foolish sort of anachronism” (385). I had, to be sure, said nothing against the reality (or the desirability) of ethnic diversity and nothing to suggest that I disparage the pride of ethnic minorities. What I had said was that, like Du Bois in his better moments, I favored speaking of (real) civilizations—by which he meant what we might call cultures and subcultures—rather than of (unreal) races. Only someone who holds the view that race is both real and the only possible basis for ethnicity can reasonably regard an argument against the reality of races as an argument that gives the suppression of cultural difference free rein. Thus, it is he, and not I, who has been captured by the hegemonic discourse of the West.

Or rather, I should say, by the form that discourse has adopted locally. For it seems to me that the discourse in which Baker has been entrapped is in some ways rather specifically American: a
discourse not so much in the service of "new world" as of "New-World" arrangements. Baker's more sophisticated resistance to a simple statement of the truth about races seems to me to have the same source as Joyce's cruder dismissal of the truth, a reaction I promised to attempt to explain.

As Werner Sollors has argued in his important recent book *Beyond Ethnicity*, American critics of "ethnic" literatures, "easily succumb to the danger of . . . grounding close readings of texts on static notions of descent and on primordial, organicist, sometimes even biological—but in all cases largely unquestioned—concepts of ethnic-group membership" (5). Sollors develops his analysis of the current American climate in terms of his primary analytical dualism of descent and consent, a dualism which corresponds to Du Bois's opposition of race and civilization:

The heart of the matter is that in the present climate consent-conscious Americans are willing to perceive ethnic distinctions—differentiations which they seemingly base exclusively on descent, no matter how far removed and how artificially selected and constructed—as powerful and crucial. (7)

[Yet] ironically, the very popularity of defiant ethnic revivalism and exclusivism in the United States suggests a widespread backdrop of assimilation against which it takes place. The process works only in a context where values, assumptions and rhetoric are shared. (13)

The model of ethnicity that Sollors is criticizing here is, as he observes, the strategy of ethnic self-affirmation of the Black Power movement of the sixties, particularly in its literary ramifications; this American mode of conceiving of the power of descent is a consequence of the "influence black literary debates of the 1960's exerted on ethnics of the 1970's" (5).

What Baker and Joyce—and many others who have not reacted in writing—are resisting is what Mary Louise Pratt correctly identified as the project of "Race," *Writing and Difference*: "to destabilize fixed, naturalized meaning systems around race and other lines of hierarchical differentiation" (401). The challenge to the strategy of ethnic self-affirmation—Sollors's challenge to theorize ethnicity more fully as consent—is part of that project. As I argued in my review of Sollors's book, members of groups, like Jews and Afro-Americans, whose ethnicity is usually theorized (however falsely) in racial terms, are compelled, to the extent that they share this dominant ideology, to resist a conception of ethnicity as consent; and so the discourse of consent competes for the same space as the rhetoric of race. Baker and Joyce have inherited that rhetoric of race; and, if it is a very American rhetoric, it is one that
a European outsider, like Sollors, or an African one, like me—each of us having “consented” to make a life in America—can help Americans to remark and—as I would hope—to transcend.  

X

Why address these issues in a black literature journal? It's true that the question of race is central to Afro-American literature, but it is also central to every other area of black life in the United States. If the question must be addressed in the context of Afro-American literary studies, it is because it is the most significant of the academic quarters in which the form of essentialism I have dubbed "racialism" is entrenched.

This fact is somewhat obscured by the way in which "Black" has come to function pedagogically as if it were a generic predicate: In teaching "Modern Black Autobiography," for example, there is a tendency, given a canon that is in fact defined by the "racial" identity of its authors, to seek to give an account of that canon either in formal terms—as people have conventionally defined the sonnet—or in terms of a distinctive subjectivity—as they have conventionally defined the lyric. In each case the real origins of the categorization are sheathed in a more respectable integument.

This is not surprising; nor is it, by any means, uniquely a feature of Afro-American literary studies, precisely because of the way that the cultural pronouncements of 1960s' black nationalism influenced and informed the general vogue for ethnicity in the ensuing decade. And, as we shall see in a moment, similar problems attend some versions of feminist theory.

Indeed, these strategies are the obvious ones to adopt in a discourse that retains racial or sexual essentialism while affecting to disdain it. The formalist reduction, after all, is consistent with the formalist methodology that has been so influential—both as model and anti-model—in recent American criticism; and the subjectivist reduction—the regression to a crude notion of a distinctive racial subjectivity—ties into the older humanistic conception of "culture" as the province of a privileged subjectivity, to which the artist gives an especially exalted expression. And, of course, the two categories can hardly be kept distinct, since the same suppressed essentialism can sometimes be found even in the displaced version of "black consciousness" that assigns the distinguishing features of black writing not to an authorial consciousness but to the texts themselves—whether in their "ideological form," or in more purely linguistic characteristics.
I say essentialism can be found here, not that it must be. There really are formal echoes, formal traditions, formal influences, both as conceived in traditional literary history and, no doubt, as conceived in our newer post-Bloomian theories of "influence." A useful categorization of a class of texts through time as a genre must recognize the distinction among texts, on the one hand, that simply share some objective property—being fourteen lines long, for the sonnet—and texts, on the other hand, that are bound together by a history in which such a property plays a certain kind of subjective role. The objective—formal—characteristics of the sonnet play a role as necessary conditions in its individuation in part because in the course of the history of the sonnet poets intentionally wrote works that were formally like earlier works. Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth all wrote sonnets under that description. These works are to be read through a convention that sees them as the product of an intentional act: as poems that are, among other things, subject to specific formal constraints, constraints that must, therefore, be acknowledged by a competent reader. Simply put, we are supposed to recognize a sonnet as a sonnet.

Because their recognition as part of the baggage of intentions postulated of the author is essential to an understanding of the conventions of a genre, these constraints can be seen as part of its subjective structure. These subjective, historical conditions for the articulation of a genre are met by many an Afro-American text corpus: Slave narratives, for example, clearly constitute not merely an objective class but a subjective genre, articulated as such very early in the history of their production. We are meant to recognize Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a slave narrative.

Now there are, surely, other bodies of texts—the accumulated fictions of Wright, Ellison, and Reed, for example—in the identification of which being "black" can be seen to play a crucial role, a role that it is important for students of these texts to articulate, to explore. Surely, too, we are free to read together any texts we please, and the openness of the range of reasons for such choices is part of the essentially contestable character of literary study. But my point about the strategies I identified just now—strategies for theorizing a "genre" of "Black Autobiography"—is that they suppress the actual basis for reading these texts together: Essentialist assumptions are concealed behind phoney reasons; distorting rationalizations are offered for the reading together of Afro-American texts.
Worse still—because ultimately more dangerous—is the way that both strategies seem usually to be undergirded by what we might call the "constituency model," which is implicit in much careless contemporary talk about canonization. Previously excluded texts enter the castle of canonicity not individually, as a procession of discrete candidates, but in the form of a "tradition" coterminous with a racial or sexual or ethnic identity. The impetus here is not the worth of the individual work, as might be determined by the dubious criteria of the old canonical conjuncture (dubious because its allegedly immanent criteria were in fact the product of the "extra-literary" politics of the old regime), nor even simply an opening of the reader/student to hitherto suppressed or distorted areas of experience, but rather, I think, a mistaken notion that in "doing justice" in the canon, by opening the doors to those who have been excluded by racism and sexism and other devices of difference, we are somehow symbolically rectifying past—and present—wrongs. Representation in the canon is mistaken—perhaps through one of those dangerous puns that perpetually threaten our reason—for political representation: Each constituency deserves its representatives, and so the passions we bring to the political question will be productively deflected, re-channeled, to the literary one. Let the Bastille stand while we storm the theaters.

Real oppression is not revised by such merely symbolic gestures.

Of course, if you adhere to an ideology of the "literary" as a source of transcendent value, you will see in the recognition of black (or Chicano or women's) writing, the possibility of "sacralizing" the real lives of the oppressed through the representation of their experience within the confines of "literature." You will then have a motive for a subjectivist strategy that goes beyond the constituency model. Elaine Showalter has made the case, mutatis mutandis, for women: "Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored and given resonance in literature" (Smith 81). If this were true, symbolic action within the canon might help in the real world, might not be merely symbolic. Still, even if it were true that some of our black students were helped to discover their authentic—essential—Afro-American beings through the experience of reading Invisible Man in high school (and some of our female students were released by reading The Color Purple), such therapeutic results would not be sufficient reason to reinforce the ideology of the "literary."

The point at which to address the older canons is not by challenging their criteria: It is by challenging the very idea of the
The Conservation of "Race"  

The canon, the double claim that there is some recoverable notion of purely literary value and that that notion is what explains why Emma, Othello, and War and Peace are in, and Oroonoko and The Green Carnation—to take two works almost entirely at random—are not. We need to escape from the idea that what novels and sonnets are, how they work, when and why and if they matter can be settled by vague gestures in the direction of an aestheticized conception of value.¹²

What lies behind the attempt to argue for literature as a repository of racial or gendered experience is, at all events, the very same essentialism that I have been arguing against. It takes only a moment of sober reflection to see that talk of the Afro-American experience treats the complex worlds of millions of men and women as homogeneous, and thus treats black people as particularized expressions of a racial essence—as tokens of a human type—in precisely the way invented by nineteenth-century extrinsic racism.¹³

Showalter’s argument reflects a double error: an essentialism about "the female experience" and a mystified conception of literary value. It is time to admit that each of these errors is pervasive—while insisting also that they are not inevitable—in the arguments for blackening the canon.

XI

The last word here should be a reminder of why all this matters. As I said at the start, speaking the truth is our vocation in the academy, and, all things considered, our societies profit, in my view, from the academy and its vocation. And so it is important for us to continue trying to tell our truths. Yet I, at least, have a strong sense of the marginality of such work to the central issue of the resistance to racism—and to sexism, and to the other structures of difference that shape the world of power—and I have an equally strong conviction that the real battle is not being fought in the academy.

What we in the academy can contribute—even if only slowly and marginally—is the disruption of this discourse of difference. For, in my perfectly unoriginal opinion, the inscription of difference in the industrialized societies (as in neo-colonial Africa) plays into the hands of the hegemons. "Race" in the United States (like "tribe" in Africa) is central to the way in which the objective interests of the worst off are distorted: To choose an obvious example, a black preppie at an Ivy League college is allowed to count as a symbolic response to the economic disadvantages of the inner city.
This point was recognized by Du Bois, among others. Cedric Robinson summarizes a crucial part of the argument of Black Reconstruction as follows:

It was these ideologies [of racism] as historical forces which had precluded the emergence of a powerful labour movement in the U.S.—a movement whose nucleus would have consisted of the nine million ex-slave and white peasant workers of the South. The force of these ideologies manifested itself after the war when these workers did not move to the next logical step: the institutionalization of their historical convergence in order to dominate the Reconstruction's "dictatorship of labor." (313)

I am unable to agree fully, therefore, with Henry Louis Gates when he says that "race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests" (5, emphasis added). Trope of ultimate difference, yes. But precisely not for differences that are coterminous with the economic. For it is because the categories of difference cut across objective economic interests that they operate to blind us to them. What binds the preppie to his dark-skinned fellow citizens downtown is not economic interest but racism and the cultural products of resistance to it that are shared across (most of) Afro-American culture.

It seems to me that we learn from this case what John Thompson has argued recently, in a powerful but appreciative critique of Bourdieu—namely, that it may be a mistake to think of social reproduction presupposing "some sort of consensus with regard to dominant values or norms." Rather, the stability of today's capitalist society may require "a pervasive fragmentation of the social order and a proliferation of divisions between its members." For it is precisely this fragmentation that prevents oppositional attitudes from generating "a coherent alternative view which would provide a basis for political action."

Divisions are ramified along the lines of gender, race, qualifications and so on, forming barriers which obstruct the development of movements which could threaten the status quo. The reproduction of the social order may depend less upon a consensus with regard to dominant values or norms than upon a lack of consensus at the very point where oppositional attitudes could be translated into political action. (62-63)

Hegemony sets the framework. It defines the dominant system of concepts, the "common sense," in terms of which social and political reality will be lived. But in so doing, it does not need to be so totalizing as to enforce consensus on every central question of fact or of value. Sometimes—as those master hegemons, the
Roman imperialists, knew—it is better to divide and rule. Surely part of the difficulty of resisting what one wants to resist in the dominant scheme in the United States is that this country can truthfully proclaim a plural polity. In the buzz of the many questions that are being asked, it is hard to hear which questions are not being asked—and harder still to identify the pattern in those absences.

XII

It is still an open issue how much a counter-hegemonic pedagogy based in the university can function to translate our resistance to injustice into powerful forms of “political action.” But to the extent that we believe there is such a thing as hegemony, we are committed to holding that ideology is a mechanism of exploitation; and ideology has to be resisted at the level of ideas, which is to say in language. If there is a faith that Baker surely shares with us rationalists, it is that language can allow us to imagine other ways of seeing. It is one of the advantages of our newer theories of ideology that whatever “determination in the last instance” means, we no longer expect an ideological analysis to treat ideology as a symptom, an epiphenomenon.

As we free ourselves gradually from the discourse of difference, we may be able, as political actors, to create coalitions for change. But we do have to free ourselves ideologically first: This is one impasse where the academy should not be marginal. This mess we have to think our way out of, even if thought is only the beginning.

Notes

1I am extremely grateful to Professor Houston Baker for correspondence over an earlier draft of this essay that led me to revise a good deal—though, no doubt, not enough!—of what I had to say.

2The point is reinforced in Gates’s final remarks in “Race,” Writing and Difference (the book that was produced from the issue of Critical Inquiry and the responses to it): “Our decision to bracket ‘race’ was designed to call attention to the fact that ‘races,’ put simply, do not exist, and that to claim that they do, for whatever misguided reason, is to stand on dangerous ground” (403).

3I do not wish, however, to endorse Pechter’s mobilization of Cousin Irwin to resist feminist reading.

4We cannot even treat Baker’s observation as hyperbole: Segregation and genocide usually have profoundly contradictory rationales. They are not two points on the same scale so that the identification of one with the other can serve to illuminate their affinities. Segregation aims to make its victims available as exploited labor. South African racism wants its victims alive but poor; the Nazis wanted their victims—all of them—dead. By the end of the War, when
they had a choice between exploitation and extermination—even at the point where the former would have better served their war effort—, the National Socialists chose the latter.

I shall be using the words *racism* and *racialism* with the meanings I stipulate: In some dialects of English they are synonyms . . . and in most dialects their definition is less than precise. Since, as I argue, not all forms of these ideologies are equally pernicious, this has the disadvantage that I use epithets that are normally powerfully pejorative in ways that require us to examine the dangers of the corresponding doctrines case by case, even though, as I also argue, I am opposed to all the doctrines that I label with these two terms. But this price is worth paying, in my view, for the sake of clarity about the issues. After all, if racism is bad, we ought to be able to say why.

This would be extrinsic racism.

This would be intrinsic racism.

I take up all these issues further in my forthcoming *In My Father’s House: Essays in the Philosophy of Culture*; there is an extended discussion of Crummell’s significance and of the relations between racialism and racism in my essay “Alexander Crummell and the Invention of Africa,” forthcoming in *Salmagundi*.

There is no doubt another source for the sense that many people have that the racism of the nationalists is, at least, excusable—namely, that it is what Sartre called—apropos of Négritude—an “anti-racist racism.” Sartre saw this anti-racist racism as a necessary step in a dialectic that would lead to the transcendence of racism by an identification with humanity. Necessary or not, it has indeed proved to be the next step: The question now is whether we are ready for the transcendence Sartre anticipated.

I suppose I should say that it is the cultural situation of African and European intellectuals that makes mention of our origins relevant.

Smith identifies the essentialist presuppositions of Showalter’s view, and I argue at the end of this section that the same problem faces talk of an Afro-American experience. This remark was made twenty years ago in an address to the MLA Commission on the Status of Women. It represents an expression of feminist humanism to which I am almost certain Showalter would now no longer assent.

On all these issues—and those in the following section—I have learned a great deal from John Guillory’s brilliant essay “Canonical and Non-canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate.”

See Adolph Reed’s powerful and disturbing essay “Black Particularity Reconsidered.”

That “race” operates this way has been clear to many other Afro-Americans: So, for example, it shows up in a fictional context as a central theme of George Schuyler’s *Black No More*; see, for example, p. 59. Du Bois (as usual) provides—in *Black Reconstruction*—a body of evidence that remains relevant. As Robinson writes, “Once the industrial class emerged as dominant in the nation, it possessed not only its own basis of power and the social relations historically related to that power, but it also had available to it the instruments of repression created by the now subordinate Southern ruling class. In its struggle with labour, it could activate racism to divide the labour movement into antagonistic forces. Moreover, the permutations of the instrument appeared endless: Black against white; Anglo-Saxon against southern and eastern European; domestic against immigrant; proletariat against share-cropper; white American against Asian, Black, Latin American, etc.” (286).
Again and again, in American labor history, we can document the ways in which conflicts organized around a racial or ethnic group identity can be captured by the logic of the existing order. The financial support that Black Churches in Detroit received from the Ford Motor Company in the 1930s was only a particularly dramatic example of a widespread phenomenon: corporate manipulation of racial difference in an efforts to defeat labor solidarity. See, for example, Olson, and Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 141-43.

Once more, it is important to stress that political debate must be responsive to the local specificities of social arrangements; and, in the Marxian tradition, I consider valuable Fred Jameson's emphasis that "structurally different national contexts" will differently determine the strategic exigencies of political discourse. In the United States, he observes, "it is precisely the intensity of social fragmentation . . . that has made it historically difficult to unify Left or 'antisystemic' forces in any durable and effective organizational way. Ethnic groups, neighborhood movements, feminism, various 'countercultural' or alternative life-style groups, rank-and-file labor dissidence, student movements, single-issue movements—all have in the United States seemed to project demands and strategies which were theoretically incompatible with each other and impossible to coordinate on any practical political basis. The privileged form in which the American Left can develop today must therefore necessarily be that of an alliance politics . . ." (54).

Works Cited


Todorov, Tzvetan. “‘Race,’ Writing and Culture.” Gates 370-80.