

RACE in the Age of Obama

Does race still matter? If so, what is different about race today? These questions animated the discussion at the Academy's 1968th Stated Meeting, held at Washington University in St. Louis on February 25, 2011. Gary Wihl, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Hortense & Tobias Lewin Distinguished Professor in the Humanities in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, joined Academy President Leslie C. Berlowitz in welcoming four scholars to consider *Race in the Age of Obama*.

Academy Fellow Gerald Early (Washington University in St. Louis) stressed how “understanding race depends on understanding the past.” Jeffrey B. Ferguson (Amherst College) looked to his own past – an upbringing “bathed in the rhetoric of the civil rights movement” – before cautioning against narratives that cast racial history in simple terms of progress. Korina Jocson (Washington University in St. Louis) also focused on youth, exploring how young people are shaping the “new race era,” particularly through poetry they write and perform. Academy Fellow David A. Hollinger (University of California, Berkeley) emphasized the need to ask new, better questions of race: “the not-so-easily answered questions [that] are often generated by the contingencies of history.”

The meeting followed the January publication of “Race in the Age of Obama,” the Winter 2011 issue of *Dædalus* guest edited by Gerald Early. That issue was the first of two volumes revisiting the main themes of the Academy's mid-1960s project on “The Negro American.” The second volume, “Race, Inequality & Culture,” guest edited by Lawrence D. Bobo (Harvard University), was published in April 2011.

More than a hundred Fellows and guests gathered to hear the presentations at the February meeting. What follows is an edited transcript.



Image courtesy of Julie Conway, Washington University in St. Louis.



Gerald Early

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and Director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. A Fellow of the American Academy since 1997, he serves as Cochair of the Academy's Council.

Guest editing the issue of *Dædalus* on “Race in the Age of Obama” was something I undertook with considerable seriousness of purpose. I felt the burden of history. This feeling is inevitable with the subject of race, which is not just a political concept but also a complex historical construction. That is, what race is depends a great deal on what it was. This is unavoidable because race is deeply rooted in the idea of progress. No progress can occur without a past against which to measure it. Are things getting better or worse compared to how they were at an earlier time? With race we are constantly swimming against the currents of the past.

I began by familiarizing myself with the two influential volumes of *Dædalus* on “The Negro American” produced in Fall 1965 and Winter 1966. How might these volumes inform an examination of race today? What did the leading social scientists that were assembled to write for those *Dædalus* volumes think we were living through? What did people think Negroes were at that time?

It is not surprising that Lee Rainwater, a sociologist at Washington University, and Erik Erikson, the famed Harvard psychologist, wrote essays on Negro identity in the 1966 *Dædalus* volume. What is surprising is that the volume did not include more such essays. Negro identity was a highly salient topic at the time and was to become only more so. Even more surprising, no black scholar or intellectual was asked to write about identity.

Race as a concept of identity is composed of a series of categories, each deriving its meaning from how it is contingent upon and comparable to the other. For instance, white has meaning only as it relates to black or to anything else that is not white. White has no real meaning in and of itself. As Erik Erikson wrote in his *Dædalus* essay, “[F]or man meets man always in categories, be they adult and child, man and woman, employer and employee, leader and follower, majority and minority.” In this one respect little progress has been made in race relations over the last one hundred years. For all the talk of multiculturalism and diversity, they are simply an-

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other way of talking about people as categories. If ending prejudice and bigotry means destroying the idea of seeing and understanding human reality as a set of categories, we still have a long way to go. But perhaps categories are a prison from which human beings will never escape, and all we can hope to do is to be more humane in how we create our categories.

In any case, one thing I knew clearly when asking my contributors to write for *Dædalus* was that the United States had elected a black man as president and that his first term would coincide with the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War. The juxtaposition is striking.

The *Dædalus* volumes of the 1960s appeared at an equally incredible moment in the history of American race relations, a time just as remarkable as the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008. The actual planning and writing of those volumes took place during the centennial of the American Civil War. On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. Despite compromises, this was the most serious and far-reaching piece of civil rights legislation since the days immediately following the Civil War.

The civil rights movement seemed to have gotten what it had wanted, what it had fought for over the last decade or more: a bill that completely shattered legalized racism and segregation in the United States. Two weeks later, on July 16, an off-duty white police officer shot and killed a fifteen-year-old unarmed black boy in New York City. For the next several days in New York the story about three missing civil rights workers in Mississippi was completely forgotten as several boroughs erupted in racial violence

against the police. From August 28 to August 30, 1964, a similar race riot took place in Philadelphia. Things in northern ghettos would get a lot worse before they got any better – if indeed one can say that fifty years later anything in ghettos has gotten better.

On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks were among those who witnessed the event in the Oval Office. This was the final jewel in the crown of the civil rights movement. If the dramatic 1963 campaign in Birmingham and the subsequent March on Washington played a role in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, then the agony of the Selma cam-

paigned played a role in the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

These two pieces of legislation were coupled with President Johnson's speech at Howard University on June 4, 1965, in which he spoke of "the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and as a result."

Nothing seemed clearer in President Johnson's speech than that this was the moment when affirmative action began. On August 11, 1965, just five days after the signing of the Voting Rights Act, racial tensions erupted into violence in Watts. This was not a race riot; it was a small race war. Over six days, thirty-four people were killed, and more than one thousand were injured. The Watts riot was among the worst race riots in American history.

When Johnson heard about the riot, he said despairingly about blacks, "I am giving them boom times and more good legislation than anyone else did and what do they do? Attack and sneer. Could FDR do better? Could anybody do better? What do they want?" What was clear in the mid-1960s was that race relations in the United States, the struggle between blacks and whites, was not just over immediate and concrete issues such as jobs, housing, health care, and schools but over the meaning of more abstract ideas like justice, freedom, equality, fairness, and reparations, and this struggle pitted decidedly different views of reality against each other, views that have become both central to our nation's self-understanding and utterly intractable. This moment was both the best of times for whites and blacks and the worst of times, and it was at this moment that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences held conferences that resulted in the seminal issues of *Dædalus* in 1965 and 1966 on "The Negro American."

The American Academy had long had an interest in participating in public policy debates. In the 1960s, as a result of the civil rights movement, the status of the Negro American was one of the hottest public policy debates in the nation. With support from the Carnegie Foundation, the Academy, having determined that the public policy debate

greatly on the work of black sociologists like W.E.B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Kenneth Clark because at the time the Negro family was understudied by whites. He also relied on a flotilla of government statistics.

Influenced by his Irish Catholic background and by the fact that his own father had deserted his mother when Moynihan

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about race and black Americans was worth engaging, held a planning meeting in April 1964, just a few months before the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Among those present at that meeting and also at the conference held in May 1965 just before the passage of the Voting Rights Act was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then the Assistant Secretary of Labor. Moynihan, who had come on board in the Labor Department under President Kennedy, had already made a name for himself in policy circles by writing about automobile safety (Moynihan also hired Ralph Nader to work for the government) and by modifying qualifications for the armed forces so that more men from the lower socioeconomic strata of society, who previously could not pass the entrance exam to get into the military, could now enlist. By 1964 he had become interested in the civil rights movement, which impressed him greatly.

From December 1964 to March 1965 Moynihan and his staff drafted a report entitled "The Negro Family, a Case for National Action," which became one of the most famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view – sociological treatises on race in the twentieth century. Moynihan relied

was ten years old, Moynihan wrote a ringing endorsement of traditional family life and an almost panic-stricken document of the disintegration of the black family and its "tangle of pathologies." These "pathologies" included out-of-wedlock children, low marriage rates, low regard for education, and a high number of unemployed, emasculated men who mostly made babies and mischief.

All these observations about the negative impact of urbanization on blacks had been made before by black sociologists as far back as W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro*, which was published in 1899. The essay Moynihan wrote for *Dædalus* was far more muted than his report. However, at the *Dædalus* conference on the Negro American in May 1965, he was the lightning rod. Few people outside the government had read his report at that time. Moynihan presented a bleak description of the problems of the black family, but he offered no solutions. He felt that government policy-makers were too fixated on so-called solutions or poorly-thought-out government programs, so he purposely did not offer any.

Moynihan had once said, "[T]he role of social science lies not in the formation of social

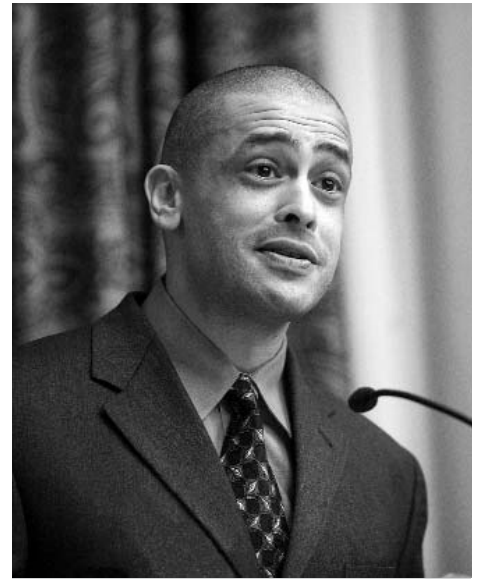
policy but in the measurement of its results.” But Moynihan itched to create public policy for the Negro family. He contributed to President Johnson’s Howard University speech. He endorsed something much like affirmative action. After the report was leaked publicly, however, and blacks in the civil rights movement reacted so negatively to it, saying Moynihan was blaming the victim, his voice was essentially thwarted. He left the Labor Department before the end of 1965.

In addition to the Moynihan thread, one other interesting aspect of the *Dædalus* race volumes of the 1960s is how few blacks wrote for them. No blacks attended the planning meeting in April 1964, and black authors contributed only five essays to the two volumes, their voices joined by Ralph Ellison and J. Saunders Redding, who were among the attendees at the May 1965 conference and whose words are recorded in the conference transcript published in the second *Dædalus* volume.

In the 1960s race was still seen as a social science issue by the consent of both blacks and whites who studied race academically. Oddly, the two most prominent black voices about race at that time were not social scientists at all but creative writers, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, both of whom were at best skeptical and at worst hostile to social science and its view of blacks as a maladjustment to be corrected rather than a way of life to be understood. Ellison wrote sharply about Gunnar Myrdal’s classic study of race, *An American Dilemma*: “But can a people (its faith in an idealized American creed notwithstanding) . . . live and develop over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?” Baldwin wrote, “In overlooking, denying, evading [the Negro’s] complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished and we perish.”

But with the election of Obama we face a fundamentally different question than Americans did in 1965. For many the question now is, does race still matter? If it does, it cannot matter in the same way it did in 1965 when the thought of a black president would have seemed a fantasy. So what is different about race now?

I had several objectives with my volume of *Dædalus*: One, to offer a broad and diverse set of humanist responses, from both creative writers and historians, to the question of race today in order to present the humanistic and cultural thinking about race that has become central to any discussion of the subject and to show that the questions of identity and the political meaning of identity are, for better or worse, more salient now than ever. Two, to provide in my own essay an objective account of Obama’s historical moment to define clearly the occasion for the volume and to historicize it so that readers might open the pages fifty years from now and find a time capsule in which they can see how we understood our own time. Third, to revisit historian John Hope Franklin’s essay in the original *Dædalus* race volume of 1965 to underscore the importance of how understanding race depends on understanding the past. Finally, to refocus in my essay the discussion of Moynihan away from his sociological arguments to where I think the focus should rightly be: on his own struggle with the challenges to liberalism and the welfare state posed by the race problem, which made blacks different from other American ethnic groups.



Jeffrey B. Ferguson

Jeffrey B. Ferguson is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Black Studies and American Studies at Amherst College.

I generally dislike the easy dishonesty of autobiographical presentations, especially by scholars, so it is with apologies that I offer one in this case. Academic life rarely affords me the opportunity to reflect out loud on why I wrote something or what it might mean.

Although reincarnated as a black American and later as an African American, I was born a Negro American one year before the publication of the landmark 1965 *Dædalus* volume on “The Negro American,” and every year of my conscious life I have been endeavoring, both intellectually and emotionally, to disentangle the puzzle of our peculiar American tendency to return continually and despite our best wishes to what we most disavow: privilege based on heredity and human possibility circumscribed by descent.

Thus, the subject of the new *Dædalus* volume on “Race in the Age of Obama” – a volume that seeks to take stock of what has occurred in the nearly half-century between the end of legal segregation and our more subtly segregated though notably more integrated present – is in some ways about my life. Admittedly, one might not reach this conclusion upon reading my essay. There I

take on our racial moment at a distance, more as a matter of intellectual definition than as a conundrum at once lived and thought. Yet now, with the context of my essay as my focus, I will take up the same questions in a more personal fashion by returning to W.E.B. Du Bois's reverberative question in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "What does it feel like to be a problem?" – only inflected along the lines of a similar question asked by Harlem hustlers of a young James Baldwin, "Whose little boy are you?"

I was born in the midst of a tumultuous period of racial change, but being young in this era meant not even half understanding it. Nevertheless, I felt even as a black child living in the projects in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that the events going on around me conferred an enchanted, if somewhat embattled, sense of membership in a privileged group at the forefront of change in a great, if not the greatest, nation. I was born bathed in the rhetoric of the civil rights movement.

With so many heroes, so many mythical events of recent vintage, who needed fairy tales? From my limited but privileged angle, my people were cool and smart and strong and stylish and somehow transcendently right in a wonderful way. As they used to say when all of this mattered, right on! I would always smile when my aunt called me her little black boy. Deeply rooted in Southern black traditions, Aunt Kat figured that my survival depended on thinking of myself this way. She didn't want her little light-skinned boy to get any bright ideas about being anything else. But with apologies to Richard Wright, who wrote *Black Boy*, to me the term meant that I somehow fit in with all the rightness and coolness around me, and that made Aunt Kat's nurturing love seem even more delicious.

In an effort to develop my mind, my father liked to play memory games with me. He would state a term, and I would have to name an appropriate match. The pairs were

almost always intended to confer pride and to teach a bit of history. If he said Joe Louis, I would have to name a great boxer, preferably Ali, whom my dad liked for being both oppositional and pretty. If he said King, I always said Malcolm (and vice versa), though at my young age I registered only the sense of triumph, not the profound sense of loss invoked by this pairing.

When the wave of riots that marked the late 1960s and early 1970s came to Chattanooga and the National Guard with them, I had no idea that everyone was still reeling from the loss of King – though I had osmot-

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ically imbibed many of the black power slogans that marked the moment. My first real memory comes from this riot. As a police helicopter made slow progress overhead, I ran down a hill with my fist in the air, screaming, "Power to the people! Power to the people!"

My subsequent education has bled this demand with a thousand pinpricks disguised as questions and qualifications; it has transformed my childish ultimatum into a series of questions and at times even reduced it to an embarrassment or a joke. Whose power? What people? Still I return to it because, as with most American dreams, something vital remains in the sheer impossibility of a childish wish made in the first conscious encounter with something large and real and virtually impossible to solve.

I see in my helicopter image both a metaphor for personal advancement and a figure for the pursuit of an ever-more-distant yet palpable source of oppression. That, in a nutshell, is how it has felt to live as a maturing and now mature black person in the

post-civil rights era. Even as I developed into an affirmative action baby headed for the Ivy League and benefited from a certain mainstreaming of the views of the civil rights movement, I witnessed the crumbling of its late phases from both internal dissension and external attack. As my own fortunes improved, the ghetto deepened its grip on those who remained, including many of my own relatives.

Yet by the time I entered college much had already changed in the country. Diversity and multiculturalism had become catchwords, and concentrations of black students

at Harvard had grown large enough for the administration to worry about such relatively new phenomena as voluntary segregation at dinner tables and an almost constant morality play of injured racial feelings in need of repair.

Imagine that, I thought. Even in the midst of the most integrated scene imaginable and in the most comfortable place that I had ever experienced in my life, racial feelings ran high on every side of the color line; it appeared that nothing could suppress them. People even seemed attracted to them at some level as if they stood at the center of some grand antagonistic ritual of incorporation and justification through the constant redrawing of boundaries. What seemed true of race on campus also seemed to hold for the broader racial controversies. I wouldn't have put it this way at the time though. I wasn't a professor then.

I hope my brief autobiographical sketch serves somewhat to indicate the kind of post-civil rights life that might lead to viewing race, and by extension America, in somewhat unprogressive terms, as I do in my

essay, which argues that the principal pillars of the American progressive viewpoint, the belief in universal freedom and equality, are logically and historically linked to our history of racial exclusion and violence. Despite the varied railings of academics against ideas of American exceptionalism and, more broadly, against ideologies of modernism, most Americans continue to believe that this nation is categorically good in a special sense, that it progresses in a self-perfecting way toward ever-greater days to come, that those who work hard and maintain solid values of moral self-examination and delayed gratification have every opportunity to prosper, and that prosperity itself may be taken as a sign both of individual merit and of the larger positive direction of the nation. I could go on, explaining the features of this viewpoint, which has become more powerfully held during the post-1970s era of conservative ascendancy – notwithstanding our multicultural, regional, and ideological factioning – but I think that we all know its main features. We are steeped in it.

I take the story of black and white in this nation as the best evidence against this progressive viewpoint despite the fact that our racial history is most often told as a progressive from-to story (as John Hope Franklin put it in his justly famous text, *From Slavery to Freedom*). As one of my teachers, Sacvan Bercovitch, has trenchantly pointed out across several books (most recently in *The Rites of Assent*), the most amazing aspect of our national ideology may be its absorptive capability, which occurs through the encouragement of vigorous but somewhat narrow rituals of dissent. This absorptive capability, which covers up thousands of sins and often defers the will to reform, circumscribes dissent in part by making America the only real topic of conversation. Those who object to the state of the nation, whether they be multiculturalists, Marxists, or what have you, tend to express their disagreement in terms of the nation's transcendent mission – even when they think they are going against that mission.

Most dissenters align themselves with the myth of America even as they hurl their jeremiads against their opponents. The black American political tradition has a long history of standing on American ideals while denouncing America for not standing up to its promise. For example, Martin Luther King managed through this kind of rhetoric finally to close the deal on making racism un-American. Yet he did not succeed in his late-career attempt to have imperialism or poverty recognized in the same terms. In a sense, this represents “the chickens coming home to roost” for him because his rhetoric of dissent and universal brotherhood unwittingly empowered the other side by reinforcing the sense of American exceptionalism that engenders our tolerance for poverty at home and fuels our sometimes callous disregard for rights and interests of less powerful nations abroad.

For many people Obama plays a symbolic role similar to that of King. Obama succeeds as a figure in part by representing the absorption of racial dissent by the American myth. Suspected by many as a Manchurian candidate or as “not one of us,” he nonetheless projects the deepest faith in national unity and the continuing power of our mission as a nation. For all that is good, indeed wonderful, about Obama as a figure in our national life, his faith works in many ways against the achievement of racial justice. Such are the ironies of our most peculiar racial moment, which returns to the past all the more powerfully for the sometimes remarkable effort that it has put into overturning it.



Korina Jocson

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Two questions guided my thinking as I wrote “Poetry in a New Race Era,” my contribution to the *Dædalus* volume on “Race in the Age of Obama”: What is shaping youth culture? How are youth shaping culture in this new race era? The *new* in my title suggests a continuum, a blending, the forging of the old and the new; it does not supersede or replace the old. Instead it marks a shift, something emerging in this era of hope and possibility.

Although I consider intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, and other markers of difference in my work, I am far from a race theorist, and I do not consider myself a race scholar. My work is set primarily in literacy studies and education, and so for at least the past decade I have been most interested in how young people use and often leverage different types of literacies to navigate their social worlds and make sense of their lives, both in school and out of school.

I had the good fortune of working closely with June Jordan’s Poetry for the People program during my graduate studies at Berkeley. Even before that time, in my experience as a high school teacher in Los Angeles, I had

noticed a resurgence or reemergence of poetry and the spoken word – in particular, youth’s affinity for writing, performing, and sharing poetry in various spaces. These experiences helped formalize my thinking and propelled me to examine them further in the field of education.

In late 2008, on the eve of President Obama taking office, the subject of my essay came to me. I was in Washington, D.C., for a meeting and was talking with social and ed-

discovery, experimentation. They also write about invisibility, surveillance, harassment, pain, and loss shaped by racialized and gendered experiences in school and in society.

Second, how and why does poetry matter? Poets and writers long ago established the power of poetry as a medium of expression. There is nothing revolutionary per se about the cultural phenomenon I am describing. Obama did not change this potential power or the approach to poetry or even

ing their varied experiences, and this has implications for practice and for policy. It is essential to take into account such literacies in order to support youth’s literacy development both in and out of school. As youth continue to demonstrate in their work, some more explicitly than others, the danger in this era is a system that rewards a few and punishes many. Thus, we need to create learning opportunities to help young people make sense of their lives, and we need to create conditions in schools and in communities to shape the academic and life trajectories of students, particularly those from nondominant, historically marginalized populations.

With his iconic campaign and historic electoral win Obama brought about a shift that has influenced the way young people take up issues in their writing.

ucational theorist Zeus Leonardo, who was writing about the idea of post-race thought. He asked, “How do we think more deeply about race or the future of race?” In this context I couldn’t help but think about youth culture, poetry, and a new race era.

In my essay I begin with Brave New Voices, an amazing weeklong festival held every summer and culminating in the International Youth Poetry Slam. Brave New Voices (BNV) is spearheaded by leading literary arts organizations Youth Speaks and Urban Word NYC to create opportunities for youth ages thirteen to nineteen to write about matters of importance in their lives and, equally important, to voice them in ways that reach large audiences in both physical and online environments.

Youth in various parts of the United States and abroad are telling us something through their words and through their actions. Today this is done not only on paper and on the stage but also online and through audio and video offerings of their work. What do their words and actions suggest to us as we try to find ways to support young people in this age of Obama and beyond?

First, though, what are young people writing about today? Their themes include love,

the writing process, but with his iconic campaign and historic electoral win he brought about a shift that has influenced the way young people take up issues in their writing. This shift brings to the fore the need to confront what still lies beneath the skin, the need to face race and other markers of difference head on, the need to elevate ourselves and to turn discourse into action. In this new race era the challenge is just that, how do we confront race without turning to color blindness?

My *Dædalus* essay features several student poems. In one, Carolyn writes, “I’m not the black you know, I’m the black you will know so I ask once more can you see me?” How do we charge ahead with newer tools for mediating and sharing experiences in a way similar to that of BNV poet B. Yung, who wrote, “Every time I write a slave poem my paper bleeds . . . society never wanted me to make it so I guess the gravity ain’t the only thing that’s been holding me down lately.” These days poets not only write on the page; some also perform on stage, and others use new media tools. Many video poems, including ones by BNV poets, are on YouTube.

Young people are finding more and more ways to create and distribute works captur-



David A. Hollinger

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Jeffrey's contribution to this issue of *Dædalus* observes that many of the voices in today's conversation about the place of descent communities in the United States divide into the party of memory and the party of hope. I understand what he means, and I think that most of us in this ongoing conversation, whatever emphasis we take, like to believe that we appreciate the virtues of memory and of hope, that we try even if we often fail to remember the past without being blinded by it to possibilities that present and future circumstances might enable.

Yet I want to suggest a third party, again one to which most of us here would like to count ourselves as members. This is the party of analysis. The ideal of analysis inspires us to mobilize and employ our skills as scientists and scholars and to use those skills to evaluate critically and in some cases even to neutralize the claims of memory and the claims of hope. This is the spirit in which I wrote my own *Dædalus* essay, which rejects as all-too-easily answered a question popular today in the media, a question that sometimes divides the party of memory from the party of hope, a question that misses a great

deal of the action: Has the United States achieved a society in which the physical marks of descent and the legacies of racism no longer operate to disadvantage historically racialized communities of descent?

This is an easy question because it requires little science and scholarship to answer in the negative. To be sure, some Americans are tempted to answer this question incorrectly. That so many journalists and politicians are functioning as a kind of truth squad correcting this mistake is thus fortunate. This is an important task. But an organization of scientists and scholars such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has a much more demanding calling. We should be identifying questions not so easily answered and should be offering the best commentary we can on those questions, especially those that are not constantly discussed in the mainstream press.

The not-so-easily answered questions are often generated by the contingencies of history, by developments that the party of memory is sometimes too slow to engage and the party of hope sometimes too eager to interpret as signs of victory. Two such historic developments are the focal points of my essay.

Both developments are major preoccupations of a splendid book I read on the plane from San Francisco yesterday, Eugene Robinson's *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. Robinson is one of my favorite cable TV talking heads, so I was pleased to find his book so sensible and sound and such a bracing mixture of memory, hope, and analysis. We scholars sometimes patronize journalists, as I probably did a moment ago, but Robinson is refreshingly up to date on the latest social science, and he advances a perspective that I find totally congruent with my own essay in the *Dædalus* issue we are discussing today.

One of the two developments that Robinson and I both think demand sustained attention is the blurring of the lines between the classic color-coded communities of descent, often still called races. Although rates

of out-marriage in the Hispanic and Asian American populations were already beyond 30 percent as early as the 1990 census (and for Korean Americans and Japanese Americans have reached more than 50 percent in Los Angeles), what is more remarkable in recent years is the increase in marriage, cohabitation, and reproduction across the black-white color line. Citing some of the same sociological studies I mention in my essay, Robinson observes that of the census-identified black males who got married in the year 2008, 22 percent married women who were not census-identified black females and 9 percent of the census-identified black females who got married that year married outside their so-called race. Because the mixed offspring of these socially recognized unions often ask their mixture to be acknowledged, at least in some settings, the power of the "one drop" rule to classify Americans is diminishing.

What does the blurring of these lines, especially between blackness and nonblackness, mean? I am not certain, but the question strikes me as one worth pursuing because it is not so easily answered.

A second development to which my essay calls attention is massive immigration since the late 1960s and the increasing percentage of immigrants who have dark skins and would be classified as African American by our inherited set of categories. The diversity of the populations arriving from East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East make a mockery of the category "Asian American," and the destiny of many specific immigrant groups from Asia reminds us of the role of class position in enabling people to overcome the power of white racism. That poorly educated immigrants from Mexico have a different destiny in the United States than Koreans, who often come here as college graduates and with English fluency, is not surprising.

Americans of Japanese ancestry were taken from their homes and thrown into internment camps within my lifetime and within a few miles of where I now live in Cal-

ifornia. The depth and intensity of anti-Asian racism in this society is often underestimated, with the result that people do not focus enough on the process by which so many Asian Americans have managed to overcome the barriers created by white su-

One social scientific study after another reveals that the immigration-based black population, like the immigration-based populations from Korea, Taiwan, and India, does very well in this country by standard indicators. What does this say about the significance of the black-white color line?

premac y. What can we learn about white supremacy from the fact that it has had less and less effect on Americans of East Asian ancestry?

But what most invites our attention is the increase in black immigration. Robinson, too, is much engaged by this demographic transformation, and again to my delight, he cites some of the data that I cite in *Dædalus*. Immigration from Africa consisted of only about 1 percent of arriving peoples as late as the 1980s but now constitutes 7 percent. More immigrants are coming into the United States today from sub-Saharan Africa than from India, China, or Russia – sources of immigrants that the press constantly discusses.

Astonishingly, the anti-immigration forces in American politics have yet to say much about how the color of immigration is blackening, and the class differentials introduced into the black population of the United States are stunning. Immigrants from Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, Robinson notes with fascination, have stronger financial and educational standing than do immigrants from most of Asia. One social scientific study after another reveals that the immigration-based black population, like the immigration-based populations from Korea, Taiwan, and India, does very well in this country by

standard indicators. What does this say about the significance of the black-white color line? The children of immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados are, after all, just as black as and often blacker than the children of African Ameri-

cans whose families experienced Jim Crow and before that centuries of slavery. Might history, as opposed to race, have some significance here?

At issue is not the power of white racism but rather the ways in which that power works differently in relation to different population groups with different histories. Do well-educated black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean experience discrimination? Of course they do. But white racism hurts them much less than it hurts other black people. We cannot remind ourselves often enough that the African American descendants of American slavery and Jim Crow are the only demographic group in the United States to inherit a multcentury legacy of chattel slavery and systematic, violently enforced discrimination, cataclysmically inadequate educational opportunities, and extreme racialization under the ordinance of the one drop rule – all sanctioned by constitutional authority in the United States.

President Obama is not a member of this unique population group, whose history is markedly different from that inherited by Obama and generally by the new immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean. I can't pretend to have all this figured out, but, as with the phenomenon of ethnoracial mix-

ture, figuring out what all this means is well worth the attention of our best minds. Hence, I am frustrated by the countless writers who keep telling us how bad racism is – a claim they are right about – but who so rarely discuss these developments.

The reason to study these developments is not just to decide on how much or how little progress we have made in diminishing racism. Rather the point is to understand the specific dynamics of the process by which racism is diminished. What are the forces that diminish it? How does racism interact with class position? What historical circumstances make a difference? In what particular locations does white supremacy do the most and the least damage and why? These questions get short shrift when we focus instead on the matter of the hourglass being half empty or half full or just how far in some general sense we have gotten beyond racism, on whether we are optimistic or pessimistic. Only when we energetically engage difficult questions are we likely to enable the party of memory and the party of hope to work together with greater confidence and maximum effect. ■

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