

Brave New World? Ruminations on Race in the Twenty-first Century¹

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Abstract: What if we “renovated” race as a concept to reflect new configurations, possibilities and disruptions? In this essay, I consider how we might “do” race differently in our theorizing and praxis by interrogating the framings and the language we use to understand and engage race in all its permutations. I encourage us to see “informal moments of intervention” in the public sphere as resilience central to informing our theory. By engaging multiple sites of production and placing our intellectual and creative selves at the center of those relationships, we can potentially uncover/discover/recover race as an emergent concept that more accurately depicts and articulates where and who we are in the present.

Keywords: race, resilience, nature, praxis

“Reimagine the very ground we are standing on”

bell hooks, from a talk given at the Boston Street Community Center and Peace Gardens, Asheville NC, June 2009 (online video)

“Remember, no matter where you go, there you are”

Peter Weller’s character in the film *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the Eighth Dimension*

On a Friday afternoon in 2012, I sat myself down in a dark movie theatre to watch *The Hunger Games*, a big screen representation of a dystopic world where teenagers fight to the death while onlookers watch from distant television screens. While I had not read the books on which the film is based, I was intrigued by a film that captured the hearts and minds of teenagers and twenty-somethings across the blogosphere (and made over \$155 million in its opening weekend). In particular, I was fascinated by what Anna Holmes, in her recent article in *The New Yorker* entitled “White until proven black: imagining race in Hunger Games”, called the “failure of imagination” of young adults to empathize or relate to the black characters in *The Hunger Games* (Holmes 2012: 2). Young moviegoers responded with varying degrees of apoplectic righteousness at the idea that the character of Rue, a sweet, 12-year-old girl doomed to die and thus elicit the audience’s sympathy, was African American and not white. Comments on Twitter were unapologetic in their anger: “why did the producer make all the good characters black?”; “ewww, Rue is black? I’m not watching”; “call me a racist, but when I found out Rue was black her death wasn’t so sad” (Stewart 2012).² As I continued to read these kind of comments, it would have been easy for me to grumble about how our ability to deal with race continues to be stymied by a degree of collective ignorance and unwillingness to engage systemic and

structural processes of racialization in our day-to-day lives.³ We cannot seem to get past certain “unalienable truths” about how we see the world and ourselves in it that make us complicit in the way in which we engage “race” and perpetuate racialization at multiple scales.

Race as a construct has been wrestled with by scholars, activists, writers, artists and policymakers who seek to explain, understand and engage the spaces that race makes, particularly in the United States (Alexander 2012; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Braun 2003; Clifton 2004; Coleman-Adebayo 2011; Degruy-Leary 2005; Dyson 2006; Gilmore, 2002; Hall 1996; Harris-Perry 2011; Hooks 1992; Hoskins 2006; Kennedy 2011; Moore et al 2003; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Marable 2006; Outka 2008; Pollard 2004; Shein, 2006; Toure 2011; Walker 2007; West 2001). There are rich and nuanced conversations and explorations taking place in various intellectual and artistic sites. For this essay, I would like to draw our collective attention to the public sphere, where race matters as well, as evidenced when I googled “Race in America” and found 120,000,000 results. From Anderson Cooper’s expose on CNN about race in America in the wake of the Trayvon Martin case to numerous scholarly and public conversations about post-race possibilities, race as a concept and an embodied experience appears to be alive and thriving in our collective consciousness.⁴ As I scrolled through the many different Google entries, I took heed of their lead-ins: “Even after Obama, race still the left’s problem” (*New York Post*); “If there is a race problem in America today, what is it?” (*The Atlantic*); “The first black president has made it harder to talk about race in America” (*Washington Post*); “The troubling cases involving race” (*Christian Science Monitor*). What I surmised is that within the public sphere, we tend to talk about race in the USA as a socially constructed burden with economic, political and real-life consequences, particularly for non-white people. History and statistics overwhelmingly support this characterization. Whether we’re talking about slavery, Jim Crow segregation, redlining, prisons, inequitable distribution of wealth, immigration, housing, unemployment, greater risk of exposure to toxins or evidence of shorter life spans, race is privileged as the primary indicator for establishing *who* is most affected by these processes and *how* we frame our conversations about these issues and people.

What if we “renovated” race as a concept to reflect new configurations, possibilities and disruptions? We need to engage multiple sites of knowledge production—the public sphere, media, art, cyberspace and academia. By placing our intellectual and creative selves at the center of those relationships, we can potentially uncover/discover/recover “evolved” permutations of race that more accurately depict and articulate where and who we are in the present, while leaning into the future. To concur with scholar David M.P. Freund: “race has mattered far too long in the United States for this intellectual revolution to erase popular memory, to dissolve communities that self-identify racially, or to undo centuries of race-based discrimination” (2007:11–12). Instead of jettisoning “race” as a theoretical player informing cross-cultural relations and revealing power dynamics, I would like to consider a reinvention of race that is elastic enough to reflect contemporary cultural shifts while acknowledging its historical roots.

Mixed Race, Post Race, No Race?

But, as Marable writes, “what was ‘black’ and ‘white’ in Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee of 1895 was not identical to categories of color and race in New Orleans a century ago; both are distinctly different from how we perceive and define race in the USA a generation after legal segregation” (2011a: 9). There have been significant shifts in the way we think and talk about race in our lives. Public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson (2006) challenges the “black–white racial paradigm” as being insufficient in addressing the changing racial make-up of our communities. According to scholar Michelle Elam, racially mixed people are considered by some to be the “new world order” and the black/white binary just will not do for capturing “transformations in racial understandings” that could potentially reinvigorate discussions about race and social justice (2011:xiii, xv). Yet invoking the oft-used phrase, the personal is political, others see the Census and similar state-sanctioned documents as opportunities for action. One author of a recent *New York Times* article went so far as to admonish all bi-racial people to mark “black” on the census as a reminder that non-black identification has material consequences for non-white communities (Williams 2012). “Identities may be situational, but when the power and resources of the state are used to categorize groups under a ‘one-size-fits-all’ designation, the life chances of individuals who are defined within these categories are largely set and determined by others” (Marable 2011b: 286).

While I agree with Marable’s (2011b:286) assertions that the state, by “manufacturing and reproducing categories of difference” wields control over the materiality of any given group, there is still a lived space where resilience is experienced not simply as a response to these constraints, but as a proactive possibility. Resilience is not only about the ability of people to survive within the social, economic and political constraints that inform their lives. I am using resilience to also underscore the creative and innovative ways that people expand and transform their realities, often boldly going where no one has gone before.

While bi-racial and multi-racial embodiment and experience surely alter the racial landscape we presently inhabit, “post race” promises to transform our collective neurosis into irrelevant cultural artifacts relegated to a past that we are desperately trying to separate ourselves from. Since the election of a “black” man to the most powerful position in the free world, post-race possibilities have been bandied about as viable options to our present predicament. Some want to whitewash, universalize or colorblind the issue of race to avoid any real relationship with what we have wrought historically and the current manifestations of these social constructions (Wise 2010). Others oppose the idea that “we are in a post-racial society and no longer need to calculate the racial impact of policy decisions, legislation and programs” (Bush 2011:7). While I do not find “post-race” as a concept sufficient to “get past” racism and oppression, the term does afford us an opportunity to do some self-assessment about who we are, as a nation, and who we want to be. Scholar Michelle Bush contends that we could be “facing the ‘perfect storm’ in which demography, economics, and organizing among ordinary people provide the means for truly challenging the structural basis of the racial hierarchy” (2011:xvii).

While there has been a seismic shift in the cultural and technological expressions of human experience on the American landscape, the aforementioned tweets of

disgruntled young people suggest that skillfully engaging new creative spaces *alone* does not a transformation make. Jerry Kang (2000) talks about the “racial mechanics” that shape cross-cultural interaction in the United States, even in cyber space (as evidenced in *The Hunger Games* tweets). One has to consider the mechanisms available to young adults to have a conversation that makes room for our historical proclivities pertaining to race and their contemporary possibilities shaped by new technological and cultural dynamics. Perhaps the theoretical framings and the language that we use are a bit old fashioned and limiting. Perhaps the devil is in the details.

Race, Space and Nature: The Remix

The elasticity of meaning is informed by temporal, historical and place-based differences and subjectivities. All three concepts deserve their own in-depth exploration into their meanings, histories and contemporary applications. But the possibility for public participation in the renovation of the term “race” is arguably richer than at any other time in history. Whether you look at demographics, technology, politics, or just human development over time, the multiple sites of expression, experience and energy informed by and around race are not just intellectual; they are visceral. The combination of mind and body engagement and expression of lived “race” yields numerous opportunities for how we see/vision/employ race as an idea, and in determining who actually gets to participate in the continued production of theories, practices and possibilities of race reimagined. Even in an academic context where we treat concepts like space and nature as flexible terms, we tend to rely upon traditional interpretations of race even though the complexity of how race is articulated in public space is exploding. Even so, there are scholars, activists, writers and artists whose activism and very lives are one big, intertwined amalgam of lived experience, ideas, words, practices and mere survival at multiple scales, who engage race, space and nature at many levels. Learning from these experiences, how can we use race as the starting point for re-engagement, theoretically and in practice?

Perhaps we can learn from examples of individuals and communities that are operating within the existing structures and systems that inform our materiality, but are not constrained by the ideological limitations that imbue our language and traditional practices around engaging difference. The following is one such example of race and engagement with nature reimagined: On the west side of Chicago, there sits a modest, three-story building that to the uninformed would seem to be just another in a series of houses along that particular street. But this building tells a different story. In 1999, Brenda Palms Barber, an African-American entrepreneur, moved from Denver to Chicago to become the Executive Director of the Northlawn Employment Network. Her mission was initially to assist in creating a consortium that assessed and addressed capacity challenges for individuals in need of a job. Palms Barber discovered that 57% of the unemployed were men and women who were ex-offenders; 80% were men who were previously incarcerated and most of these men were African American. Because of the stigma attached to having spent time in prison, many of these men and women could not find jobs. So Palms Barber created a program called “U Turn Permitted” that gave these

individuals a chance to review and renew their skills, and find work within their communities. She considered a number of ideas ranging from landscaping to transporting older people. One day, the idea of working with beekeepers came up in conversation. Her friend pointed out how you did not need an academic degree to work with bees because knowledge was passed down by word of mouth. To Palms Barber, these were sweet words indeed and she saw an opportunity to provide previously incarcerated men and women with viable and meaningful work in their communities. With the help of beekeepers, corrections officers and those knowledgeable about business, Palms Barber created Sweet Beginnings, a company that makes urban honey and honey-related products. She also became an accidental “greenie” in the process. Now she intentionally infuses green business principles in the work that she does: the products they produce are local; African Americans can reclaim their relationship to the earth through beekeeping; and she believes that “through green” people can become empowered (see Finney forthcoming). Sweet Beginnings challenges old models of engagement regarding “outreach” and “diversity”, and expands “green” to include the experiences and the needs of the people that the business is purported to serve by providing employment, developing skills and building trust. In addition, Sweet Beginnings taps into the resources of the community, both people and the flora that had previously been ignored and abandoned. “People viewed as second class people [such as previously incarcerated black men and women] can make a first class product”, says Palms Barber. “People need to be reminded that they are important”⁵ (see Finney forthcoming).

Looking at the way in which Palms Barber engages issues on the ground does not necessarily change the direct effects of structural and systemic racism, but can change the way we engage the structure and the people directly affected by the manifestations of racialization. Through her creative engagement, Palms Barber pushes us past our limitations and asks academics, policymakers, and strategists to consider the human/environment relationship anew. Palms Barber challenges old assumptions about people (their capacities and competencies) while engaging in ideological and economic risk taking that considers relationships between previously unconsidered ideas and entities (bee keeping in an urban center, green business and skill building for previously incarcerated men and women).

Fluxus

In the Detroit Institute of Arts, where the only mural created by Diego Rivera in the United States is housed (Detroit Industry) I saw an exhibit about an art movement and an attitude called *Fluxus*, taken from the Latin word meaning “to flow”. This movement was made up of an international group of artists, composers and designers that blended different media, disciplines and ideas to create something new and different. They wrote a manifesto, a dynamic document that went something like this: *Purge*—flushing away traditional attitudes and ideas about art, start fresh; *Revolution*—transforming art to include all forms of expression and the everyday; *Fuse*—merging and uniting to make new and radical art. Elam (2011:xv) contends that the humanities can provide social science with potential “transformations

in racial understandings that frequently elude social science frameworks” for theory and practice. In that light, how might we construct a dynamic document, a strategic re-invention of race?

- *Purge*—flushing away traditional attitudes and ideas about race or difference, start fresh (When we think about engaging difference, what are our long-held assumptions? What do we believe? What has changed?).
- *Revolution*—transforming frameworks of engagement to include all forms of expression and the everyday (think about citizen science, participatory research, oral traditions, empirical research, collaboration, art—all the ways in which we understand, process, and express how we understand race and nature).
- *Fuse*—merging and uniting to make new and radical visions about race and nature/environment and difference and relationship.

We need multiple approaches to dismantling oppression and regimes of practice that perpetuate racialization. I am not advocating “post-racial liberalism”, which anti-racist activist Tim Wise (2010:16) defines as the “de-emphasis of racial discrimination and race-based remedies for inequality [which he finds is problematic], in favor of class-based or ‘universal’ programs of uplift”. Nor do I support a “colorblind universalism” that eschews racial realities in favor of racial possibilities. What I am advocating is taking a second look at the tools in our toolbox (practical and theoretical) to see how we might reinvent an understanding of race that considers more recent cultural and technological disruptions. Our romance with “post race” is more reflective of our inability to stand where we are, than it is in showing how “evolved” we have become. How does innovation and creativity (as resilience redefined) get supported and awarded? How do we recognize interventions such as Sweet Beginnings, as an opportunity to change the lens, shift the language, create a different starting point, reframe “race”? What are the design limitations to the frameworks we are using (which theories do we privilege? how are we constrained by disciplinary boundaries?)? The mechanisms (tools, language, theoretical considerations) have not evolved to meet where we are at, in terms of the multiple contexts in which we can build relationships across difference. Young people are working with tools, structures and framings that we have forged over time. Yet they are working in contexts that are continually changing and expanding, revealing new iterations of old connections. What does this relationship between old ideas and new contexts reveal about the way we might engage race in theory and in practice?

Conclusion

I have considered how we might “do” race differently in our theorizing and praxis by interrogating the framings and the language we use to understand and engage race in all its permutations. How might we operationalize “resilience” so that it becomes something more than a “happy ending” or useful anecdote and instead becomes a place to begin to engage race, allowing something new to emerge from this reconfiguration? In a way, what I am asking us to do is improvise with intention. Using

jazz music as an example, scholar Theresa Jenoure (2000:15) describes improvisation in this way:

Jazz improvisation is a system of spontaneous composing. It is process oriented and requires that ideas be instantly organized, which does not allow for a return to previously stated ideas in order to undo them, only for opportunities to expound upon them. Improvisers assess the past, present, and future in a relatively short span of time.

This paper is meant to provide some intellectual scaffolding for an exploratory conversation about race reimagined. Not post race, or no race, but race as an emergent idea/concept influenced by cultural and technological upsurges, while privileging agency, optimism and everyday acts of resilience as key mechanisms in creating alternative realities in the present moment.

Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from a keynote given at the “Race, Space, and Nature” symposium at UC Berkeley in 2011.
- ² These tweets are not an anomaly. *Jezebel* published an article on 9 November 2012 entitled “Racist teens forced to answer for tweets about the Nigger president”.
- ³ When I give a talk about race, I remind the audience that while I am engaging race at the intellectual level, as a black person I am also the thing itself. I cannot necessarily separate my “gut” reactions from my intellectual observations (though I often compartmentalize them). Sometimes, I just get mad. But I do not find that my anger, in and of itself, is useful to moving forward (though I believe it is often justified).
- ⁴ Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old, unarmed African-American man who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman (described as a multi-racial Hispanic American) on 26 February 2012 in Sanford, Florida.
- ⁵ These examples are taken from my book, *Black Faces, White Spaces: African Americans and the Great Outdoors* (Finney forthcoming).

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