



Symbiose by Mohamed Berkane.

The term “postracism” ranks among the most loaded words in contemporary discourses about race. When Prince Harry married Meghan Markle in 2018, many touted their union as marking the advent of a “postracial Britain.” We all know how that turned out. Markle was subjected to an onslaught of racist abuse in the press and on social media. She was described, for example, as having “exotic DNA” and their son was compared to a chimpanzee (Goodfellow). Sadly, the failed arrival of postracial Britain was all too predictable. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was similarly heralded as bearing the promise of a post-racial America. Instead, racist innuendo – and in many cases outright bigotry – plagued his presidency. The legitimacy of his birth certificate, for instance, was incessantly questioned, most notoriously by the ~~current~~ occupant of the White House.¹

To hear Jacques Derrida employ the term “postracism” might sound a bit jarring given

christopher peterson

THE PLASTICITY OF RACE

microaggressions and derridean postracism

the pivotal position that concepts such as the trace and spectrality inhabit his work. How could anything be conceived as “post-” in Derridean thought for which teleological formations are everywhere put in question? In fact, Derrida’s postracism is radically different from its conventional usage. It emerged in his response to Étienne Balibar’s keynote address at the *tRACEs* conference held at UC Irvine in 2003.² The organizers chose to spell the title with a lower case t, followed by RACE in all capital letters, ending with a lower case s, a pun that Derrida initially says he found “a bit

ISSN 0969-725X print/ISSN 1469-2899 online/22/050162-12 © 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2022.2110402>

artificial” but later came to see as justified insofar as race “never presents itself” as such. Race, he asserts, is a “spectral alibi” and a “repressed trace.” He avers that if you ask racists what race is, they will say “there is something I cannot tell” because “they know there is no scientific content to race.” Perhaps he gives racists a bit too much credit here – no doubt many of them are not acquainted with or pay much attention to science, or at best disavow it – yet his underlying point is indisputable. Race is ineffable. He even characterizes racism somewhat hyperbolically as a “speechless act.” Despite its endless, repetitive expressions, it always fails to define either race or its target, which is why he asserts that its aim is not the other as such but “another otherness of the other.” Racism operates as an alibi or an excuse because its target is directed toward “someone else,” someone other than the victim of racism’s violence and abuse. My hypothesis is that this *other* other is twofold. On the one hand, it corresponds to the other *within* the self. Racism is self-reflexive, fueled by psychological projection. As Toni Morrison puts it, racism “protects people from a certain kind of pain.” Without racism, people “may have to face something really terrible [...] about who they are. It’s just easier to say that one over there is the cause of all my problems” (Martin). According to this reading, the most virulent racist is equally – if not more – at war with himself as he is with his victims, even though it goes without saying that those who suffer as objects of racial hatred bear the larger burden.

On the other hand, racism is not reducible to psychological projection. Racism also expresses our irresolvable, conflicted attitudes toward difference as such. Freud’s famous notion of the narcissism of minor differences goes some way toward accounting for the persistence of racism. According to Freud, “it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them” (“The Taboo of Virginity” 199). Freud initially applied his theory to gender, but later broadened it to include ethnicity, nationalism, and race to account for conflicts that occur

between “communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and ridiculing one another” (“Civilization and Its Discontents” 305). Large differences do not pose the same psychic threat to the integrity of the self as do small ones, which generate an uncanny, unsettling dynamic between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

In Freud’s numerous discussions of disavowal and difference, he details our dogged capacity to cling to utterly irreconcilable attitudes. In “An Outline of Psychoanalysis,” for example, Freud argues that the psychic processes of disavowal are “never complete [...] The outcome always results in two contrary attitudes” (204). Disavowal by definition involves both negation *and* affirmation, which is to say that every *avowal* is equally incomplete. The upshot in the context of race is that an unequivocal affirmation of otherness is not possible, which also means that postracism cannot present itself as such.

In this regard, perhaps only a minor difference, as it were, separates the self-reflexive conception of racism – that is, racism as internal, psychological pain outwardly projected – from the notion of race as an expression of ambivalence toward difference given their dual basis in narcissism. That the target of racism is not this or that particular other but “another otherness of the other” owes both to the division between the self and its otherness to itself as well as to those “exterior” others who inhabit us from the start. Edmund Husserl’s notion of “immanent transcendency” is particularly relevant to this division between inside and outside (92). Immanent transcendency describes an intersubjective condition by virtue of which others inhabit us from the start. While the self “transcends” the world in the sense that our relation to others emerges from the zero point of our perception of others, their simultaneous immanency engenders an opacity that clouds the distinction between self and other: hence, the difficulty (if not impossibility) of identifying racism’s target.

Freud’s narcissism of minor differences is also germane to modern science, which has proven without a doubt that the genetic

the plasticity of race

differences between races is trivial. On this basis, Anthony Appiah has argued that the concept of race is fundamentally irrational and should be abandoned altogether (208). It goes without saying, however, that staunch racists are impervious to facts. Race, and by extension, racism, persist precisely because humans are not fully rational creatures. Appiah's rejection of the category of race presupposes the elimination of all our phantasmatic, unconscious, and ambivalent attitudes and desires. As Michael Naas observes, a phantasm is an *as if* that masquerades as an *as such* – the way things really are (200). Phantasms are not errors in any simple sense but express wishes and desires that, even if empirically false, manifest as “real.” However much we might want to send race packing, and by extension, racism, they endure thanks to their psychological utility.

Given that Derrida maintains (via Husserl) that no event – past, present, or future – makes itself fully present, that every apparently punctual now carries within it both a retentional and anticipatory element thanks to which *there is no time like the present* in a precisely literal sense, what does deconstructive postracism signify? First, we must come to terms with his vertiginous formulation that “racism has always been a postracism [...] Racism in its modern strict form started with the end of racism.” For Derrida, the conditions of racism's possibility reside at the heart of Western metaphysics, which depends on a number of concepts that ground racism in the modern sense of the term: chief among them the opposition between *physis* (nature) and *nomos* (the institution, the law, convention). Racism, he says, “always tries to naturalize what is not natural.” While Derrida acknowledges that he has not written much that explicitly addresses race and racism, he nevertheless contends that deconstruction implicitly dismantles racism by interrogating the founding tenets of Western metaphysics (“Response”).

Postracism, for Derrida, thus does not mean that we are witnessing the final death throes of racism. On the contrary, it marks a reaction to the threat posed by the undoing of the general conditions that make racism possible. This

undoing owes not only to the deconstruction of being as presence, but to numerous “geopolitical transformations” that historically preceded deconstruction (if only in name) and gradually sought and still continue to overturn racial hierarchies. Derrida does not identify these transformations, but one might reasonably surmise that he has in mind such events as the abolition of slavery, decolonization, desegregation, the end of South African Apartheid, and so forth. That the post- of Derrida's postracism does not equate with racism's demise means that the abolition of racism as such is ongoing and interminable. Postracism “began” once racial hierarchies were seen as problematic, once they were viewed as ideological formations rather than natural hierarchies. Is it not significant that the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* records the first use of the term racism in 1932 to describe European fascism?³ Nineteenth-century American abolitionists, for instance, did not characterize slavery as “racist.” They opposed slavery on the grounds of its inherent inequality and its suspension of freedom and self-determination, not to mention its brutality. The coinage of racism in the early twentieth century, however, does not mean that it did not exist previously any more than it can be said that homosexuality did not exist prior to the advent of the term in 1892 (Halperin 15). It also does not mean that abolitionists did not inchoately view slavery as racist even without the word. The “beginning” of racism/postracism defies any effort to pinpoint the precise historical moment of racism's “end.”

Derrida thus reconfigures postracism as an aspirational, antiracist project whose achievement will remain forever incomplete. One witnesses this aspirational appeal in one of his texts that does explicitly focus on racism, in particular state racism: “Racism's Last Word.” It begins: “APARTHEID – may that remain the name from now on, the unique appellation for the ultimate racism in the world, the last of many. May it thus remain, but may a day come when it will only be for the memory of man” (Derrida, “Racism's Last Word” 291). In his withering rejoinder to

Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon's critique of his brief essay, Derrida underscores the subjunctive, prescriptive grammar of the appeal, which McClintock and Nixon misread as a historical description that ignores the pseudonyms that the South African government began to employ, such as "separate development" once "the term *apartheid* had become sufficiently stigmatized to be ostentatiously retired" (Derrida, "But, Beyond" 158; McClintock and Nixon 142, 141). Despite the aspirational quality of this earlier text, Derrida's response to Balibar makes it clear that deconstructive postracism does not equate to the self-congratulatory pronouncements that we saw with Obama's election or Prince Harry's marriage to Meghan Markle. Such declarations are *presentist* in a manner utterly antithetical to deconstruction. When Derrida says that "the beginning [of racism] is the end," the novelty of this formulation is manifest in its refusal of any naïve attempt to disassociate or disentangle postracism from racism.

In *Bestial Traces*, I borrowed from a familiar Derridean locution and wrote that postracism is always *to come*.⁴ Derrida's *à venir* lacks any assurances that the better future to which we aspire will ever bear fruit. In fact, the *à venir* describes precisely what cannot fully present itself as such. Geoffrey Bennington has noted that this sense of always falling short bears palpable similarities with the Kantian idea that Derrida explicitly rejects. Nevertheless, in *Rogues*, Derrida confesses that "the regulative Idea remains, for lack of anything better [...] a last resort [...] I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it" (83). In this regard, we might say that the *à venir* is not so much anti-teleological as a-teleological, a "weak" teleology, if you will, rather than a frontal attack that confidently (if not arrogantly) portrays itself as "beyond" teleology (itself a teleological formation), but affirms both its pitfalls and seductions. Antiracism is predicated on at least a minimal teleological desire that people no longer experience discrimination on the basis of either phenotype or genotype.

Nevertheless, racism, as Derrida deftly observes, is intrinsically "plastic." It may

assume future "metonymic forms in an endless way." How could we be certain that "even after the end of the so-called declared racism there would be no racism waiting for us." Later in his response, Derrida asks: "What will come next?" He continues: "What I am almost sure of, is that with or without the name racism, perhaps the name will disappear [...] But what racism is a symptom of will continue." Hence, even if the word racism disappears, even if in the future hatred directed toward those who look different from us vanishes, the plasticity of racism – understood both as psychological projection and as a symptom of our contradictory feelings toward difference – will no doubt endure.

"i am racist"

I deliberately say *our* contradictory feelings because, as Derrida asks at the beginning of his response: who could claim to have "never been touched, contaminated with or by some, at least virtual, racism?" Derrida pairs this question with the following one: "Who would confess today 'I am a racist?'" His stress on the contemporaneity of this non-confession associates the admission "I am a racist" with a bygone, unabashed racism, one that has historically been associated with white supremacist hate groups. Derrida made this remark in 2003, yet as recent as 2017, in the wake of Trump's election, Chris Edelson stated similarly that "no one will own up to being a racist. White supremacists hide behind the 'alt-right' euphemism," to which I hasten to add the pseudonym "white nationalism" as well. Among many examples, Edelson notes that when a group of white teens hanged a young black child from a tree in New Hampshire in September 2017 (the boy thankfully survived), the local police chief, Mark Chase, made no reference to racism. Instead, he remarked that "mistakes they make as a young child should not have to follow them for the rest of their life." City Manager Ryan McNutt echoed Chase, describing the event as "an unfortunate incident between some juveniles." It would be empirically impossible to

the plasticity of race

confirm that all racists and white supremacists do not openly identify as racist (no doubt some do), yet this fact does not undermine the merit of Derrida's claim. The most glaring example would be Trump, who declared himself "the least racist person there is anywhere in the world" despite all the obvious evidence to the contrary (Fabian).

While avowed racism among those who hold racist beliefs may have declined, Google Books Ngram View shows an exponential increase in this "confession" (if we can call it that) since the 1960s.⁵ Its recent proliferation, moreover, owes at least in part to a rather novel phenomenon. A search of recent articles, blogs, and so forth shows that this admission is most frequently made by those who are ideologically committed *antiracists*. In an article published on *Commondreams.org*, for instance, Steven Singer writes "I am a white man. I am racist. But that's kind of redundant."⁶ Here the confession is meant to establish his antiracist credentials. One of the chief mantras of our time is that racism equals prejudice plus power. According to this pervasive view – ubiquitous at least in anglophone contexts – racism can only be called as such if it is systemic and institutional. If you have benefited from racism, then you are racist. Nonwhites can be prejudiced toward other people of color, yet such discrimination is not racism because it lacks any widespread systemic support. Yet is this extremely narrow definition of racism justified?

First, consider the claim that profiting from white privilege is evidence of one's racism. It does not follow logically that white privilege – which no doubt exists – demonstrates prejudice. Advantages that accrue from being white verify one's positional power, but benefitting from them does not necessarily express prejudice. Both elements must exist in order for racism to occur according to the prejudice-plus-power theory. If a white bartender serves me, a white male, before serving a person of color who arrived before me, then I have certainly benefited in this situation. We cannot be at all certain, however, that my being served first conclusively evidences the bartender's conduct as racist, notwithstanding

Derrida's observation that no one – including nonwhite people – are immune to racism. Many contemporary racial discourses would likely consider the bartender's behavior a microaggression. The guiding principle behind this concept is that the minority who feels slighted is the final arbiter on whether racist behavior has occurred. Yes, there are no doubt defensive white people who deny the existence of white privilege or deny that microaggressions exist, yet they are easily susceptible to what psychologist Nick Haslam calls "concept creep," whereby definitions of injury and harm can, in principle, expand infinitely. I ask in all seriousness if it is only a matter of time before we begin talking about nanoaggressions?

What makes Singer's confession even more problematic is that racism is increasingly being deployed interchangeably with white supremacism. Linguist John McWhorter has articulated the problems that this conflation produces. He writes:

White supremacy is now a dogwhistle itself. A leftist contingent is now charging any white person who seriously questions a position associated with people of color as a white supremacist. The idea is that if you go against a certain orthodoxy, then it isn't only that you disagree, but that you also wish white people were still in charge, that you want people of color to sit down and shut up [...] [But] if whites accept anything a person of color states, is this not a new form of condescension? These days, the term "white supremacy" is being used not as an argument but as a weapon [...] The fact that psychological tests reveal subtle racial biases in whites does not justify calling any white person's questioning of the views of a person of color a white supremacist. That's an athletic jump from the subtle to the stark, from the subliminal to the egregious. (McWhorter)

White supremacists explicitly believe that white people are superior and therefore should dominate nonwhites. Would Singer confess to being a white supremacist, a label that McWhorter argues "is a way of making the reader jump" by "casually throwing

around a term that calls to mind black men hanging from trees?” Kevin Drum has characterized the substitution of racism with white supremacy as “a terrible fad.” He writes: “Petty theft is not the same as robbing a bank. A lewd comment is not the same as rape.” Unsurprisingly, concept creep has infected racial discourse to the point that it is not enough for people to confess their racism. Joanna Cruickshank, a university lecturer in Australia, recently wrote an article stating that, despite her involvement

in a range of social justice projects [...] I’m a white supremacist because I live in a world in which, for two centuries, a racial hierarchy that gave power to white people has been one of the primary frameworks for justifying oppression.

The title of a recent blog entry written by Elyse Cizek goes even further: “I’m a White Supremacist and So Are You (A Mixed Girl’s Story of Recovering from Self-Hate and Unchecked Prejudice).” While she details examples in which she has appeared to display minor forms of internalized racism, she offers what can only be described as a baffling definition of white supremacy. No longer is it limited to “men on horses with hoods [...] It’s the feeling you get when someone suggests you are racist.” Unfortunately, such confessions (though usually coming from white people) are not anomalous.⁷

Confessions and attributions of white supremacy as well as accusations of microaggressions continue to grow. The Global Language Monitor named “microaggression” the word of the year in 2015. Both concepts’ linguistic and political currency depend on concept creep. Everyday overt or covert acts of racism are increasingly rebranded as “white supremacy.” Its associated beliefs and conduct were previously considered the most horrendous, which is to say *macro*, expressions of racism. Meanwhile perceived minor (often unconscious) slights and insults are brought under the aegis of racism. These conflation perpetuate the erasure of crucial distinctions. These effacements license one of the most cited promoters of the microaggression

concept, Derald Wing Sue, to claim that “microaggressions reflect an unconscious worldview of White supremacy” (Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions” 331). Yet if microaggressions are expressions of white supremacy, then nothing in the final analysis separates the macro from the micro.

This indistinction lies at the origin of the microaggression concept, first coined in 1970 by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce. He wrote:

Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *microaggression*, as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression*, such as lynching. (Pierce 266)

Pierce provided no clinical case studies to support his claim that a “cumulative effect” of an “unimaginable magnitude” is felt by both the victim and the victimizer. Sue also provides no empirical evidence to support the view that microaggressions cause long-term harm. He more often refers to the “experiential reality” of aggrieved victims, which amounts to their subjective perception that a microaggression has taken place (Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life” 274). He provides empirical support for the existence of microaggressions with two examples: “Several investigators have found, for example, that law enforcement officers in laboratory experiments will fire their guns more often at Black criminal suspects than White ones [...] and Afrocentric features tend to result in longer prison terms” (277). The problem for Sue here is that these are both obviously examples of *macroaggressions*.

For his part, Pierce viewed racism as a “mental disease because it is delusional [...] a false belief, born of morbidity, refractory to change when contrary evidence is presented concerning the innate inferiority of any person with dark skin color” (266). Both

the plasticity of race

white and black people are affected by racism – albeit asymmetrically – because “everyone is involved in this delusion” (266). From its inception, however, the microaggression concept has barely concealed its macro-aspirations. Pierce held that microaggressions

lead to the statistical early demise of blacks and to their incomparably higher morbidity and mortality rates [...] It is difficult, if not impossible, for a black to understand how a white, particularly a privileged white, can exhibit offensive micro-aggressions without considering himself a murderer. (268)

It goes without saying that Pierce was drawing a rather long bow by equating microaggression with murder, however much the former may contribute to the conditions thanks to which racism endures. Therein lies the great irony of the arguably outsized attention currently paid to microaggressions. The fixation with microaggressions transforms them into quasi-microaggressions by sneaking them in through the back door of white supremacy. The accusation that microaggressors are murderers, moreover, utterly contradicts Pierce’s recognition that “relatively innocuous” slights are obviously different from acts of physical violence.

As a linguist, McWhorter acknowledges that the meanings of words change over time. Neither he nor I argue for a prescriptive approach to meaning. Yet it behooves all of us to ask what political work the rebadging and amplification of these terms is doing. Sue repeatedly describes microaggressions as ambiguous, yet ambiguity by definition is irresolvable. Whether a microaggression has occurred cannot be conclusively identified based either on one’s subjective interpretation or on one’s “experiential reality” being “validated” by witnesses to the event (Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life” 275). Nevertheless, I concede that in many contexts, the connotation behind many microaggressions *seems* easily determinable. The meaning of one classic example – “Where are you from?” – when asked of an Asian person fluent in English and devoid of any foreign accent may appear transparent, especially when someone has repeatedly

been asked the same question umpteen times. Yet patterns are just that: repetitions subject to variability and far from immutable. Understandably, nonwhite people who have repeatedly been asked where they are from would assume that the question is *always* racially based, but it goes without saying that no assumption is utterly conclusive. When I lived in Los Angeles years ago, I was once introduced to a friend of a friend who was Asian. In the course of our conversation he told me that he graduated from UC Berkeley. At one point, I asked “Where are you from?” I sincerely wondered if he was from Southern or Northern California. His reply was that my query was akin to asking if he used chop sticks. Never mind the old adage that “No one is from LA” (a phrase that Google returns with more than 250,000 hits). Even Sue observes that microaggressions are often invisible to both

the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient [...] Microaggressive acts can usually be explained away by seemingly nonbiased and valid reasons. For the recipient of a microaggression, however, there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened. It is difficult to identify a microaggression, especially when other explanations seem plausible. Many people of color describe a vague feeling that they have been attacked, that they have been disrespected, or that something is not right. (Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life” 275)

To reiterate: I believe microaggressions do occur, however ambiguous they may be. Yet belief, as Derrida insists, is irreducible. It can never open onto any absolute certainty.⁸ The point, therefore, is not that we need more empirical studies to verify either the existence of microaggressions or the harm they may cause. Rather, we need to accept their inescapable ambiguity. Why does it not occur to Sue that perhaps some alleged microaggressions are invisible precisely because they did *not* occur, whether intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously?

Even Pierce admitted that his perception of having been microaggressed might sometimes

have been “paranoid” (277). He remarks that after each of his classes

a white, not a black, will come up to me and tell me how the class should be structured or how the chairs should be placed or how there should be extra meetings outside the classroom [...] What I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. I was patronized. I was told, by my own perceptual distortions perhaps, that although I am a full professor on two faculties at a prestigious university, to him I was no more than a big black nigger. (277)

The student described in this anecdote certainly sounds entitled, but his privileged attitude could have been owed to a number of factors in addition to race, such as class status or simply the age-old problem of youthful insolence, which once again betrays microaggressions’ intrinsic ambiguity.⁹ Despite the colossal leap from feeling undermined and disrespected to believing his student thought he “was no more than a big black nigger,” at least Pierce displays some modicum of open-mindedness that (unlike Sue) allowed for misperception, and thus did not ground his interpretation of this incident in his own, unchallengeable “experiential reality.”

metonymic racisms

Singer acknowledges that there are “degrees of racism.” Of course, this observation is rather self-evident, but it does resist to some extent the micro/macro erasure. While his position might initially give the impression that it coalesces with Derridean plasticity, these gradations are nevertheless restricted to *white* racism. Consider that if a nonwhite person uses a racial slur against another nonwhite person, designating this speech act as prejudiced but not racist is illogical on its face because the discrimination expressed is racially grounded. It not only involves absurd hair splitting to describe such behavior as racially prejudicial but not truly racist. It also denudes race-

based discriminatory attitudes among nonwhites by employing a generic term salient to any context in which bias is displayed. Consider, among many examples, a prejudicial juror or judge, or someone who has a prejudice against poetry or a particular musical genre. The latter two examples might not be common parlance, yet they nevertheless underscore the non-specificity of the term prejudice, which at bottom equates to any preconceived judgment.

Without a doubt we must continually come to terms with the power of institutional and systemic racism. Yet racist power is not reducible to these forms. How is it possible to claim that the victim of a racial slur directed by a member of one racial minority to a member of another does not involve power? The power lies precisely in the psychological harm that the perpetrator inflicts on the victim. This force may lack institutional, systemic support, but it is power nonetheless. This more expansive perspective on what counts as racism echoes the enlarged reconfiguration of racism that the concept of microaggressions equally affords, despite the latter’s tendency to limit instances to their institutional foundations.

Pew Research conducted a survey in 2008 that revealed that “Nearly half of all blacks [...] say immigrants reduce job opportunities for blacks, while fewer than four-in-10 Hispanics agree” (“Do Blacks and Hispanics Get Along?”). In addition, the majority of black people surveyed believe that “bias against blacks remains widespread,” while “most Hispanics reject the view that blacks frequently face discrimination.” Given that both minority groups are undeniably subject to ongoing discrimination, designating the views of these minority groups as prejudicial but not racist only makes sense if one endorses the dogmatic, doctrinaire view that racism is *only* prejudice-plus-power.

Unsurprisingly, Derrida does not subscribe to such a narrow definition of racism. Recounting his childhood in Algeria, he explains his own “investment” in the problem of racism by remarking that “everyone could in Algeria [...] at the same time claim that he or she was

the plasticity of race

a victim of racism and at the same time participate in some racism” (Derrida, “Response”). Among these multiple perpetrators and victims, he names French-born citizens, Algerians, Italians, the Spanish, the Maltese, and Jews, the latter of whom were divested of their citizenship during the Nazi occupation. Noting that Algerian Jews were often racist toward the French, Derrida draws laughter from the audience when he states that he “still keep[s] something [...] vaguely ironic and suspicious about everything French.”

Derrida’s account of his experience with racism in Algeria is the exact opposite of the prejudice-plus-power dictum, which prescribes the *congelation* of racism rather than its plasticity. Earlier I characterized this formulation as a mantra, a Sanskrit term that means “the thought behind speech or ritual” (*OED*). In contemporary discourse, however, the term often refers to an endlessly repeated slogan that is designed to *suppress* thought or interrogation, which is precisely what the dogmatic, entrenched status of prejudice-plus-power performs.

Despite affirming racism’s plasticity, toward the end of his response Derrida remarks that he was initially “shocked” by how the word racist is used today as a synonym for exclusion. He notes with some incredulity, for example, that homophobia is sometimes characterized as racist. Nevertheless, Derrida says that after a period of time he began to “understand [...] the logic of this looseness of the word.” The example of homosexuality, together with his association of plasticity with the possible “end” of racism as we know it, demonstrates that Derrida tends to equate racial plasticity with its current and future transformations. Yet it also extends historically backward, assuming a number of different shapes whose conditions of possibility are also owed to Western metaphysics. Against conventional wisdom, Derrida argues that race does not precede racism; rather, racism produces race, even though the word race historically antedates racism. Yet if racism produces race, then the latter is equally plastic.

Consider that the metaphysical distinction between *physis* and *nomos* does not only provide the general conditions of possibility for racism. It also provides the basis for conventional conceptions of family and kinship, which privilege biological relatedness. Derrida does not consider these antedated metonymies of race. The received definition of race conceives it as a modern invention indissociable from colonialism, slavery, pseudoscience, and so on. As Linguists Roslyn Frank and Nathalie Gontier note, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term race was more commonly applied to plants and animals as well as equated with family until these connotations gradually subsided (34). Only at the end of the nineteenth century did race come to refer almost exclusively to phenotypical differences between humans. How could racism come into being without the concept of family, which prescribes that we bear more obligations and responsibilities to those who are similar to us than those who are not? Appiah has described family as a form of what he calls “intrinsic racism” (216). Whether biologically related or not, family is ethically justified according to him because of the reciprocal duties it performs. He thus distinguishes family from what he names “extrinsic racism,” which correlates with a set of familiar stereotypes, including lack of intelligence, criminality, deceitfulness, laziness, sexual promiscuity, and so forth (208).

Despite Appiah’s openness to a non-biological notion of kinship, historically it has depended on so-called “blood” relationships. As with extrinsic racism, family attempts to naturalize the unnatural. As anthropologist David Schneider remarks, the notion that “blood is thicker than water” constituted the fundamental basis for nineteenth-century thinkers on kinship while all other forms (adoption for instance) were rendered “*fictive kinship*” (165, 99; emphasis in original). In no way, moreover, has this *physis/nomos* hierarchy been entirely superseded given that adopted children today still continue to search for their “real” parents. Furthermore, when people proclaim that a close friend is “like a

brother” or “like a sister,” the intelligibility of these similes depends precisely on the biological model of kinship they would appear to surpass.

Despite identifying the *physis/nomos* distinction as the condition of possibility for racism, Derrida stops short of claiming that Western metaphysics is racist at its core. He wants to preserve some distance between racism’s philosophical foundations and racism in its narrow, modern sense. When it comes to family, however, we can see that racism is in no way a modern phenomenon, but is as old as the concept of family itself. Kinship is the most ancient and familiar form through which racism expresses itself. Racism is originarily plastic. It always already assumes precisely those “metonymic forms” that Derrida postulates as emerging after the so-called “end” of racism.

Consider Freud’s “Civilization and Its Discontents,” which takes to task the biblical injunction to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Freud argues that this commandment is only “justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man [...] People are so ready to disavow” that

men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. (“Civilization and Its Discontents” 303, 302)

Indeed, the biblical imperative presupposes this aggression. Otherwise, the commandment would be utterly gratuitous.

To be sure, neither refusing obligations to one’s neighbor nor to one’s non-kin are synonymous with racial othering *stricto sensu*. Yet they do constitute metonymic forms of “racism” *avant la lettre*. While Derrida suggests that the name racism will perhaps disappear while leaving behind its symptoms and traces, racism in fact appeared *before* it appeared. It has always been with us. It has not been merely lingering in the wings waiting to take center stage. It does not

peterson

matter whether its name might someday disappear. We never needed this name because it has long made its presence felt, however shadowy and spectral.



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 *Sous rature* is justified here on the grounds that Trumpism survives despite its namesake no longer occupying the office of president. See, for example, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumpism-republican-party/2020/11/08/d86035de-21d1-11eb-952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2021.

2 Derrida’s unpublished English response is available online at the link provided in the bibliography as well as at <<https://vimeo.com/25689804>>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2021.

3 Google’s Ngram shows sporadic uses of the term prior to the early 1930s, but it did not take root until the twentieth century.

4 See Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013) 96–102.

5 This increase is relatively the same across different variations: i.e., “I am racist,” “I am a racist,” “I’m racist,” “I’m a racist.”

6 For other examples, see Doug Kindschi, “A Personal Confession: I am a Racist.” <<https://www.therapidian.org/personal-confession-i-am-racist>>. Leslie Lowe, “I Embrace the Healthy Fear That I am Racist.” <<https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/local-perspectives/lezlie-lowe-i-embrace-the-healthy-fear-that-i-am-racist-417541/>>.

Nicole Meoli Myles, “I am White, and Therefore, I am Racist.” <<https://www.realchangenews.org/2015/07/01/i-am-white-and-therefore-i-am-racist/>>. All accessed 18 Nov. 2021.

7 Emily Pothast, “True Confessions of a White Supremacist.” <<https://medium.com/the-establishment/true-confessions-of-a-white-supremacist-349053e9c875>>. “I am a White Supremacist.” <<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/1501515>>. Michelle

the plasticity of race

Weber, “My Name Is Emily, and I’m a White Supremacist.” <<https://longreads.com/2016/11/16/my-name-is-emily-and-im-a-white-supremacist/>>. All accessed 18 Nov. 2021.

8 Jacques Derrida, “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing.” *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham UP, 2005) 65–96.

9 Harvard admitted fewer than twelve black undergraduate students per year until the 1970s, which means that Pierce’s interactions with black students would have been extremely limited when he published his article in 1970. While one might hypothesize that the paucity of black students at the university contributed to a collective reticence among them to challenge authority – even that of a black professor – such a conjecture is no more verifiable than Pierce’s original assumption regarding the white student’s racism. See Ata D. Amponsah, Matthew Moore, and Janae Strickland, “Welcome to the Harvard Black Community.” <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/9/11/welcose-black-harvard/>>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2021.

bibliography

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “Racisms.” *Race, Gender, and Sexuality: Philosophical Issues of Identity and Justice*. Ed. Jami L. Anderson. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002. 206–17. Print.

Bennington, Geoffrey. “In Dignity: Worthy of the Name of Michael Naas.” Unpublished paper. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <https://www.academia.edu/221872/In_Dignity>.

Cizek, Elyse. “I’m a White Supremacist and So Are You (A Mixed Girl’s Story of Recovering from Self-Hate and Unchecked Prejudice).” 30 Apr. 2020. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://blog.usejournal.com/im-a-white-supremacist-and-so-are-you-a-mixed-girl-s-story-of-recovering-from-self-hate-and-2896fc948d4>>.

Cruickshank, Joanna. “Confessions of a White Supremacist.” 29 June 2017. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/confessions-of-a-white-supremacist/10095658>>.

Derrida, Jacques. “But, Beyond ... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon).” *Critical Inquiry* 13.1 (1986): 155–70. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. “Racism’s Last Word.” Trans. Peggy Kamuf. *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 290–99. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. “Response to Étienne Balibar’s Keynote Address. tRACEs: Race, Deconstruction, and Critical Theory Presented by the University of California Humanities Research Institute, April 10–11, 2003.” Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfXdYefgKjw>>.

Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

“Do Blacks and Hispanics Get Along? Yes, but Not Always, and Not about Everything.” 31 Jan. 2008. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2008/01/31/do-blacks-and-hispanics-get-along/>>.

Drum, Kevin. “Let’s Be Careful With the ‘White Supremacy’ Label.” 26 Nov. 2016. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2016/11/lets-please-kill-white-supremacy-fad/>>.

Edelson, Chris. “Who Will Admit to Being a Racist?” Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-0927-racism-20170926-story.html>>.

Fabian, Jordan. “Trump Says He is the ‘Least Racist Person Anywhere in the World.’” 30 July 2019. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/455295-trump-says-he-is-the-least-racist-person-anywhere-in-the-world>>.

Frank, Roslyn, and Nathalie Gontier. “On Constructing a Research Model for Historical Cognitive Linguistics (HCL): Some Theoretical Considerations.” *Historical Cognitive Linguistics*. Ed. Margaret E. Winters, Heli Tissari, and Kathryn Allan. New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010. 31–69. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. “Civilization and Its Discontents.” *Sigmund Freud, Vol. 12, Civilization, Society, and Religion*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Penguin, 1991. 243–340. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. “An Outline of Psychoanalysis.” *The Standard Edition*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1973. 144–204. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. “The Taboo of Virginity.” *The Standard Edition*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1973. 191–208. Print.

Goodfellow, Maya. “Yes, the UK Media’s Coverage of Meghan Markle Really is Racist.” 17

peterson

Jan. 2020. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/1/17/21070351/meghan-markle-prince-harry-leaving-royal-family-uk-racism>>.

Halperin, David. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Haslam, Nick. "Concept Creep: Psychology's Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology." *Psychological Inquiry* 27.1 (2016): 1–17. Print.

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Trans. Dorian Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999. Print.

Martin, Michelle. "Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age." 26 Dec. 2008. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98679703>>.

McClintock, Anne, and Rob Nixon. "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le Dernier Mot du Racisme.'" *Critical Inquiry* 13.1 (1986): 140–54. Print.

McWhorter, John. "The Difference Between Racial Bias and White Supremacy." 29 Nov. 2016. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://time.com/4584161/white-supremacy/>>.

"Microaggression is the Top Word of the Year for Global English 2015." 27 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://languagemonitor.com/global-english/microaggression-is-the-top-word-of-the-year-for-global-english-2015/>>.

Naas, Michael. *Derrida from Now On*. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print.

Pierce, Chester. "Offensive Mechanisms." *The Black Seventies*. Ed. Floyd Barbour. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970. 265–82. Print.

Pothast, Emily. "True Confessions of a White Supremacist." 10 May 2016. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://medium.com/the-establishment/true-confessions-of-a-white-supremacist-349053e9c875>>.

Schneider, David. *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1984. Print.

Singer, Steven. "I am Racist and (If You're White) You Probably Are, Too." 10 June 2015. Web. 18 Nov. 2021. <<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/10/i-am-racist-and-if-youre-white-you-probably-are-too>>.

Sue, Derald Wing, et al. "Racial Microaggressions Against Black Americans: Implications for Counseling." *Journal of Counseling & Development* 86.3 (2008): 330–38. Print.

Sue, Derald Wing, et al. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist* 62.4 (2007): 271–86. Print.

Christopher Peterson
School of Humanities and Communication
Arts
Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith, NSW 2751
Australia
E-mail: c.peterson@westernsydney.edu.au