



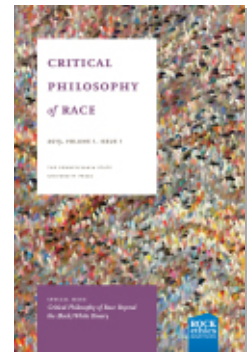
PROJECT MUSE®

Afterword: The Black/White Binary and Antiracist Racism

Linda Martín Alcoff

Critical Philosophy of Race, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 121-124
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/501725>

AFTERWORD

The Black/White Binary and Antiblack Racism

LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF

Hunter College CUNY

CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF RACE,
VOL. I, NO. I, 2013

Copyright © 2013 The Pennsylvania
State University, University Park, PA

Living in these times of ongoing, persistent, and extreme antiblack racism, from police violence to voter suppression to crushing unemployment and poverty, it feels a harsh task to criticize the hegemony of the black/white binary in antiracist discourses. The difficult challenge of this critical project has always been the question of how to critique the binary without deflating our commitment to address antiblack racism or implicitly denying the value and importance of work that is centered on this virulent form of racism. The presidency of Barack Obama in the United States has only underscored the fact that even in the twenty-first century the hysteria of what some have called “negrophobia” continues to thrive and even to grow. And what is also persistently obvious is that antiblack racism is a kind of equal-opportunity phenomenon, infecting all communities of color in both overt and subtle ways.

Yet combating antiblack racism will require a coalition of forces motivated to come together with a sense that the full range of race and identity related problems are acknowledged and addressed. It thus requires an understanding of all the ways racism itself works. The articles in this special issue showcase the growth in our understandings of racism, from antiblack racism, to the explosion of xenophobic nativism, to the incapacity of the binary to capture Asian American women.

Clearly, we should begin to refer to racisms in the plural. The multiple ways in which the targets of racism are constituted, (mis)represented, and interpellated reveal differences of *form*, and not only, or even always, differences of degree. Some groups are purported to be intellectual and cultural inferiors, some are purported to be intellectually superior but unable or unwilling to assimilate, others are viewed as constituting an inherent existential threat to the West as a whole because of their religious culture. These are just the main examples. Contrasting narratives yield different affective responses, from contempt to animosity to fear to a complete disavowal of existence, with coordinated practical responses that range from forced assimilation into a stratified and segregated structure, to hysterical overreactions of competitiveness, to military aggression. There may be commonalities running through these variations such as a basic disrespect for life, but these variations cannot explain the formations of specific racist narratives or the diversity of practices.

Rather than highly general arguments about functionalism and universal aversions to difference (arguments that breed pessimism, lack convincing evidence, and eclipse important distinctions), we need local analyses. Anti-Latino racisms are themselves pluralist and diverse, with quite different treatment meted out to Cubans of the professional class versus Guatemalan day laborers or Puerto Ricans seeking social services. Latinos in Germany often have quite a different experience than those in Arizona. Racisms take their opportunities from local discourses and conflicts and histories.

It is precisely this power of local conditions to construct effective local racisms that gave the black/white binary its explanatory value. Slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the long history of lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and the civil rights movement were central to the formation of the complicated and always contested narrative of U.S. national identity. These conditions provided a discursive and conceptual repertoire with which to interpret other groups and other relationships, and also a set of practices—institutional as well as interpersonal—that could be applied or revised and sometimes given new life. The black/white binary continues to have prescriptive purchase on the representation and treatment of other groups.

Yet what the critics of the binary hold is that it never exhausted or entirely dominated the formation of racialized identities or racial practices and relationships in the United States. It is simply impossible to reduce all aspects of the racial history of the United States into this framework.

Attempting to do so obscures the diverse forms of treatment, as if genocide and expulsion can be made analogous to enslavement. The latter is a form of instrumentalization; the former two are attempts at erasure. Neglecting such differences will undermine the possibility for coalition and will also reduce our capacity to comprehend fully the forms of racism that occur between and across communities of color.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of "racial formations" and "racial projects" remains a useful orientation that allows for the comprehension of local and particular histories but also makes possible the linking of projects within larger historical frames.¹ The concept of racial formations is the idea that there is a constant historical fluidity of the concepts and practices of race, while the concept of racial projects concerns the ways in which institutions govern the norms of conventional practice and social interaction to produce functional effects. The white racial projects in evidence today as the West transforms its demographic makeup are intensely specific, with their incessant focus on Islam, for example, yet connected to long histories of imagining the nation in racial and religious terms. My exhortation for more localized analyses of racial phenomena is not meant to convey the idea that any practices are irreducibly local: every idea, concept, and practice of race resonates with memories, whether fictive or material or both, and gains strength from both diachronic and synchronic connections.

As Ronald Sundstrum's work here shows, the nation remains a critical venue for racial projects, not simply as an imaginary place in which racial configurations are organized but also as a material site of political institutions that manage resources and rights in accordance with complex structures of differentiated positionality. The currents of anti-immigrant xenophobia that unite Western countries today require analyses of the ways in which racial concepts play a central role but they also showcase the inadequacy of the black/white binary to explain all aspects of the current contestations and alignments.

We who work in the philosophical wing of critical race theory need to learn from our comrades in law and the social sciences to be more decentralized in our theory, and thus more adept at comprehending the rapid pace of change in configurations of meanings and practices. The inaugural issue of this journal, with its excellent essays working on race from this expanded lens, bodes well for the future theoretical work to be found here. I recommend regular reading.

NOTE

1. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Also Howard Winant, "Racism Today: Continuity and Change in the Post-Civil Rights Era" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (1998).