On the State of Race Theory: A Conversation with David Theo Goldberg

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In 1961, the distinguished British historian E.P. Thompson assessed the scholarly and social contributions of Raymond Williams, an ascending intellectual of the New Left, in the following terms:

"With a compromised tradition at his back, and with a broken vocabulary in his hands, he did the only thing that was left to him; he took over the vocabulary of his opponents, following them into the heart of their own arguments, and fought them to a standstill in their own terms." (27)

Thompson was, of course, referring to Williams' transformation of the field of literary studies through his rigorous historicization of its aesthetic mode of textual analysis and his insistent expansion of its narrowly conceived literary focus to include more diverse forms of cultural expression, such as film, television, and advertising. An engaged, oppositional intellectual, Williams played a decisive role in the "culture wars" of his time, challenging a deeply conservative and entrenched Leavisite tradition in British letters as well as the vulgar orthodoxies of mid-century Marxist theorizing, which understood culture as a secondary effect of a determining economic base. Uncannily, Thompson's judgment might be said to perform double duty, as I attempt to demonstrate how, in the context of the current culture wars, his commentary serves as an appropriate and succinct encomium for the unsurpassed theoretical achievement and intellectual courage of the contemporary cosmopolitan philosopher of South African heritage, David Theo Goldberg.

The award winning filmmaker turned philosopher and social theorist has similarly transgressed and transformed not only the field of analytic philosophy and many of the central tenets of social and political theory—of modernity, culture, morality, subjectivity, the law and legality, the state—but also, and most comprehensively, the discourse of race and racism, to which he has lent intellectual vitality and political urgency. The author and editor of over a dozen books and scores of articles, David Theo Goldberg has produced a body of work as bold and capacious in its historical and geopolitical reach as it is exacting and meticulous in its modes of analytic engagement. Departing from the prevailing social scientific paradigm of putatively distanced and objective research, with its penchant for empirical methodologies and reductionist accounts of "race relations," Goldberg draws on diverse theoretical traditions to fashion and refashion new conceptual apparatuses, new modes of analysis, and new critical vocabularies that unapologetically foreground an active commitment to "resisting particular racisms of given historical moments" (Anatomy xiii).

Guided by the Sartrean notion of a project (a figure he studied assiduously as an undergraduate), Goldberg is singularly committed not only to advancing critical knowledge but transforming contemporary political, legal, economic, discursive, and material conditions in the interest of dissolving racist expression and eliminating racist exclusions in the ongoing struggle for global democratization. Responsive to, yet often refreshingly critical of, key contemporary dialogues and debates within the university, his body of work is also generative and assertive. Well versed in theories of race and racism in cultural anthropology and in various schools of Marxist and postcolonial thought that have circulated with a great deal of currency in the humanities over the last several decades, he has consistently challenged—despite the obvious costs of such provocation—the critical aporias, omissions, reductions, romanticizations, and reifications in left-liberal analyses of race. He has also explored the work of post-war European intellectuals often neglected in the North American academy (until recently) in the study of race, such as Zygmunt Bauman and Michel Foucault. Advancing the scholarly conversation about such important and often enigmatic figures, Goldberg has succeeded in transforming their conceptual bequeath into entirely new and startlingly original analytic frameworks for understanding the complex intersections of race, modernity, social subjectivity, and state power. He simultaneously remains in critical dialogue with a number of African American philosophers he counts among his cohort—Cornel West, Lucius Outlaw, Tommy Lott, Angela Davis, among others—with whom he struggled to assert the legitimacy of racial analytics and anti-racist practice in the American Philosophical Association and related mainstream professional assemblies, conferences, journals, canons, and curricula. The net result of his boundless intellectual energy and emancipatory vision is an oeuvre unmatched in its contributions to the field and uncompromising in the demands that it makes on readers as readers and ethical agents.

Goldberg's scholarly achievements are perhaps more profound when taken up within the contexts that inform their inception and production. Like the working-class Welsh intellectual forced to negotiate the culture of Oxbridge, Goldberg shares with Williams the outsider's characteristic comprehension of political, economic, and cultural contradictions that reflect the fractured sensibilities and inherent instabilities of a divided nation and declining empire, contradictions naturalized and normalized by an increasingly complacent citizenry. Leaving South Africa in 1977, still a formal apartheid state, he arrived in New York City in 1978 to find a strangely familiar, because similarly discordant, informally regulated and racially ordered, urban space. The conservative backlash against the civil rights advances of the 1960s having gained considerable momentum by the late 1970s, the young PhD student witnessed first hand the unfolding of a "new racism" that would come to define the Reagan/Bush/Clinton eras. A more fluid, less obvious, deregulated and privatized rearticulation of racist discourse, the new colorblind, or "raceless racism," he would later define in the following terms:
Expressly committed to race-blindness, that is, to a standard of justice protective of individual rights and not group results, raceless racism informally identifies racial groups so long as the recognition in question is no longer state formulated or fashioned. The possibility of racelessness publicly, and by extension of racial reference privately trades exactly on an implicit and informal invocation of the sorts of massaged historical referents now denied in the public sphere. This in turn makes possible the devaluation of any individuals considered not white, or white-like, the trashing or trampling of their rights and possibilities, for the sake of preserving the right to private "rational discrimination" of whites. (Racial State 228)

A diversified and implicitly intensified racism, coupled with neoliberal ambitions to dismantle the welfare state and shrink "big government," continued to fuel for the next several decades a right-wing social movement as well funded—by large corporations, conservative think tanks, imperial militarists, and the religious right, among others—as it was well organized—from the grassroots to K Street. Its aim, in short, was and is to reshape government and refashion public culture in the interests, largely, of wealth and whiteness.

From the start, the university was a primary target. Like Williams in mid-century Britain, Goldberg resisted, and continues to resist, a very different, and I would argue more pernicious, set of culture wars that have been ongoing for two and a half decades in the American academy and in the mass media. The crusades of the 1980s and 90s—waged against "political correctness," affirmative action, diversity, and multiculturalism, which was decried as "paranoid" and "divisive"—eventually hardened into the more dangerous and more literal crusades of the present post-9/11 era. Organized around a kind of patriotic correctness, the current assault routinely blacklists professors and administrators perceived to be critical of the current Bush administration's policies, or those of its allies, as it seeks state and federal legislative and judicial aid in efforts to render the university classroom an utterly instrumentalized space devoid of critical thought, self-reflection, and moral accountability.²

In the midst of this conservative revolution, Goldberg struggles to keep the academy intellectually honest. When Racist Culture made its appearance in 1993, those who imagined philosophy a disinterested, nonpolitical scholarly profession went on notice with Goldberg's insistence that we must "acknowledge the role of philosophical discipline in establishing racialized discourse and the culture of racisms, as well as the importance of philosophical analysis in any comprehensive commitment to their disarticulation" (1–2). At the time, there was widespread internal debate among scholars in the humanities and social sciences about the meaning and significance of "race," a conceptual and political debate that often turned acrimonious when related, more difficult concerns with "racism" emerged. The prevailing wisdom held, and continues to hold for many, that race no longer matters and racism is now a thing of the past, an anachronism that only occasionally reappears in the form of individual ignorance or pathology (a characterization often meant to include the "politically correct" or "paranoid" scholar who dares to assert the contrary). Against typically singular and monolithic, ahistorical and unchanging conceptualizations of race and racisms, Goldberg advances the argument that racially significant expressions are most productively understood as a "field of discourse," drawing in this instance on Foucault's early archeological work. In spite of criticism leveled by Paul Gilroy and others against what might be perceived as a general or universal theory of race and racism that would necessarily sacrifice historical and cultural specificities, Goldberg argues for the validity of a "general but open-ended theory" that would "account for historical alterations and discontinuities in the modes of racial formation, in the disparate phenomena commonly expressed in racialized terms, as well as those expressions properly considered racist" (41).³ Thus transcending the often barren academic preoccupation with the tensions between the universal and the particular, Goldberg asserts in provocative and "pragmatic" terms that the theoretical validity of conceptualizing a field of racially significant expression
must be measured according to the degree to which "it enable[s] and encourage[s] opposition to racist expression, for ultimately the efficacy of a theory about race and racism is to be assessed in terms of the ways in which it renders possible resistance to racisms" (41).

The implications of Goldberg's theoretical insight become readily apparent when taken up in light of his ongoing critique of liberal modernity's denial of its own racially conceived history and the attendant racist exclusions that its idealized commitments to liberty, equality, and fraternity nonetheless rationalize and sustain. Goldberg traces the history of racial denial through the work of the definitive philosophical architects of liberalism's moral and political framework—from Rousseau and Kant, Bentham and Mill, to present day reassertions of the moral irrelevance of race in the form of commitments to "colorblindness." For Goldberg, the dilemma at the heart of liberal modernity is elaborated as follows: liberal modernity assumes that the basic human condition—the economic, political, scientific, and cultural positions that moral subjects guided by reason might occupy—is understood to be naturally determined by race, yet simultaneously insists that race is a morally irrelevant category. When the denial of difference proves an impossible stratagem, liberalism is moved to either tolerate the other's differences—a response that simultaneously indicates that the object of one's tolerance is somehow repugnant—or develop modes of assimilation that will cast away difference through a universally imposed sameness.

As he discusses in The Racial State, Goldberg understands the academy's tepid celebration of diversity and multiculturalism—as against a more robust commitment to empowering the once marginal through what he calls the "incorporation" of difference into the body politic—to be in keeping with liberalism's vacillation between two equally problematic polarities of colorblind insistence and tolerant accommodation. He observes:

Cultural diversity and multiculturalism under their liberal interpretations constitute advanced stages of this (dis)integrative stage. They are administrative instruments that serve to contain and restrain resistance and transformation as they displace any appeal to economic difference by paying lip service to the celebration of cultural distinction. . . . Similarly cultural diversity in the academy is invoked as a necessary recruiting mechanism at a time of decreasing enrollments and shrinking federal dollars. (Racist 220)

Universities rush to adopt inclusive curricula while at the same time two decades of skyrocketing tuition rates and affirmative action backlash work disproportionately to exclude students of color from post-secondary education. Whatever the tangle of intentions at work here, the consequence remains structurally racist. This genealogical exemplification makes clear the necessity of a theory of racialized discourse capable of mapping the transformations in what Goldberg calls, after Foucault, the "conceptual primitives" of racialized expression, the underlying preconceptual factors generative of the discursive field that become embedded in popular social, scientific, and political discourses, thereby gaining a measure of legitimacy. Absent a unified grammar of racially significant expression, skeptics can and do assert that past racisms have been delegitimated and have disappeared from public expression, if not consciousness, rendering new articulations invisible and thus the potential for critical response and redress nearly impossible. The implications for public policy reform and individual accountability, Goldberg notes, are quite considerable.

Challenging the fallacy of conceptualizing racism as a singular and premodern prejudice—one that liberal modernity imagines itself to have overcome by the force of Enlightened reason—Goldberg insists that the discourse of race and racism is "one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity" (3). Here, Goldberg draws on Zygmunt Bauman's double assertion that the modern project is principally concerned with order as "expressed through the domination of Nature by Reason; the transparency of Nature to Reason in the Laws of Nature; through the classification of Nature in rational systems of thought; and through the mastery of Nature, physical and human, by way of 'design, manipulation, management, and engineering" and, in turn, modernity's simultaneous
Goldberg elaborates dent logic, yet at the same time refusing to intersection with economic exploitation or patriarchal privilege, a inevitably content, to mastery and, it necessarily deepens its paradigms for explaining race and racism—those that reify race as engaging the constitutive cance of Bauman’s thesis and at the same time expands and insight, moreover, resists the inadequacies of the two dominant classifications, including the constitutive role of race in modernity’s commitment to mastery and, it necessarily follows, subjugation. Goldberg’s insight, moreover, resists the inadequacies of the two dominant paradigms for explaining race and racism—those that reify race as a biological given and those that deny race any independent content, relying on the explanatory value of other putatively deterministic forces like culture and class, which appeals to race are said inevitably to mystify. Affording race and racism its own independent logic, yet at the same time refusing to reductively bracket its intersection with economic exploitation or patriarchal privilege, Goldberg elaborates at length:

Race undertakes at once to furnish specific identity to otherwise abstract and alienated subjectivities. Sufficiently broad, indeed, almost conceptually empty, race offers itself as a category capable of providing a semblance of social cohesion, of historical particularity, of given meanings and motivations to agents otherwise mechanically conceived as conduits of market forces and moral laws. Like the conception of the nation that emerges more or less coterminously, race proceeds at its inception by arming social subjects with a cohesive identity. It is an identity that proves capable of being stretched across time and space, that itself assumes transforming specificity and legitimacy by taking on as its own the connotations of prevailing scientific and social discourses. In colonizing these prevailing connotations, race in turn has been able to set scientific and political agendas, to contain the content and applicability of Reason, to define who may be excluded and to confine the terms of social inclusion and cohesion. (4)

Racial assignment thus works to keep ambivalence at bay, while the exercise of power in the form of racist exclusion curtails the threat of the unknown as it silently equates security and safety with racial homogeneity, a conceptual and political concern to which he returns in The Racial State. Against the general presumption of racism’s inherent irrationality, this line of argument further underscores the degree to which “racist exclusions throughout modernity can and have been rationally ordered and legitimated,” as exemplified in the way that the European participation in the slave trade and various colonial projects have historically assumed the force of a moral imperative (11). Rationality, in fact, becomes the defining feature of humanity and the crucial differential between racial groups; in contrast to the “Western Man of Reason,” the generic image of the savage is characterized by lack of reason, self-control, culture, or morality—a figure, a race, in need of salvation and civilization. Goldberg resists, however, delimiting modernity’s commitments to racial definition, order, and rule to its extensive colonial history, recognizing in the utterly transformed, postcolonial present its obvious and persistent traces.

If, by his own reflection, the role of state in reproducing and renewing—and occasionally challenging—racial expression and exclusion was undertheorized in Racist Culture, that absence is vigorously engaged in The Racial State (2002), where many of the themes of Goldberg’s earlier work are treated to further elaboration, revision, and refinement.4 Written in a post-9/11 world, in the midst of a global war on terror, intensified global instability resulting from neoliberalism’s blistering advance, and massive immigration from the global south to the north, Goldberg’s extended meditation on what he calls “the racial state” might at first glance appear anachronistic. I suggest, to the contrary, that it could not have proven more timely, especially as the presumption of the nation state’s declining power and political relevance as a result of the globalization of economic power threatens to become common
sense. The emphasis here, he quickly explains, is "not the racial state, but the racial state, its forms and logics, histories and expressions" and is meant to rectify a lack of mutual engagement between state theory on the one hand and race theory literatures on the other (vii). Goldberg also seeks to challenge, in the latter body of work, a growing weariness—the ironic outgrowth, he suspects, of too much success—evident in the now ritual exchange in clichéd vocabularies and blunted, imprecise analytics in journal articles, books, conference panels and classroom seminars that belie theoretical rigor, critical depth and political commitment. "I have taken of late to warning students in my seminars," he writes,

that they will no longer get away with flippant invocations of "racialization" and "sites of contestation," "interrogation" and "narration." The warning produces stunned silence, as though they have been robbed of the only language they have come to know for addressing racial matters and racist conditions. At the same time, concern with and about the latter has disappeared all too quickly before the drunken diffusion of racial categories, new domains in the name of whiteness studies, race traitorhood, identity claims, and the romance with hybridity. (1)

True to form, the arguments that follow are a decisive effort to move the critical conversation beyond the culturalism that has absorbed academic (in)attention for the last two decades, at the cost of anti-racist analysis and intervention.

Similarly, Goldberg seeks to challenge the reductionism in dominant critical accounts of the state that tend to break down in two rather predictable ways: first, the liberal view of the state as a "purely autonomous political realm" distinguishable from civil society and the realm of the economic, as evident in the work of Habermas, Rawls, or Kymlicka; and second, the ongoing legacy of Marxist-inspired accounts (an abiding concern in Racist Culture) in which the state, much like the category of race, is conceived as "epiphenomenal," a reflection of "deeper" underlying determina-

tions, like class relations, the mode of production, or the economy more generally (6). Arguing instead for the relative autonomy of the state and capital, Goldberg points out that while states often occupy a structural position in reproducing capitalist modes of production, states can also represent or mobilize interests antithetical to those of capital.

In short, states—always already racial states—can and do operate according to their own logics. Goldberg explains,

The state has the power by definition to assert itself or to control those (things) within the state . . . [and] the power to exclude from state protection. In these senses, the modern state has readily lent itself conceptually to, as it has readily been defined by, racial (and gendered) formation. For central to the sorts of racial constitution that have centrally defined modernity is the power to exclude and by extension include in racially ordered terms, to dominate through the power to categorize differentially and hierarchically, to set aside by setting apart. . . . [These are] processes aided integrally by . . . the law and policy-making, by bureaucratic apparatuses and governmental technologies like census categories, by invented histories and traditions, ceremonies and cultural imaginings. (9)

Modern state power is defined by both its monopoly on force and its capacity to categorize, through which it acquires the necessary justification. The state determines who will be protected under the mantle of citizenship and who will remain alien, who will be declared friend and ally and who will be charged an enemy combatant. The social contract tradition—one such "invented tradition" enabling state power—offers Goldberg a key metaphor, not an accurate historical accounting, for engaging state origin, constitution, and legitimation. The very notion of a "contract" and the guarantees upon which it is founded—individual rights, property—underscore a "presumption of voluntarism" that "completely denies the constitution of power and its effects" within certain groups, legitimating the racial and gendered exclusion and exploitation it thus renders invisible (39).
Goldberg's rigorous and nuanced genealogical analysis of social contract theory commences with Hobbes and moves forward to Rousseau, Kant, Marx, Hegel, Mill, and others. The modern state was established, according to Hobbes, to promote peace and social stability in the violent transition from feudal to modern industrial society, a commitment that informs his justification of the Leviathan. In efforts to shore up its necessary façade of permanence and inevitability, the modern state was required to alleviate any challenge to its authority—in the form of war, revolution, anarchy, or chaos.

Enter race. Further refining and expanding his earlier analysis of modernity’s drive to mastery and subjugation, Goldberg asserts that “Race appears in this scheme of things as a mode of crisis management and containment, as a mode mediating that tension, of managing manufactured threats, and of curtailing while alienating the challenge of the unknown” (40). Just as race is invented to defeat disorder and chaos—modernity’s ambivalent other—so too race “stands in for that which the modern state is not, what the state avoids, what it is to keep at bay” (40). Racial states are thus predicated on their capacities to restrict heterogeneity—“taken to inject into the safety and stability of the known, predictable and controllable worlds elements of the unknown, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable”—in the interest of securing political, cultural and racial homogeneity (23).

The modern state’s commitment to racial homogeneity, an unnatural condition invariably achieved through violence, is always understood to intersect with other political, economic, and cultural forces. The Racial State is devoted to richly elaborated and articulate analyses of the multiple ways in which variously configured racial state formations in the E.U., Brazil, the U.S., and South Africa historically conceived, implemented, managed and maintained forms of racial homogeneity—and how they do so at present. Goldberg proposes three historically shifting (though not necessarily superseding) paradigms for defining and thereby producing racial differences—naturalism, marked by the presumption of innate, biological conceptions of difference; historicism, defined by its rejection of biologism and its understanding of racial differences as a result of profound developmental lag described variously as “primitive” or “backward”; and contemporary commitments to state racelessness, which insist simultaneously that race is a politically irrelevant category yet make appeals to universal values and interests allied with whiteness. Differing conceptual definitions of race produce different mechanisms for the achievement of racial homogeneity in the form of states of whiteness—the drive to extermination (the eradication of difference), or assimilation (dissolving difference into sameness), or commitments to colorblindness/multiculturalism (aspirations to race transcendence in the form of universals equated with whiteness). The drive to racial homogeneity reflects an independent state logic that, Goldberg insists, must be taken up relationally with other state projects, like neoliberalism.

In the wake of racial panic spurred by terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, and London, and acts of state terrorism in Palestine, Darfur, Iraq, and Afghanistan; in the midst of headscarf hysteria in Paris and armed vigilante groups “patriotically” patrolling the U.S. border with Mexico; in the growing encampment of the stateless among the fates that await millions of economic migrants and political refugees; and in the aftermath of man-made “natural catastrophes” like Katrina, Goldberg’s nuanced, textured analysis of contemporary state commitments to racial homogeneity and neoliberal economics must be understood as a significant event in the history of race theory.

Goldberg’s latest work, The Threat of Race, brings readers closer still to world politics, war, violence, and death suffered in the name of race. The project was tentatively titled The Death of Race, a provocation meant to draw attention to a deeply disturbing contemporary paradox in which academicians, intellectuals, experts associated with think tanks, and political pundits call for the conceptual “death of race” while at the same time racially produced death—as a result of war, state violence, crippling poverty, famine, disease—grows exponentially. In ongoing efforts to imagine a different analytic vocabulary with a wider global trajectory than
much of the work produced in, and often bounded by, the U.S. context, the current work in progress seeks to unsettle theoretical concepts and modes of analysis that have passed uncritically into the common sense of recent “cutting edge” race theory. Critical of the lack of specificity and the inadequacies that attend the concept of “racialization,” for example, Goldberg has organized his investigation of contemporary racisms in terms of regional configurations in the post-civil rights, post-apartheid era: racial americanization, palestinianization, europeanization, latinamericanization, southernafricanization, and their contemporary implications for challenging the presumption of racelessness (the death of race). Yet, in spite of such precise analytic interventions, one notes as well in this newest writing a different narrative voice, an experimentation in prose style that departs from certain academic protocols (citation, footnotes) in efforts to draw readers’ attention to argument rather than erudition—a genuine act of persuasion in an academy often taken with performance. While sacrificing none of the rigor and depth characteristic of his work, this new book challenges scholars existentially untouched by contemporary global crises because insulated, politically and intellectually, in what Susan Buck-Morss uncomfortably calls “theoryworld.”

The Threat of Race boldly and bravely addresses the most combustible issues of the day—the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the U.S. led war in Iraq and Afghanistan (and its “born again racism” at home), the global war on terror, the rise of what Etienne Balibar has called “European apartheid” with the fall of the Berlin Wall—in an academic context where one is increasingly surveilled and harassed for such views. And Goldberg speaks in a public voice, though he has expressed a not unwise concern with what it means to assume the role of the public intellectual to “take center stage in the public and not just the academic theatre” under conditions in which “like any public figure . . . [one] is no longer so clearly in command of [one’s] meaning” (Racial Subjects 111). Identifying the risks of entering the “marketplace of popular policy analysis,” Goldberg exercises discretion in selecting the appropriate media through which to engage public audiences, as he insists that “The power of language gives way, if only silently and subtly, to the language of power, if not to the gaps between language” (111). These risks seem doubly so when one dares to speak the truth of race to power. “Where the subject is race,” he recognizes, “the silences speak louder than words” (111). Yet, at no other time is such risk more necessary—and no other figure more capable of such critical public engagement.

If the popular and critical success of the summer 2005 blockbuster and Academy Award winner Crash is an indication, it may well be the right time for a conversation. Crash gave North Americans a ready metaphor for its encounters with race that simultaneously underscores the existential isolation, loneliness, and despair that have come to characterize postmodern metropolitan life and the intense fear and suspicion with which we regard others. The “cure” for the latter—more segregation, more security—merely exacerbates the symptoms of intense anxiety and insecurity that mark the former, further weakening the body politic. Excising encounters with otherness from our daily repertoire of human interaction, as Goldberg’s analysis of racial homogeneity cautions, only renders us less capable of negotiating differences and more invested in the supposed safety of sameness, more insistent on uniformity, more comforted by conformity—and more contemptuous of strangers. Goldberg’s insight resurrects as it gives greater depth and specificity to Richard Sennett’s influential work on the city and the danger to democratic public life that the intensification of isolation and individualization—of “ghettoization” parading as community—invariably produce:

Modern community seems to be about fraternity in a dead, hostile world; it is in fact all too often an experience of fratricide. Furthermore, these terms of personality which govern face-to-face relationships in a community are likely to cut down the desire of people to experience those jolts which might occur in a more unfamiliar terrain. These jolts are necessary to a human being to give him that sense of tentativeness about his own beliefs which every civilized
person must have. The destruction of a city of ghettoes is both a political and a psychological necessity. (296)

Exploding the myth of the colorblind society in its exploration of post-9/11 Los Angeles, director Paul Haggis seeks to make visible the social costs of racist expression and exclusion, the fratricidal tendencies of failed fraternity. But those "crash moments," to invoke Oprah's unfortunate idiom for racist encounters—isolated incidents, rendered in privatized terms—believe the "everyday" nature of racism and the ongoing experience of inequality structured into one's social, economic, political, and cultural subjective location (see Essed). Moving beyond the black/white racial dichotomies that overwhelm contemporary urban representations, the film paints Latinos, Chinese, Persians, whites, and blacks with much the same strokes. With few exceptions, everybody is angry, undone by difference, a little racist. What seems like an invitation to moral outrage, self-scrutiny, and critical accountability dissolves into melancholic contemplation of humanity's sound and fury, set to the tinkling of a new age musical score—a trauma witnessed and then gently covered over, like the blanket of white snow that drapes the LA nightscape in the mystical urban montage with which the film concludes. Such representations and the identifications and investments they mobilize vividly attest to what Goldberg calls "the paradoxes of racism":

Never again, and yet again and again, even now, never more so before our very eyes. Seeing but not; seeing but not believing; believing but believing at once its not my problem, our problem; seeing and believing but frozen from action, too distracted or busy or unconcerned to do anything about it; acting but not in concert. (Threat n.p.)

Goldberg's eloquent commentary carries both insight and warning, echoing with chilling appropriateness the powerful conclusion of Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism:

Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result. This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian; its hallmark is impotence insofar as power always comes from men acting together, "acting in concert" (Burke); isolated men are powerless by definition. (474)

It is against such horrible potentialities, increasingly perceived as inevitabilities in a contemporary context saturated with violence, terror, and authoritarian tendency, that David Theo Goldberg's body of work has passionately committed to both challenge and dissolve.5

Susan Searls Giroux: Before becoming a philosopher, an academic, and one of the world's leading theorists of race and racism, you produced film and video. Your films have been accepted for screening at the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival, and your music videos have been similarly well received; in fact, you produced the first rap video aired on MTV in the early 1980s. Can you talk about that transition, what it means to shift from working with images in a visual culture broadly accessible to various publics, to working in the medium of language, addressing very different, and much narrower, audiences. Do you consider yourself now a writer?

David Theo Goldberg: Thanks. It is delightful to be here, and these are wonderful questions. It makes me think about going back to that moment when I was having to choose between being a philosopher or being an academic intellectual and being a producer of popular culture, of certain kinds of popular culture, both independent and more broadly popular. So it was a moment of personal struggle between thinking about forms of expression: engaging in a newly emerging form, new popular modalities, or
those that were narrowly tailored, in this instance not just to an intellectual audience, but at the end of the 1970s, beginning of the 80s, to a narrowly philosophical, and indeed analytically philosophical audience. I was trained in my earlier philosophical formation in a continental modality and then in my graduate PhD program in a quite analytically driven program, though with some interesting non-analytic interlocutors. And so I was struggling over those two modalities and the types of expression that are germane to each, the one visual and the other textual, almost exclusively (although I was looking at some visual materials inflecting my dissertation about race and racism). The one modality concerned itself with invoking a way of appealing to very large audiences through a new medium, first independent film which wasn’t so new obviously, but then the new medium of music videos being funded after all by large, corporate recording companies fairly early on, just after that midnight program—Midnight Videos I think it was, on ABC, or whatever it was called—on the one hand and then later on MTV after the Michael Jackson moment when he threatened to withhold Thriller because of the lack of diversity on MTV staff and in its programming. So I was thinking about appealing to those broad audiences engaged with very talented people who were not for the most part intellectually involved. The first rap video we did, which was the one that aired on MTV initially, was Curtis Blow’s endearing peon to basketball: “basketball,” you know, “we’re playing basketball,” celebrating Dr. J. and Moses Malone. My oldest boyhood friend, Michael Oblowitz, directed it and I produced it. It was a blast. We had these cheerleaders all dressed up, and semi-professional players on the basketball court in a big studio in Queens across the East River. And there I was, quite absurdly in retrospect, carrying around something like $7000 in cash in my pocket dishing out bits of income to people working on the set. I was thinking about the forms of expression that would appeal to a very general audience, an MTV audience, on the one hand, and writing a very serious dissertation that was narrowly constrained, where the language was quite precise—thinking about Immanuel Kant’s engagement with the question of race and the question of anthropology in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, thinking about Hume’s relation to these questions prior to Kant, thinking about the role of John Stuart Mill and the formation of Empire, and having to convince a quite skeptical analytic professoriate that these were legitimate questions to be asking at the beginning of the 1980s in a discipline and a field of moral theory, social-political philosophy that really for the most part had not engaged these questions explicitly at all. And so I turned more and more to writing—and I do consider myself, among other things, a writer, more so and more exclusively now than a visual producer, a producer of visual materials, although increasingly I’ve gone back to the internet in order to mine, produce and especially to establish the digital infrastructure for archiving, distributing, and searching visual materials.

More recently I have found myself increasingly thinking about modes of expression. What are the modes of expression in a largely textual form, although maybe mediated and supplemented by visual materials, that can be engaged to speak to broader rather than very narrowly academic audiences. So increasingly I’m foregoing footnotes, for example, foregoing having to legitimate myself by sewing myself into sets of discourse, sets of intellectual engagement, speaking to the intellectual questions of the day, not feeling that you have to give yourself the imprimatur, the authority of other people’s textualities. And so how do you engage a way of writing, a rhetoric? What are the choices you have to make to convey referentiality, on the one hand, and yet on the other write in a fluid way, write in a way that has a poetics, write in a way that is engaging as a reading of a text that moves people along in an argument and, at the same time, as they’ve been brought along, bring them up short with a newness, with a subtlety, with a depth. How do you write, perhaps at the surface, in a facile way and yet even as you’re writing in that facile way at the surface you’re constantly invoking a form of expression that causes people to stop and reflect, to think, to think things anew, that provides an engagement around the subtlety of thinking? How, for example, do you take up references, as you might in film, or even music videos, where you look at a lot
of previously produced visual materials in order to be referential in this visual modality and those modes of referentiality become embedded and indexed in your form of visual expression? How do you pull up textually, verbally, conceptually modes of referentiality that in the irreference refer to other things but you don't simply stop at that point of referentiality? How do you move the temporality of your argument so that it is not just about identifying a concept that will always be identified with you and that's all there is to it? So I am concerned with that relation between conceptuality, on the one hand, which is not unimportant as providing anchors, to, on the other hand, your argument? It has struck me increasingly how through the 1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century so much of what gets produced is indexed simply: you identify a thinker with a concept. You know, Bauman is about pastoralism, or Stuart Hall is about articulation, etc. etc. and you completely forego an engagement, a broader engagement with the depth of the argument, forego or forget or elide or pass by an engagement with how the argument is positioning one with respect not just to other texts but to the object of analysis, where one loses a sense of the object of analysis, the social object that's being analyzed.

So I've been struggling increasingly over the years, but especially in my more recent work, trying to pull those things together, finding a hook that pulls people in, a poetics that moves people along in reading my work and yet a set of anchors that pulls the reader down into the depths of an argument where there is, hopefully, greater nuance and greater potentiality. And I think that goes back, in a variety of ways, to my film-making days, both in thinking about my work and in the administrative aspects, in my administrative work. How I was able to run a film company in New York City while writing a dissertation and teaching four courses a week or whatever it was and how to pull those things together became quite indicative of a way of trying to do creative work alongside administrative work, which I think has stuck with me all through my administrative career. I think that point marked me quite deeply in a variety of ways, both at the conceptual argumentative level and in the relation between intellectual work and the promotion, through administration, of interesting intellectual engagement.

SSG: Along those lines of imagining that relationship between your youth and your decision to become an academic, in your "Reflections on 'Modernity, Race and Morality," you discuss growing up in South Africa in a "society long turned against itself, a state more concerned with its own 'lore and order' than the social wellbeing of its inhabitants," as against those it would claim as its "citizens." You describe "years of struggle against apartheid on picket lines and around parliament, through the mists of tear gas and protest slogans and closing down the college campus" then moving to the U.S. to attend graduate school in New York City and finding there "Reagan's brand of 'new racism' reeled all about too." "Not quite invisibly," you write, it reveals itself "in the conditions producing both homelessness and homeboys, dramatically differentiated employment rates across race and hypersegregation" (Essed and Goldberg 422). It is against this backdrop that you map the personal and political contexts that informed your transition from youthful activism to graduate school, as well as your decision to write on the "philosophical foundations of racism," which, radically revised, became the basis for Racist Culture. You produced, in short, a comprehensive philosophical archeology of racial conceptualization where none had existed before, as part of your efforts to "throw down a gauntlet to the discipline of philosophy, to challenge its parochialism, its self-possessed denial, its blindness to its own traumatic implication in the history of racist reproductions, its sweeping of its own stench behind that veil of ignorance" (423). Can you talk about why you chose to intervene in what you saw unfolding all around you in Cape Town and then New York in the form of a deeply historical and philosophical treatise on racism, especially as we seem to find ourselves at a time when there is a great deal of suspicion and cynicism about the significance of "academic" interventions in the worldly space of politics. Your own formation as an intellectual seems to suggest a need to rethink
common sense distinctions between theory and practice, the so-called "ivory tower" and the space of "realpolitik."

DTG: Yes, another wonderful question. Let me start with the autobiographical once more and thread back into the conceptual question. I grew up in a middle-to-upper middle class home that became increasingly upper-middle class as I became a teenager, a fairly liberal family in the classic South African sense of liberal. Extended members of the family were engaged in politics from the center to the left, the older members being at the center, in opposition to apartheid, under a very liberally driven sense of what living in South Africa might be as a non-racial society and voted and engaged accordingly in all sorts of ways; the younger members of the family engaged in anti-racist activity of various kinds, campus politics, that to some degree took on life and death circumstances, and then to even more radical elements of the family. There was one person who looked at himself as a mixed race person engaged with other mixed race people in Cape Town and lived out his life and continues to live out his life forty years later in a quite provocative kind of way, refusing to give in to certain aspects of racial politics in South Africa much to the chagrin of the rest of the family, of course. So we have this not quite entire gamut, because the entire gamut would include proto-nationalists and the like, and at the same time, as with almost every family of this ilk in South Africa, there were members of the household, I hesitate for all the obvious political reasons to say quite full members of the family, through domestic labor and engagement who were very much a part of some form of family with whom one was engaged from a very young age, from a very young age. And as I grew up into teenage years, I was taking off from living life on a beach and then going off into townships with friends of my same age and beginning to engage with people not just of one's age but older people in their homes, being invited into their homes in townships, engaging in all kinds of illicit activity, but realizing that there was more than the illicit activity holding you together, that there was a, I'll call it humaneness, in order to avoid the question of humanism, a humaneness that drew us in, drew us together. There were common engagements in politics, common engagements in sports, there were common engagements in thinking about sexuality as one was coming into sexuality, there were common engagements about social life, common engagements about political questions, and it's those things that you realized flew very dramatically and very immediately in the face of apartheid. You were transgressing apartheid as you were doing this, but it also prompted very deep questions about the forms of race denial and human denial with which you were confronted on the most immediate basis.

At the same time, one also has to say that everything in South Africa then—and to some degree now, but certainly then—had a racial dimension to it. I mean, the repression was so deep around questions of race that they could only inevitably pervade every other aspect of social-political human life in both trivial and non-trivial ways. For example, I grew up surfing and would often go surfing, which in apartheid South Africa was an overwhelmingly white activity. You'd come onto the beach promenade by your car would and be changing late in the afternoon, the sun already having set after you come out of the water, and you'd have a towel around you with a Speedo underneath the towel, pulling off a wetsuit in unremarkable ways. I remember one instance—these are trivial instances, but I think they mark something broader about the repressiveness of the society—in which a police captain came up to me and wanted to arrest me for public indecency for changing in the face of little old women walking along the promenade that I might somehow be offending morally. These police interactions were always serious engagements so those forms of repression, I have to say, which are more or less trivial, went along with larger forms of repression having to do with policing the interaction of bodies of different racial categorization and classification. You'd be walking along as a seventeen-year-old smoking a cigarette and you'd be stopped for smoking marijuana, so the forms of invasive-ness were at every level of existence. And as a thinking teenager you begin to question those forms of repression and to realize that they mark and order every aspect of your everyday being.
At the same time, I grew up in a house where I would wake up literally every morning to Robben Island across the bay. It was literally the first view of my morning, every morning of my teenage life and into university life. And so I was faced daily by the question of racially founded privilege and the costs at which it was purchased. This wasn't just about Mandela, although he symbolized something even in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s. It was a matter of the symbolism of a future South Africa that would not be beholden to these forms of repression. That became evident every day you woke up. It was a formative part of your waking experience. I can't say everybody had this experience, or faced this question explicitly. I just happened to be on a hill that overlooked Robben Island. But every time there was a piece of news about somebody dying on Robben Island or in other spaces of incarceration, about Steve Biko being killed in 1977 or forms of political repression like those in 1976 or earlier in the 1972 trade union strikes and so on, these issues became more palpable and you couldn't help but make a stand in whatever direction you were making a stand. Even if you refused to take an explicit stand on these things, it was a stand, right? Once you went to university, these questions were forced upon you. There was a space in which, certainly for young white people, the question was most palpably put. For black people in the townships it was more immediate and more direct post-1976: the ungovernability, the making ungovernable of black urban space; the very form of lived experience became the modality for those of us that were more privileged and able to go to largely, if not almost exclusively, white universities. That privilege itself came into question, and so there was a large politics around that. At the same time, both as an undergraduate and in my first formative graduate degrees in Cape Town before I came to New York, debates in the social sciences and the humanities, in which I was being schooled, were very largely around the class/race question in the wake of Althusser. There were debates around interrogation, debates around repressive and ideological state apparatuses, on the one side, and Fanon on the other—not so much Black Skin White Masks, actually, which became a text du jour of the late 1970s and early 1980s northern hemisphere academic formations, but it was really Wretched of the Earth, a revolutionary text, and A Dying Colonialism and The Algerian Revolution. Those texts spoke to us about the possibility of a Zimbabwe (thinking back from this moment now where it's not a free society) becoming a free society, or Mozambique throwing off at least initially colonial repression—those were the palpable expressions of the day. So when I left South Africa in 1977 and arrived in New York in 1978, it was that set of experiences I brought with me.

Going into a graduate program in philosophy, as I said, consumed with questions of philosophy of language, consumed with questions of the philosophy of science, epistemology, very traditional philosophical questions, I began looking around to see that at the same time it was a moment when Said had just published Beginnings and was about to publish Orientalism. I sat in a class of his on Gramsci and Althusser at Columbia. I was searching around in the corpus of philosophy and that form of philosophy to which I was being subjected as a graduate student in order to come to terms with a project that would speak to me, and that I could speak to. That struggle over race and class had stayed with me, those debates in the early to mid-1970s in South Africa were very reductionistic; they were concerned with Althusser, to use Foucault's term, as the counterhistory within the Marxist corpus, which is why it was seized on within the context of South Africa in the 1970s. It was the reductionism of a Harold Wolpe, of racism as an ideological formation, the force of which was always driven by class and the form of class would define the form of racial arrangement that was being expressed. Having grown up in that milieu and having that set of experiences I spoke to in my earlier response, this always struck me; from the moment I confronted it, it struck me as a weak response regarding the force of race, that race seemed a much thicker form of engagement on both sides of the divide than class reductively was able to speak to.

SSG: It functions as an evasion, actually.
DTG: An evasion, yes. To some degree the material conditions were not unimportant of course; they set the limits of possibility, but they certainly didn’t define the self-determinations around questions of race and how one might speak to that. When I was confronted with addressing a project that would become a dissertation project, I began looking around and there was very little there, literally no dissertations in this milieu about race. There was a bit of analytic work around race and morality that really had to do with race, from the liberal point of view, as an irrelevant category. So I began a kind of archaeology, trying to trace the philosophical and intellectual considerations out of which this commitment to race as a morally irrelevant category emerged from the likes of Hobbes onwards and that then became, in a way, much influenced by Foucault, a genealogy of modernity. So you can begin to see in what became Racist Culture the emergence of liberalism, forms of liberalism, as a centerpiece of philosophical modernity in my thinking.

SSG: I’m going to stop you there because this anticipates my next question.

DTG: Okay, just an anecdote that bears out the force and pervasiveness, you might even say the hegemony, of this philosophical condition vis-à-vis race pervasive in the academy of the time: Gerry Cohen, who is, and certainly was in the early 1980s, writing very effectively about Marx, one of the analytic Marxists and in part a critical analytic Marxist writing about world possession, came to give a talk in the graduate program in which I was being educated and at the reception we started talking. He asked me, “So what are you working on?” And I said, “The philosophical foundations of racism.” He clearly balked; he was taken aback, and blurted out, not unsympathetically, “You mean racism has philosophical foundations?” It was that, not just ignorance, blindness, the veil of ignorance, you might say, to push the point, that I think was an expression of a much broader, wider, deeper set of evasions, as you called them.

SSG: Right, a refusal to know.

DTG: An absolute refusal. These questions were not even on the map, and an excavation of the philosophical history that produced them was really starting up. This was pre-Skip Gates’ Race, Writing and Difference, pre-Racial Formation; it was just at the time that Stuart Hall was writing “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance.” Policing the Crisis was not being widely read yet even though it had been written three to four years earlier. Orientalism was just taking hold of peoples’ imagination, you might say imaginative geographies, so it gives you a sense of how deep this was. I wasn’t alone, I have to say. I quickly found a group of African American philosophers who became very influential in my being socialized into a set of philosophical debates; there was a society that was formed that included Cornel West, Howard McGary, Tommy Lott, Angela Davis, and so on that became very instrumental in opening up the American Philosophy Association to engaging questions like this. If you attend an APA meeting today you see all kinds of panels being engaged along these lines that would not have been possible without this moment in the early 1980s.

SSG: One of the most striking achievements of Racist Culture (and a thematic upon which you further elaborate in The Racial State) is its substantive analysis of philosophical liberalism’s investment in the discourses of race and racism, locating its conceptual appeals in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Bentham and Mill, to name but a few examples. The paradox of liberal modernity, you argue, is this: “As modernity commits itself progressively to idealized principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as it increasingly insists upon the moral irrelevance of race, there is a multiplication of racial identities and the sets of exclusions they prompt and rationalize, enable and sustain. Race is irrelevant, but all is race. The more abstract modernity’s universal identity, the more it has to be insisted upon, the more it needs to be imposed” (6). It is an irony that extends from the Enlightenment to contemporary calls for
colorblindness, a commitment that was supposed to usher in a post-racist era. Why has this so emphatically not been the case?

DTG: The commitment to colorblindness, again if one traces its genealogy, really emerges in the U.S. case, post-abolition and certainly post-Reconstruction. You see the first explicit expression of it in Judge Harlan’s minority dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, where he quite explicitly uses the notion of colorblindness and is dismayed by the necessity, what he perceives as the necessity, of the majority to invoke the possibility of segregation as the maintenance of white supremacy and white dominance in America. He explicitly says that whites will have nothing to worry about if you level the playing field in the sense of making it competitively possible for people to compete because whites already have such a leg up and would continue to have such a leg up. I think one has to trace in this way the contemporary moment around colorblindness and the resort to colorblindness, the Racial Privacy Act in the California instance, which of course has a broader resonance. The very language of The Racial Privacy Act gives it away. It’s not “the race death act,” so to speak, or “the race erasure act,” or “the getting rid of race act”; it is the privatization of race act; it’s the neoliberal project. It’s privatization, much as everything else is being privatized; it’s the undertaking to protect the private expression of racism, to protect it from government intervention, even as the state is being dismantled or repositioned in relation to the neoliberal project. So I think the short answer has to be the way in which the project of colorblindness in its very forms of articulation is deeply embedded in the project of neoliberalism and, in short, in privatization, not just in the United States, one I’m mapping now in this new project, *The Threat of Race*, but one sees its articulation differently and variously in Europe, in post-apartheid South Africa, in Latin America, as much as you see it in the United States. This project of colorblindness is really the protection, the privatization of discrimination, of segregation, of hypersegregation. You see it most palpably in the Katrina moment, which brought it to light, allowed us to catch a glimpse of it, if only fleeting, for it will be covered over quickly. It is the privatization of racism protected from government restriction, so that racism becomes untouchable, which is what I take the project to be.

This is tied up with another deep question, having to do with the comfort people feel in a question around heterogeneity and homogeneity, the comfort people take and think they feel naturally. Of course, it’s not natural, but they think they feel naturally at ease in “being around their own kind,” in living with those of their own culture, in choosing, they think freely and of their own making, to exclude those they define as not belonging to whatever patria that they’ve been given over to being part of. So I think, as I said, the short version of a response would be the relation of colorblindness to the neoliberal project and then tracing its genealogy through its long formation. It’s interesting that from *Plessy*, in 1896, through the end of the Second World War there wasn’t a great deal expressed, visibly expressed, of the notion of colorblindness. There is one popular book about this by a woman, Margaret Halsey, in the 1940s, just after the Second World War, really thinking about race in relation to the Second World War and the soldiers of color being excluded from dance halls and things of that kind, why this was so, and calling for a project of colorblindness—the title of her book, after all—as a response. So I think that its real roots other than Harlan are post-Second World War and are tied to the unfolding definition of a neoliberal project that gathers momentum from that point on and really becomes explicit with Ronald Reagan and Thatcher.

SSG: Returning to that question of homogeneity, I have two questions in mind that work together and we can take them up piece by piece. The body of your work thus far reflects an abiding interest in the co-constitutive relationship between modernity and race (as well as a challenge to conceptualizations of race and racism as pre- or anti-modern and archaic). It reflects, too, an indebtedness to Zygmunt Bauman, whose account of modernity similarly stresses order and ordering systems, as opposed to the more typical emphases on industrialism, capitalism, secularism, or
democracy. Though the logic of ordering is clearly implicit in these other modern endeavors, I'm curious about why this particular focus for you.

Also, you suggest, again following Bauman, that modernity's insistence on order necessarily entails preoccupation with disorder, and an attendant ambivalence toward those groups perceived to be disruptive or destructive of ordering ambition and design. (In European modernity, for him, the archetypical outsiders, the group least "like us" were Jews.) Heterogeneity is marked as a problem or a pathology. In your work, the concept of homogeneity has become, by your own description, a kind of idée fixe; it is a driving force in the construction of a cohesive social identity and moral community, in modern state formation, in the racialized postmodern city. Can you further explain why the artifice of homogeneity, in denial or repressed, continues to hold such significance?

So the first is about why the question of order and then why homogeneity.

DTG: Well, the question of order of course comes out of my abiding concern with the question of modernity and the way in which modernity is marked increasingly from earlier than the eighteenth century but really becomes palpable and explicit in the eighteenth century with concerns in disciplines like biology and natural philosophy with classification schemes, on the one side, but also mark the emergence of state bureaucracies that become part of the modern form of governance again explicated in the eighteenth century. In the latter instance the concerns circulate around modes of insurance, actuarial tables, around record making and keeping—the taking of censuses, modern censuses, which really is a project that takes root from about the mid-eighteenth century onwards in various societies, whether the British in India or the U.S., as it becomes an independent state and so on. So this focus on classification and order—the two of course go together—had very explicitly to do with the way in which this form of modernity and modern governmentality define themselves. The classification schemes take on an explicitly racial dimension at that moment in time, both zoologically—as I say, natural philosophy—and governmentally. And it's that confluence, that relationship, between articulating the project of Man (capital M), on the one hand, and articulating the project of ordered governance, on the other, that is sewn together through various forms of racial project. This is the moment of explicit emergence of liberalism as a project. You know, Locke is not a liberal philosopher; he's a pre-liberal philosopher, very influential in the late seventeenth century in prompting the emergence of the liberal project as an explicit project, as a self-consciously explicit project, in the eighteenth century running together in exactly the same voice and through the increasing proliferation of racial self-definition, what we might call the philosophy of life with the philosophy of governance. There is an interesting triangulation between life's governance as an individualizing project and liberalism as a governing project at the level of the social where autonomy of populations is circumscribed by those taken to have rationality. Tracing these things together, it became obvious to me that they constituted a complex unified project. It was both the explicit and the implicit, the loud and silent expressions of this multi-leveled project as they worked in and through various societies, their opening up and closing down at various moments in time, that became important in thinking about modernity. It was thinking these things together that brought me to the question of homogeneity and heterogeneity.

It became evident—I mean, one of those moments where one thinks: how can one not see this—that through the naturalization of race, through the naturalization of forms of gender and class, through the naturalization of forms of social arrangement that were at once inclusionary and exclusionary, modulated palpably through expressions of race, that the abiding presumption of social theory throughout this period was that somehow it's a natural thing to want to be with one's own, that somehow this is a natural condition of human existence, that a conserving stasis is the modern condition, that stasis is a given from which when we take leave this constitutes a rupture, something radical, an excision, something that undoes
stability and order. So homogeneity seemed to me to be the abiding assumption here. When you question homogeneity you seem irrational, or unduly provocative, or revolutionary, where revolutionary is not necessarily a good thing. And one who questions in this way would be cast asunder in order to save homogeneity. Now clearly racial expression, racial formation, racial articulation, racial arrangement become a "natural," really a naturalizing expression of this presumption.

As soon as I gave a moment's thought to it, this expression struck me as palpably wrong on historical grounds. Human beings have always moved; put two people in villages twenty kilometers apart, and somehow folks will be wanting to find out what's going on over there; when you're told not to go there, you go there. That's what kids do: they're told, "don't go there, don't go play with those kids" and they want to find out what's wrong with those kids and they wander over there. "Don't marry into that family." Of course, it doesn't always work this way, but curiosity about those things that are unknown to us is in part what has driven human beings. The epistemological drive is a function of this, you might say. And so thinking about the question of heterogeneity involves thinking about translation in the broad sense, not just linguistic translation but also cultural translation. It involves thinking about the question of engagement, about the question of producing a range of changeable social forms for human beings. It involves undoing, trying to de-anchor the question of belonging, which is after all, as I've pointed out in various places, a confluence of "being" and "longing." So this involves not just focusing on being: it's not just that condition of stasis, of being with; it has to do also with a romantic imaginary that is not bound by "being." This then drives the curious to the unknown, to engage with those you're not expected to engage with, and so on.

I've been pushed by critics to say more about issues of heterogeneity. This requires thinking about the impositions of homogeneity. Homogeneity is a repression; it is a restriction by necessity. And it can only sustain itself through a restriction, through strictures that are imposed, though ordinances that require one to do this and not to do that. It's the only way it can sustain itself. And in that sense it is deeply unnatural.

SSG: *The Racial State* was written, in part, to explode certain shibboleths of modern political theory and Marxist thought but also in defiance of two decades of "culturalism." You boldly assert that concern with racist conditions has "disappeared all too quickly before the drunken diffusion of racial categories, new domains in the name of whiteness studies, race traitorhood, identity claims, and the romance with hybridity. These are the very domains of analysis the culturalist turn of the past two decades has seductively prompted, for better and worse. Liberalism's dance around race relations at mid-century has given way to the infatuation with racial identities in the dying decades of the millennium. The productive possibilities of that turn seem to have run their course. Time, I suggest, to move on" (1-2). In what ways has whiteness studies, for example, proven to be both productive and a red herring? And can you elaborate on what seems like a contradiction—an infatuation with racial identities (in light of the dominant predisposition to derive comfort and security from homogeneity) coupled with an indifference to racist conditions?

DTG: The question of whiteness studies is an important one. In my less generous moment, I've said that at a moment when focus on race by people of color was being licensed as a legitimate set of activities in the academy (it was always a legitimate set of activities in sets of communities; it didn't need anybody else's imprimatur to legitimate it) whiteness studies from the late 1980s on opened a set of possibilities for white guys. And they were largely, at least to begin with, overwhelmingly white guys. Whiteness studies enabled them to have a place at the analytic table that seemed to be closing down for them. That's my cynical response.

At the same time, I have to say that whiteness studies has made very important contributions—not to be too clichéd about it, because this is a slogan that gets used repeatedly—but it has proliferated, it has made almost common sense, certainly in
academic circles, the normativity of whiteness, the way in which whiteness has continued to define the criteria of merit and therefore meritocracy, the ways in which whites have continued (although, interestingly, this is less often pointed out) to control the modes of expression but also institutional life across the board. How many people of color are in the U.S. Senate? How many people of color are in Congress? You can go on and on and on in terms of these institutional indices. Whiteness studies has at least opened up spaces in which to address these questions in very important ways. At the same time, the first person to really address an equally important set of questions explicitly that has been less fashionable—not so much blacks in the white imagination, but whites in the black imagination—was bell hooks’ discussion of “whiteness as a form of terror.” Roediger’s important anthology on the subject followed only some years later.

So I don’t want to belittle the enormous contribution that whiteness studies has made, but there are some worries. The first concerns whether it crowds out at least equally important contributions to questions regarding racisms. How does it operate within institutional life? Does it make it possible quite self-consciously to open up pressing questions? You can’t say whiteness studies is a social movement really, though arguably there was an attempt around the notion of “race traitorhood” to make it a social movement. You have to say this failed rather hopelessly if it was indeed an attempt to make it a social movement, right? For me anti-racist social movements are always about collaboration, always about cross-racial engagements and coalitions, always about cross-class engagements, and the like. And the focus on whiteness doesn’t come close to making that kind of intervention. If it were a social movement, it would be a white social movement, and it’s not unimportant as Malcolm X once pointed out to “go and solve your own problems.” It hasn’t even done that. It certainly has raised some critical elements that have become part of the mix, but little more than that. More importantly or at least equally important is a lesson I long ago learned from Angela Davis, who said in various places—and others have said this too, but I think she said it earlier and louder and more repeatedly than others—that progressive politics always has to be about coalitions across whatever divides there are around issue-driven commitments, not racially driven commitments, not simply gender, not reductively gender, nor class reductive organizations. Coalitions, if they are to be successful and sustained, have to be built around issue-driven politics where broad, progressive, engaged and productive coalitions can come together for those express purposes. If they have an afterlife that remains productive, well and good; if the issues are resolved or to a large degree resolved and the coalition then falls apart and a new coalition emerges around some other progressive arrangement, well and good. That’s how a progressive politics should work. Whiteness studies clearly violates that, call it, political condition, the condition of political progressiveness.

This raises deeper, more serious concerns around its constitutive formation. Who’s it talking to? Who is it talking for? What does it stand for? The second point is a lesson I learned from Henry Giroux (sitting here) some time ago in and around his earlier work related to kids and their education. You can’t be so critical that it refuses people the possibility of seeing themselves, of imagining themselves in a progressive arrangement, in joining a commitment to a set of interventions with other people that, as Cornel West might put it, offers them some hope, not optimism but hope. That is an engagement around, I hesitate to use the word “identity,” but it is an engagement around a set of “commitments,” a word I prefer to “identity” because it makes palpable, it makes obvious, it makes explicit the choices that have to be made, rather than falling back into something that is seemingly there by default. So I think this is a very important point, that certainly in thinking about children one has to provide them with the possibilities of seeing how wise choices can be made, not making the wise choice for them but ordering their lives in such a way that within that ordering, maybe even within a disordering, conditions of possibility are structured so they can see that there are wise choices and unwise choices and that those choices are theirs and not somebody else’s. And whiteness studies belies that possibility, I think.
SSG: I think the alienation effect with some white students is profound, not just for the obvious kind of guilt-producing discourses, but because sometimes it’s so at odds with their own lived experiences. You talk about the concept of white privilege in the context of a society that is rapidly deindustrializing, and middle class students are falling to the way side. And then I think, too, that rhetorically it poses an answer that is impossible, which is basically to give up privilege, to give something away.

DTG: Exactly, that’s a very good point. If whiteness is, if nothing else, a set of privileges, then you’re asking them to give up what they’re used to living with. It’s something of a lost cause. And there are privileges some whites don’t always have. I’m more moved by a kind of double definition: one about whiteness as a class position where it is not necessarily tied—which is not to say it’s not tied but when it’s tied, it’s tied contingently—to real human beings whose phenotype or cultural formation is of one kind or another, but it speaks to a class position that people of different phenotypes can enter or not enter, can assume or not. You can be phenotypically or culturally black and enter that class position of whiteness and be privileged in certain kinds of ways, even if deferentially in relation to white people entering that privileged position, that class position called whiteness. It gives more, you might say, velocity; it gives more openness to falling in and falling out of the condition of whiteness that is not so reified. So that is one thing. The second definition, which Ruthie Gilmore has made a great deal of, and I think in interesting ways, is a definition of racism as the foreshortening of life and life’s possibilities. I’ve often—maybe exclusively—spoken of racism as forms of exclusion, but they are forms of exclusion from the resources and sets of possibility in which life would be extended were it not for those forms of racism. Racism then is related to a necropolitics, constitutively, and I think that’s very important. So it’s thinking those two things together, and whiteness studies really hasn’t done that. I think there are more generative ways of thinking the relation of restriction, exclusion, and the foreshortening of life and life’s possibilities to a necropolitics which to me, in global terms, are more generative than thinking narrowly in terms of what becomes constitutively—I don’t mean this in demeaning ways—a relation to white supremacy.

SSG: Among your more pointed criticisms of contemporary race theorizing is the general absence of any theory of the state. Given the authority of the state to determine who is granted the rights and protections of citizenship and who is denied, who is friend and who is enemy, as well as its increasing concern with policing borders and managing flows of immigrants, it appears to be a starting absence. At the same time, there is growing ascription to the position that state power is in decline as a result of the emergence of a global economy. Jean and John Comaroff explain that this is “why it is so commonly said, many states are finding it impossible to meet the material demands placed upon them by their citizenry or to carry out effective economic development policies; why few can adequately house, feed, school, and ensure the health of their populations; why even fewer can see their way clear to settling their national debt or reducing their deficits; why only a handful can be confident about the replacement of infrastructure over the medium term; why almost none have the capacity to control their money supply, let alone flows of goods and people; and why a growing number have shown a startling inability to regulate violence” (320). Of course, the authors go on to complicate that picture to a considerable degree, even to muddy the debates further by asserting that the notion of a strong state has always been something of a fantasy. How does your conception of the state intervene in or advance these ongoing conversations?

DTG: Let me just back up for a moment and say one more thing about your earlier question, which is connected to this, about my concern with the ways in which debates in the early 1980s and 90s were so culturalist. Voegelin actually was the first in the 1930s to talk in this way, and even Omi and Winant have a chapter called “The Racial State” in Racial Forma-
tion], so one needs to be fair about this. My concern with the racial state—it started earlier, but I made it self-conscious in the *Racial State*—was to try to open up spaces in which the relation between materialist condition and the culturalist turn could be brought together in a productive form of analytics. So that was an explicit concern of mine and to do it by thinking about the way in which the state and culture were implicated in and with each other. The little book by David Lloyd and Paul Thomas by that title was quite productive in that sense and helped my thinking. So I did want to think about the state in this more complex way, at the same time also thinking about the state, that it was—the modern state—constitutively formed and fashioned through race in a way in which state theory almost exclusively made absent. When I began rereading the state theory literature, I was stunned at how absent it was. So just to take one name, Bob Jessop can write a 500 to 600 page book on state formation and state capital and have only one sentence literally on ethnicity and nothing else. So clearly it wasn’t just an absence of talking about race; it was an absence of thinking the state constitutively in relation to race, which seemed to me basic to the modern project, particularly the modern liberal project. The neoliberal project offers another turn in this formation, and this goes back to the question of privatization. It’s often been said that the neoliberal project is out to undo the state, and I think to some degree that’s obvious and right. So Grover Norquist can declare that he wants so to shrink the state that he can drown it in the bathtub, and I think that slightly disingenuous.

**SSG:** Certainly, especially as it grows and grows.

**DTG:** Exactly. It is shifting the priorities of the state, shifting its priorities of materialization, institutionalization, and in particular, most importantly, of who the state is *for*. In the post-civil rights moment (I mean this almost literally), for the Right, the state came to be seen as for people of color. Hence the attack on affirmative action, hence the attack on welfare, hence the recriminalization of populations of color, hence the warehousing of black people—the emergence at the same time of new projects of making racial populations in the name of colorblindness. So you find here that contradiction between refusing race as a state project and reinscribing race as a personally chosen project, which of course again is a state project because the state shapes the conditions of possibility. And so the attack on the state is an attack on that form of the state that is identified in, expressed in, explicitly racial terms. The attack on the state accordingly is seen as an attack on the state servicing black folk, as the largest employer of blacks, as making possible affirmative action, as enabling “welfare queens” as they might put it, as not being tough on crime. All these things do not just have a deep or any racial dimension; they are being defined in explicitly racial terms. So there’s a shift in the prioritization of the state as it’s being shrunk. That form of the state which the Right is against is being shrunk. So two things are going on: resources are being placed largely in the military and in tax givebacks that service what I define structurally as whiteness, on the one hand; and on the other, really, through these tax givebacks to wealthy people this makes it possible for privatized interests to define what heretofore had been the privy of state formation. Again, Katrina is a moment in which this becomes palpable. One sees it in the sense that FEMA can’t step up to the plate because it doesn’t have the resources to deliver the goods in a timely moment. So what do you have? You have the largest charity-giving undertaking in the country’s history—whatever it was, $500 billion, whatever the staggering figures are. Why is the state not ready to mobilize those resources to make available to people who are at dire risk, who are losing their lives, who are put under the most horrendous conditions in a largely, overwhelmingly black city in the South? So you see there the shift from public to private, the interests through the state being rerouted into palpable commitments to say, “Okay, we’re going to fund this. We’re not going to fund that. We’re going to disperse black people, but we’re not going to bring them back to have a majority black city, electing representatives who represent their interests,” and so on. I think the moment of Katrina makes palpable, makes evident exactly that shift, which is why it was
SSG: We’re going to come back to Katrina in a moment. In The Racial State, you note that “Until the late 1970s racial theorizing in the critical tradition ha[s] been dominated by Marxist interventions.” You underscore as significant the contributions of Stuart Hall, who “first demonstrated the importance of notions like ‘articulation,’ ‘societies structured in dominance,’ ‘hegemony,’ and the historical contingencies of ‘race formation’ and ‘racializing’ for thinking about race.” Like Hall, a major trajectory of your work has been concerned to challenge much of the conceptual baggage Marxism has brought to race theorizing. Building on Hall’s insights, you exposed in Racist Culture a kind of theoretical reductionism in the tendency to conflate the history of racisms with the history of capitalism, and you asserted the limits of understanding racism as simply a mechanism for class division and exploitation.

More recently, in The Racial State, you advance a theory of the state missing (ironically) even from Hall’s Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order, rejecting its often epiphenomenal status in much Marxist-inspired thought, as well as the division between state and civil society fundamental to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, even the distinction between public and private central to modernist political theory. You also complicate in very interesting ways Althusser’s notion of interpellation, of subject formation in relation to the state, of state repression, in favor of a theory of governmentality. One of the fruitful consequences of this revision is a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the militarization of everyday life, especially in the States. In contrast to Althusser’s distinction between repression and ideology, you suggest that “the military is no longer simply, if it ever properly could be conceived as, an exclusively repressive state apparatus. It plays also a more or less defining role for state socialization in regimes of racial patriarchy” (100). In other words, far from an imposition, militarism offers a site of active identification, of self-making—those “commitments” you spoke of earlier. Can you expand on this crucial insight, engaging the ways in which the cultures of everyday life are both reflective of and implicated in the processes of militarization—from video gaming to JROTC in high schools, to the paramilitarizing of the police, even to the militarizing of emergency response—whether a natural catastrophe like Katrina or a pending flu pandemic.

DTG: Terrifically interesting question. The first thing I guess I want to say about militarization is that in less noticed ways (although as soon as one points to it, people say “yes, of course”) militarization is not simply about institutions that provide or don’t provide access to populations, to segments of populations. Really, it has become—and this probably since the first Gulf War, maybe in more hidden ways even earlier, but certainly it became visible from the Gulf War onwards, and it became absolutely undeniable since then—a regime of truth. It is through both military representatives, or, which comes to the same thing, retired military representatives and through the forms of thinking they mobilize that we are provided the prism through which we have to see the world. It is the index of truth telling of what is the case and what is not the case, of friend and enemy, both internally and externally, of views of who we tolerate and about whom we’re intolerant to. So in very simplistic ways, just to mobilize the thought, one finds on every newscast literally a retired military person, or commentators from the military who are or aren’t retired, who are fueled by that modality. Those modalities of thinking become the arbiters of belief, the warrants of truth, of what is and is not the case, what you can or cannot believe, of available data, perhaps even of what constitutes data, of where you can or cannot go, and so on. This militarization provides the indices of how one is in the world or is to be in the world. And I mean it both as an epistemological claim, constituting in a quite literal sense a regime of truth and, you might want to say, also as an ontology, a way of being in the world that is diffuse and to which we pay deference. You can criticize a war in Iraq, but you can’t criticize the soldiers. They’re defending our
liberty after all. So it becomes a way of defining a liberty that needs to be defended, perhaps because it is not sufficiently perspicacious to others to resonate with them. The claim is not just about the defense of liberty. It is also about the form that liberty takes, what can and cannot be done, who can and cannot do it, where you can and cannot go, and so on. I would suggest that this is a form of regime of truth and a way of being in the world the genealogy of which we can trace to Israel. This way of being in the world is constitutive, and if 9/11 changed anything it made it more prolific, made it more global, you might say. It divided the world between those who buy into this regime of truth and those who oppose it. And therefore it becomes pervasive. It's pervasive not just in the, call it ideological or expressive or discursive, form that video games take; it's pervasive in the very production, the mode of production, of those video games. For example, there is a group that meets weekly in Santa Monica that consists of video game makers in the industry and military people who advise each other on the forms the games should take, on the one hand, in order to make them more realistic so that kids (or kid-like people) can get off on them and, on the other, so that they can be used as training mechanisms and expressions for the military in training their forces. So these have quite deep material purchase on the imaginary in various unpredictable directions.

SSG: In The Racial State, you offer a compelling analysis of the tightly knotted relationship between race and gender within the context of nineteenth century Empire. "Colonizing," you write "was considered man's work, the work of white man's regulative control, to be exact" (90). You describe the colonies as "male clubs of a kind" even, citing Helen Calloway, "a bachelor's paradise." So whereas colonization was about "European men teaching their like to be men, to do men's work, to exercise power and to serve country . . . king and God," white women as "the bearers or symbols of too much moral conscience" were "admitted to the colonies only begrudgingly" (90–91). Without denying the benefits white women enjoyed as a result of European imperial missions, you suggest that "because preexisting forms of gendered domination on both shores of the colonizing ocean, ambivalence surely marked colonial relations between women on each side of the racial divide more deeply than it did the dominant master-slave relation between white men and black people. European women, it is safe to say, engaged in a less totalizing, more tenuous embrace of whiteness than their male counterparts" (91–92).

Thinking about your comments in the context of an expanding U.S imperium, its occupation of Iraq in particular, it seems that women have been all-too-willing conscripts in Bush's War on/of Terror. On the one hand, the population most against the war, and yet most overly-represented in its military ranks, are black women (in fact, you note that a full third of the U.S military is African American). Obviously, there are pressing economic reasons for that. On the other hand, I'm thinking of the two specific women who have come to symbolize a very different reality—National Security Advisor turned Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and, of course, Lindy English, one of the women indicted for her role in the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. I'm wondering if and how you might revise this earlier assessment of the race/gendered dynamics of European imperializing missions to address the racial and gendered complex of today's military?

DTG: Yes, good critique. On the one hand, these are clearly different historical moments, and they produce different forms of possibility, different formations. That's the first point. For the second, let me just start with a point about Israel because I think it's indicative of possibility in this regard. In Israel, every Jewish-Israeli citizen is conscripted into the army for whatever it is—it might be four years, but I think it's three. And what is interesting about that society is that for a good long while now, and it continues to be the case today, one's social standing as one goes through life in society is in quite direct ways—I mean, not completely, but largely—tied to one's experience, positions one had, in the military. The people who are deemed most highly dignified in Jewish-Israeli eyes in the military are air force pilots and those who occupy senior
executive positions in the intelligence service. And if you look at the people who occupy important political positions in the history of Israeli society they are almost all people who went through one of those two, who rose through the ranks to generalships or to other senior ranking in the military. In a society that increasingly defines its regime of truth through militarization, you can expect that women—in terms of making equal claim, and so of having equal access—will have to make its claims through those forms of institutionalization. That's the first point. I don't want to make too much of that point, but I think part of what you see is in relation to that. Whether straightforwardly in the military or militarization or whether it's through those forms of political engagement with the military—the national security advisor, Secretary of State, ultimately candidate for the President of the United States—the trajectories are deeply tied to forms of militarization, whether directly and explicitly within the narrow institutionalized life of the military or through its politicization of certain points of standing. So I think I've begun to revise my analysis in something like those ways to—as you say—complicate the conditions of possibility at work. On the flip side, I think one shouldn't lose sight of the fact that terrifically progressive and productive forms of not just critique but social mobilization, social movement, have come out of women's movements. I think of women in Argentina. I think of the role of women in South Africa. This, of course, can go in a variety of ways. I was, as Cornel West might say, hopeful without being optimistic that a form of resistance might emerge in relation to expansive imperialisms of the kind we've been witnessing more recently that possibly could emerge out of mothers, women, young students on campus who didn't want to be conscripted—Cindy Sheehan being an obvious case in point. On U.S. campuses, even at the University of California, I've seen, very explicitly, men wearing military uniforms showing up on campus starting to try to recruit when recruitment is down and they're trying to meet their quotas. At moments I've wanted to go up and shake the guy and say if you recruit a person are you—Truth in Advertising! A different kind of regime of truth—actually telling them that they might not finish their degrees because they might be dead or deranged before they can come back to finish their degrees when you're recruiting them into the military?

SSG: Not to mention that there has been dramatic revision in how much money is actually provided. I'm assuming that in the University of California system the money may cover only a fraction of the tuition. So, yes, truth in sentencing.

DTG: You're right to push me to want to reformulate in a more careful, more nuanced way how militarization works across gendered lines.

SSG: Another question about Iraq and Katrina. I want to go back to your comments about advancing neoliberal agendas both at home and abroad. It seems that the U.S. is facing two crises in the Gulf: Iraq and Katrina. Writing in the aftermath of the devastation in New Orleans and Mississippi, you assert in an Open Democracy op-ed, "(W)hacked to pieces: Deva-stating America" that "New Orleans is Iraq come home." It's a startling and profound insight. Can you elaborate on the linkages you see between these two moments?

DTG: Yes, let me start with an anecdote because I think it makes once again evident the way in which these things become linked. There was a report a couple of months ago, a rather chilling report, that the very contractors who have served time as a security detail in Iraq have shown up as a security detail in New Orleans, paid for by the wealthiest private businessman in the city. His name escapes me, but he's a well know figure who will play a very prominent role in the reconstruction of New Orleans, no doubt. Perhaps I shouldn't use that term "reconstruction" so much as the "redirection" of New Orleans. These men have been employed by him as his security detail to guard his estate, with the clear agreement of local police and the local national guard. These mercenaries took over a set of apartments in the French Quarter,
throwing out people's furniture. Carrying live ammunition, they responded to some shooting that had broken out by shooting back, I think wounding someone. This is a very chilling report about privatization, and I think this anecdote ties together very clearly the mode of production in relation to Iraq, the privatization of some of the elements of securing politicians, of securing commercial activity in and through private means, and the privatization of those functions in a homeland city, to cut to the chase. In that sense, I wanted to make it quite literal that New Orleans was Iraq come home.

The second sense I think in which one can begin to spell this out is in precisely the way in which the defunding of certain elements of the state has an effect on securing the city in the wake of the hurricane, or more generally the securing of the state in the face of natural disaster. This has to do with the way in which certain populations are targeted and are presumed to be criminalized. Here, privatized interests are defining the possibilities—the institutional and reconstructive possibilities—for in this case a U.S. city, in other cases the U.S. "homeland" more generally. And they are doing it fueled by public funding, whether via tax breaks or through tax write offs, through uneven tax refunds or through more direct forms of redirected state funding—money in the treasury or money borrowed into the treasury, money that can then be redirected for a project that hasn't necessarily been signed off on by anybody, let alone by publics. So it's those forms that are tied into my earlier analysis regarding neoliberalism and the privatization of race.

I think that there is a further extension that we are witnessing over here. There's been a long history of the laboratory elsewhere of forms of deeply racial practice being imported; once perfected elsewhere, it is put to work under local conditions. And I think you're seeing a version of this being played out before our eyes in the redirection of New Orleans as a majority white city, represented by white politicians, funding reconstruction projects with public money for private interests. I think all of that is what we're going to be witnessing in the next couple of years.

SSG: Which leads me to my next question. Your forecast for the future of New Orleans is troubling. You write, "The rebuilding of New Orleans will be instructive too. A city with no residents for the foreseeable future, it will be turned into Disneyland for the oil industry where the racial poor will not be welcomed back. . . . The working class will service the oil rich and worry free. The pollution will be rendered invisible in landfills and waterways once again to afflict the most vulnerable. A new sports stadium supporting privately owned sports teams valued at hundreds of millions of dollars each will be sponsored by public revenues. Mardi Gras will be turned from the conviviality of an organic urban celebration to the plasticity of tourist fare. New Orleans spirit reduced to the cloned parades of Mickeys and Minnies." This is an image of the apartheid city returned in the form of sanitized Disney escape, a product of informalized processes of free market "choice" and what you have recently called "born again segregation" ("Racial" 100). It is an image of the city that has been a longstanding preoccupation throughout your work, from your discussion of race and urban location in Racist Culture to your latest project The Threat of Race, where you describe a process of "racial Americanization" in which "homogenized apartness is taken as the deracialized norm, the assumed, the natural, the given"; and "integration, or at least desegregation, comes over as unnatural, literally absurd, and irrational in the prevailing order of things, requiring intervention by the state at the cost of liberty."

There has been a great deal of thought recently devoted to the problem of "distance and diminishing duties," to borrow one of your phrases from Racist Culture, in relation to the ethical fallout of extraterritorialized power, the capacity of capital to take flight while populations remain immobilized, bound(ed) to locality. You are concerned here with the diminished sense of civic responsibility and social justice that segregation inevitably reproduces. Can you address the consequences of this for a country nominally committed to democracy, liberty, equality?

DTG: Yes, in short. Obviously, a divided country, a country
segregated along forms of classification that are racially driven, a
country that has reconstituted itself again and again through racial
division of this kind will be invested in delimiting those forms of
coalitional politics about which I spoke earlier. It will be concerned
to undo, to restrict, to make impossible, the development of
coalitions of the kind you saw during the Civil Rights Movement, of
the kind of you saw during Reconstruction, of the kind you saw
certainly in the anti-Apartheid movement even in a country like the
United States. And so it's another piece you're pointing to within
particularly urban formations out of which those social movements
usually emerge, another piece of neoliberal privatization, of defining
racism as a habit of the heart, of individualized preference, and
therefore individualized preference schemes, of choices that indi-
viduals make, not choices that are structured by social arrange-
ment, by predefined state possibilities and impossibilities, and so
on. And so I think it a quite pessimistic sense of democracy, liberty,
equality. At the very least, you can say that it is a country that in
repeatedly committing people to freedom is committing them to a
freedom to die. In contrast to the contrast Foucault cleverly
identifies between “Making Live or Letting Die” and “Letting Live
and Making Die,” really in the nexus between those two Foucauldian
expressions, is the New Hampshire slogan, “Live Free or Die.” Live
free, this enjoins, according to our dictate or you will be made to die,
you will be left to die. You won't have an existence worth living. And
I think that if there's a slogan for the Imperium that's it, more than
anything else, “Live free or die.” Actually I'll just say that more than
“Land of the Free and Home of the Brave,” “Live Free or Die” is
probably a more honest expression of the current condition, both
at home and abroad.

SSG: An irony you point out when you talk about Operation
Enduring Freedom. What kind of freedom has to be “endured”?
You have described your new book project The Threat of Race
in general terms as concerned with “the legacies of death and
violence in name of race,” an attempt to unravel the paradox of
mounting racially prompted death and its threats that seems to
have accompanied of late conceptual calls for “the death of race.”
You describe the project as “trying exactly to fashion a different
kind of analytic vocabulary, and wide global trajectory fashioned in
terms of regional configurations—racial americanization,
palestinianization, europeanization, latinamericanization,
southernafrikanization, and their contemporary implications for
thinking about raceless racisms in the present/future.” Your no-
menclature here is explicitly tied to your rejection of the concept of
racialization. Can you elaborate on these concerns?

DTG: This is a question about my current project. It starts from a
growing concern I've had really emerging out of The Racial State,
as I was writing that book. The notion of “racialization” is too easy;
it's used in much too easy a fashion and covers over at least two
related concerns. One is that one cannot always tell, and more
often than not cannot tell, from the context of use of that too easy
invocation of the term “racialization” whether it's being used simply
descriptively or whether it is being used normatively, which is to
say, are we just describing racial conditions, racial arrangements,
racial relationships, racial interactions? Which of those is one
characterizing, and is it simply a description of those conditions or
is there a normative project at work? Are we simply to assume that
every time it's used there's a normative project at work? We can't
assume that there is because even Nightline and other talk shows
now use the term. So clearly such popular programs don't use the
term simply or largely as a normative conception, but simply as a
descriptive conception to say that somehow race, racial conditions,
racial meanings—to use Winant's conception of it—are being
invoked in order to characterize a set of social conditions. This
relatedly leads one to say that there is some ambiguity about
whether one is simply characterizing a set racial conditions or
whether one is characterizing racisms. And if racisms, what are the
forms racisms take? It's often not expressed, as I say more often
than not. I think it really is quite sloppy language; it's a sloppy
analytic language.
SSG: Yes, students are tripping over that term all the time.

DTG: Absolutely. They just invoke it again and again, and we're supposed to say, "Ah yes, we know what you're talking about" when in fact we often don't. So it goes back to my training, in part, as an analytic philosopher, of wanting a rigorous conceptual apparatus but not so rigorous that it squeezes all life out of a set of analytics. So that's the first thing. The second is that racialization is tied very often—it's almost in the same breath—to a so-called critical apparatus that more often than not will say race is an empty category. But if it's an empty category, it does no work at all. It's empty. It gets filled by something else. I've made that claim myself about the emptiness of race, but I've tried to... .

SSG: Well, you say it's "too empty and too full."

DTG: Right, exactly. But it's filled by something that's not itself, so to speak. It's filled by sets of social conditions, it's filled by other modalities, its filled by its articulations with class and gender and other ethnic forms and cultural forms of expression and the like. And so I wanted to make something else do the analytic work for me than race. Hence what I call "racial regionalizations." I wanted a concept that would catch or enable a generalization, a generalizability. Even though trained as a philosopher, I think sociologically, and generalization is in a sense the name of the game: to what degree can you make a generalization from the things you are describing or the data you're collecting about a set of social problems. So I lighted on "regionalization," on a conceptual configuration that is a region because I wanted to make an argument about different regions having different histories of racial expression and racist exclusion, of racist threats and forms of death and delimitation of life, and different state personalities. "Region" seemed to me to do some of that work, the kind of work I want to do in relation to filling in the historical background and its modes of articulation, its expressions in contemporary terms. The regions I've chosen to focus on contingently because I know more about them and because I think they've been particularly pernicious, expressive, and dominant in the historical formation around these questions have been the United States—"americanization" as a form of expression—and "palestinianization" because it is so present with us and yet its racial expression has been so denied. Likewise with Europe for related, though different, reasons, most notably, in the wake of the Second World War. You can't mention the word "race" in relation to human beings in Western Europe other than Britain, but certainly on the mainland. If you do, you'll be looked at either like you're mad or pernicious or, you know, "we don't want to talk to you." It's very difficult to talk about race in relation to human beings in Europe, and I try to explain that. Latinamericanization has a very different mode of expression and a different history leading to that mode of expression. And then there's Southern Africa, in particular South Africa, although resonating more widely in the region. I want to suggest, first, that racial expression and racist exclusion and delimitation differ in each of those regional arrangements, and that racelessness in contemporary terms takes on different expression and modality now in each of those regions, even as there are forms of convergence, moments of convergent expression, intersections, interacting, and intersectioning expressions. I wanted to provide a map of those variations and generalizations and their delimitation, their possibilities, and their traces—and to do it succinctly (quite a project to undertake) as a way of providing a different analytics, a different cut in, coming out of my earlier work, but a different cut, not unrelated to contemporary work of others. And I also wanted to make a point that expression in one region is not simply restricted to that region. For example, to go back to the earlier response regarding Katrina, Iraq and the U.S., there's been an undertaking, post-9/11 to secure the society, call it homeland security, through condomization, through prophylaxis, through a form of circumscription that cuts itself off from everything else. This has taken on various forms of expression that I want to counter. I mean, it's obvious that this sort of social prophylaxis is a doomed project.
SSG: Where you address that specifically, you say, “Where segregation has been privatized along with much else in American life, its logic has come to dominate United States foreign policy.” The upshot is a circumstance that radically undermines the obsessive drive to national security, as you conclude: “Racial Americanization externalized is the fuel of terrorism internalized.” Can you further elaborate on this relationship?

DTG: It’s a similar point I used to make about apartheid South Africa: that as it closed itself down it imploded. It made itself not immune but more available to the very conditions it claimed to be restricting. So it’s not simply a contradictory project; it’s an inherently implosive project. I wanted to ask myself how are these things connected across regions, how do they fuel each other, how was apartheid shored up, for example, by forms of investment taking place elsewhere but also how was it resisted through global configurations, through global coalitions, which were necessary? They were not a sufficient condition, but a necessary condition for the ending of apartheid. Obviously, action on the ground was another necessary condition. These things came together in the 1980s and into the 1990s. So the project of regionalization, of racial regionalization, is a project to map that set of modalities more widely and then to try and elaborate a vocabulary, an analytics, linked to others starting perhaps with a different genealogy, a different genealogy of anti-racist analytics that lead back to Voegelin in the 1930s (whose work I think is underread, quite frankly, very important work), and can be traced through the likes of Fanon, Angela Davis, Said, and Stuart Hall. So we’re into more familiar terrain that we come to mark in the 1980s and 1990s of a kind of progressive anti-racist politics. I won’t mention names beyond those mentioned here because we’ll get into trouble but my aim is to try and identify different features of that genealogy that might open up some questions for us. So that’s the project.

Notes

1. I refer to Williams’ engagement in the “culture wars” of 1954–61 after John Higgins (Part 1).
2. I have written about this latest attack on the university more extensively in “From.”
3. Goldberg invokes a necessary distinction between “racialized” terms of discourse and those expressions properly considered “racist” in order to distinguish analytically between “racialized discourse and racism as (one of) its expressive objects,” thus enabling “elaboration of subtle points otherwise often overlooked.” He notes, “For example, we will come to see that the law, moral discourse, and the social sciences can thus silently incorporate racialized language, or what I will shortly identify as the preconceptual elements of racialized discourse, while claiming to be antiracist” (Racist 42). More recently, however, Goldberg has taken strong exception to the “ambiguous,” even “vacuous” usage of “racialization” in contemporary theory. He points out that “One cannot always tell, either explicitly or contextually, whether it is being invoked as a merely descriptive term or with deeper normative, critical thrust.” Goldberg notes that even when used in the former sense, “lurking beneath the descriptive is often implicit, unexplained, and almost invariably theoretically unmotivated critical rejection of the normative insinuation in the seemingly neutral description of the social arrangements being characterized as racial or in racial terms” (“Racial” 88).

Thinking about the implications of this most recent critique in terms of his preceding argument, the reader is invited to draw two important conclusions. First, ambiguous usages of “racialization” presuppose that all racial characterization is inevitably racist—a position he has vigorously challenged, as it would necessarily, for example, include analytic accounts of racial logics. Second, this recent rejection of the concept of “racialization” marks a significant shift in Goldberg’s thought (and serves to underscore that rare commitment to rigor and self-reflexivity). Having theorized the “racial state” and its accompanying norms, laws and traditions, Goldberg challenges the presumption of a state, of laws, of supporting institutions as having an a priori neutral existence or origin, insisting that they are raced from their inception. In keeping with Goldberg’s contention, I have sought to use more specific designations such as “racially significant” or “racially conceived” rather than “racialized” to avoid the implicit ambiguity and confusion.

4. See “Reflections” in Race Critical Theories, a volume he edited with Philomena Essed. An invaluable collection of seminal essays in its own right, the editors take the brilliant additional step of including among these
later reflections by the contributors concerning the strengths and limitations of the work anthologized herewith.

5. This interview took place on the evening of November 1, 2005 in New York City. I would like to thank David Goldberg for agreeing to be interviewed for several hours following a very long day of work at the Ford Foundation. I would also like to thank her always supportive partner, Henry Giroux, for accompanying her to New York and managing with considerable patience and aplomb a trio of professional recording devices.

Works Cited


