

Blackness as a Pedagogic Tool Against the Dishonesty of a Post-Racial Teleology

by

Kelisha B. Graves, M.A.
kgraves1@uncfsu.edu
Fayetteville State University,
Fayetteville, North Carolina

Abstract

This essay argues that the post-racial is in fact a neoliberal discourse, a myth emergent from Western millennial notions of exceptionalism. Thus, this essay attempts to highlight the dishonesty of a so-called era of post-racial achievement by arguing that such a discourse represents the embodiment of historical forgetting; hence, bad knowledge and false juxtapositions. This study also hopes to begin a line of inquiry by asking: how do we understand historical Blackness as a pedagogic value aimed toward the maintenance of a critical consciousness in our contemporary world, and in what ways might the intellectual thought of our predecessors have implications on our lives today?

Introduction

The nineteenth century is best summarized as the era in which Black thinkers defined their lives according to the idea that race could be a positive value in human relationships while also simultaneously condemning racism and advocating for racial equality. The idea that race was a value that could be positively conserved in human relationships was understood in the nineteenth century as race conservation (Curry, 2009a; DuBois, 1995[1897]). Under this logic, it was believed that each race (or folk) had its own unique soul (Dubois, 1903, 1995[1897]). However, nineteenth century white thinkers and Black thinkers deployed the discourse of race conservation toward disparate agendas. Whereas nineteenth century white thinkers like Samuel Morton, Herbert Spencer, and Louis Agassiz saw the conservation of race as white supremacy and maintained that it was the global duty of the white race to guide the darker races of the world into a more civilized existence (Jackson and Weidman, 2005/2006; Menand, 2001/2002), African American thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Delany, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Alexander Crummell offered an alternative race theory that defined the conservation of race as equality.

In other words, since historical events had fragmented human beings into various nation-groups and since each nation-group developed different traits and gifts, each group, therefore, had something unique to offer and as such were equals. In other words, the contributions that Asians offered would be fundamentally different from the contributions that Africans offered, and so on.

The works of Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois perhaps best typify the conservationist race theory generated by nineteenth century Black thinkers. Cooper (1998[1892a]) maintained that each race had what she called “sui generis” (134) or a uniqueness. She wrote: “Each race has its badge, its exponent, its message, branded in the forehead by the great Master’s hand which is its own peculiar keynote, and its contribution to the harmony of nations” (Cooper, 1998[1892b], 122). W.E.B. Du Bois maintained that each race (or folk) had its own distinct spirit or soul, which he defined as its special message to the world. It was the responsibility of each race, Du Bois (1995[1897]) wrote, “to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer to that perfection of human life for which we all long...This has been the function of race differences up to the present time.” (23). The conservationist race theory of Cooper and Du Bois reveal that Black thinkers did not presuppose that American progress necessitated the elimination of race, race pride, or racial identification. In other words, progress did not signify a movement toward the death of race. To the contrary, progress meant both the conservation of race as a positive value in human relationships and the eradication of racism as evidence of society’s maturity toward equality.

The idea that race must be eliminated from contemporary parlance is exclusively the obsession of the twenty-first century’s post-structuralist trend toward anti-essentialism. As previously noted, whereas the prevailing consensus of nineteenth century intellectuals was toward to the conservation of race, their twenty-first century successors are heavily inclined toward the opinion that race is an anachronism that prevents human beings from harmonizing into a utopian form of non-racial living. The movement to eliminate race is known as racial eliminativism (Curry, 2009b). Racial eliminativism, in its utopian form, is the state of non-racial being and living (Curry, 2009b; Appiah, 2005; 2006). The state of non-racial being and living will be defined in this study as the post-racial. The idealized hope toward that ideal is what this author refers to the dishonesty of a post-racial teleology.

Kwame Antony Appiah (2005; 2006) is most notable for his liberal humanism and his idea that race as the pretext for identity is both apocryphal and anachronistic. In Appiah’s view, the very concept of race nullifies the potential for individuals to understand themselves as global citizens in a world community (Appiah 2005, 2006). Appiah’s argument that human beings must discard the concept of race in deference to cosmopolitanism as the moral teleology of humanism (while recognizing that there are different ways of being human) is grounded in the fact that race is a social construct, and therefore irrelevant as a biological or scientific justification for identity (Appiah 2005, 2006; Sussman, 2016). Even if we recognize that race is a social construct, there can be no gainsaying of the fact that race and the reality of racism have real material implications on the lives of people labelled as non-white.

To define racism as merely a system of prejudice or discrimination would prove too narrow. This author defines racism as the systematic movement of non-white peoples toward nonexistence (otherwise codified as death, disposal, and inferiority). Race, or the ethnological organization of people groups into hierarchies that privilege whiteness and its intermediaries over Blackness and its variations, has been the existential anxiety of darker people since the conquest of the New World.

To attempt to discuss the issue of race and racism is to both grapple with an ideological value and an existential question. Even if American Revolutionists like Thomas Jefferson regarded equality as fundamental to constitutional writ, as George Frederickson (2002) states, “social inequality based on birth was the general rule among Europeans themselves” (54). Considering the fact that Europeans arrived to the New World with established notions of natural inequality based on birth, it is not difficult to understand how displaced African people and indigenous folks were inevitably labelled as what Sylvia Wynter (1994, 2003) referred to as the non-human Other in contrast to the European Man. The author maintains, then, that the obsession with the post-racial represents the urgency to exorcise the lexicon of race from contemporary parlance. Under this logic, post-racialism is taken to not only be a philosophy of reconciliation, but the prioritization of racial amelioration as the moral obligation of the present era. The ameliorationist trend (the extreme embodiment of which is racial eliminativism) relies on a certain historiography of progress to justify the idea of America as inevitably progressive and by default no longer racist. James Loewen’s texts, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (2007) and *Teaching What Really Happened* (2009) expertly demonstrate how K-12 history textbooks include both the facts and fictions necessary to induce uncritical patriotism and notions of Western exceptionalism.

The assumption that the past events we study are merely the series of events whose culmination is the inevitable resolution of all conflicts and that the current era we inhabit (the so-called post-racial era) represents the culmination of the Black freedom struggle, troubles a new Black generation aiming to grapple with the persistent violence they witness against Black life. Current trends in pop culture discourse continue to push the fiction of a post-racial society despite the overwhelming evidence that Black life in America is still marked for death, disposal, and inferiority. The abuse and slaying of Black men, women, and children taken together with the ascent of Donald Trump to the United States presidency and the purging of Black-centered news programs demonstrates that the post-racial America assumed to be ushered in by former President Barack Obama was more counterfeit than concrete. The project at hand argues that the post-racial operates as a neoliberal discourse that dismisses the material agony of racism in deference to an illusory optimism that is at odds with reality. This study hopes to begin a line of inquiry by asking: how do we understand historical Blackness as a pedagogic value aimed toward the maintenance of a critical consciousness in our contemporary world; and in what ways might the intellectual thought of our predecessors have implications on our lives today?

The Problem of Post-Racial Thinking in Our Time

In the years leading up to the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States, the most effective fiction pumped into the American aural and ocular spheres was the characterization of the bi-racial Senator from Chicago as the post-racial incarnate. In fact, the fiction of a post-racial society created the context for which a “Black” presidency was envisioned as possible. Although, we must admit, the reality of a Trump presidency has jarred the nation from a nefarious reverie induced from the post-racial hopes projected onto the first Black president. By 2008, many had assumed that racism was over in America. McWhorter (2008) declared: “Racism in America is over” (n.p.). He posited the question: “Is America past racism against Black people, ‘I say the answer is yes’ ” (McWhorter, 2008, n.p.). This a priori assumption only served to re-inscribe the dishonesty that the American experience had been normalized and neutralized for everyone.

While the genealogy of post-racial discourse has been enumerated by scholars like Roopali Mukherjee (2014) and Alana Lentin (2012), popular consensus takes the election of President Barack Obama as the twentieth-first century moment that effectively shifted what Howard Winant called “racial common sense” (quoted in Mukherjee, 2014, 30). Following Loewen (2007), if we were to rely solely on a progressivist reading of American history as the series of events whose culmination is the inevitable resolution of all racial conflicts and that the current era we inhabit represents the entelechy of the Black freedom struggle, then the Obama moment would be regarded as the incarnation of the discursive hopes culled from the integrationist archive of Black thought, most notably the pre-1967 rhetoric of Martin Luther King.

Given the American tendency toward a redemptive narrative about itself, Loewen’s (2007; 2009) texts and Dylan Rodriguez’s *The Black Presidential Non-Slave: Genocide and the Present Tense of Racial Slavery* (2011) offer provocative analyses about the ways in which a grammar of racial healing ignores the reverberations of America’s genocidal history in the present.

Despite the commercialization of the 44th President as the post racial incarnate, Feldman (2015) acknowledges the oddity in bestowing a wreath of hopes around a political figure whose ultimate job would be to advance the agenda of empire. Obama’s 2008 “More Perfect Union” speech “disavowed his relationship to the materialist antiracism that his pastor’s [Rev. Jeremiah Wright] anti-imperialist sermons had made legible...His speech both bore witness to and laboured to disavow a public history of antiracist social movement, resolving the persistent American dialectic of Blackness and freedom in the telos of the imperial state” (6).

Nevertheless, the Obama moment coupled with a sudden burst of brown and Black programs on television and in cinemas, as Catherin Squires (2014) maintains, “suggests [that] our society requires no further political or social activism to achieve equal opportunity for people of all races” (6). This conflates race relations (interpersonal or intimate relationships) with racist hierarchy (the organization of the globe around a system of inequality of resources based on color) and neglects the proximity of the reality of racism as the movement of non-white bodies toward death, disposal, and inferiority. Reducing race or racism as an anomaly of individuals renders it a post-racial neoliberal value.

The Post Racial Ego as Neoliberal

How does a post racial discourse function as a neoliberal value? Any discussion of neoliberalism has to address the issue of growing capitalist economies as the primary beneficiaries of persistent global inequality and poverty. Neoliberalism can be defined as the exaggeration of capitalist endeavour. It takes the accoutrements of our public sphere such as “health care, public education, student loans, transportation, and imprisonment” (Saltman and Means, 2015, 288) and privatizes them as sites of profit-making. Thus, the neoliberal state is a “market bureaucracy” (Saltman and Means, 2015, 288) driven by the commodification and commercialization of society, and the creation of markets “where they previously did not exist” (Saltman and Means, 2015, 288).

At the individual level, neoliberalism signifies a shift towards the individual as “homo oeconomicus” or what Michel Foucault (2010) called the “man of enterprise” (149-150). Thus, the individual is not merely the consumer or producer of goods; rather, the individual itself becomes the site of market within an enterprise society. Under this logic, the individual is one who “allocates their time and resources between consumption...and investment in the self... such an individual is...an investor, an innovator, and an entrepreneur.” (Bencze and Alsop, 2014, 28). As Peters (2001) noted, neoliberal narcissism insists that “individuality, rationality, and self-interest” (14) should guide all actions. Thus, the “ideal neoliberal citizen” is “passive and hierarchically oriented subject ‘who strategizes...among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strive with others to alter or organize these options.’” (quoted in He, 2015, 288).

To the extent that neoliberalism seeks to marketize relationships through a rugged individualism that rejects the concept of community, herein lies how the post-racial operates as a neoliberal discourse. The post-racial as a neoliberal ego means that it feeds the myths of millennial elitism and Western exceptionalism and thereby disjoins Black folks from the reality of anti-Black violence as a group epidemic. The immediate danger of a neoliberal post-racial logic, as Elizabeth Martinez and Arnold Garcia (2015) acknowledged, is that it marks the departure away from the concept of a “public good” or “community” (Martinez and Garcia, n.d).

Following Squires (2014), because neoliberal ideologies promote a concern for “individual freedoms” (6) and unabashed self-aggrandizement, this locates post-racial neoliberal discourse as the antithesis of racial uplift ideology promoted by the intellectual traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The denial of racial radicality under post-racialism distances young Black millennials away from the anti-imperial, pro-race politics of figures like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and Malcolm X who envisioned their lives as invested in race work even if the price was severe personal agony or exile, as in the case of Robert F. Williams. Under a post-racial milieu, race consciousness is not only castigated as anachronistic, but also group solidarity is deemed as “suspect and anathema to values such as merit and hard work” (Squires, 2014, 6).

For many race thinkers and activists, like Martin R. Delany in the nineteenth century and Robert F. Williams in the twentieth century, race work was envisioned as a duty. This is not an attempt to romanticize the Black historical archive as a theodicy (or an all perfect system); rather, the objective is to demonstrate how an investment in selfish individual-level analysis is at odds with the idea of a collective race consciousness or race work.

In evaluating the post-racial as a neoliberal value, it behoves us to analyse how what Feldman (2015) calls the “privatization of race” (6) and what Lentin (2015) calls “frozen racism,” (3) discounts the relationship between American genocidal history and current structural inequalities. By rationalizing racism as a property of a bygone era, the contemporary violence that flourishes against Black and Brown people is not seen as structurally contingent and dictated. Similarly, high rates of engineered poverty in the inner cities and educational achievement disparities are not seen as tied to a legacy of chattel enslavement, or nearly a century of Jim Crow. Rather, all problems are privatized as the results of biological determinism. Such a worldview makes it easier to see how certain people are labelled as more deserving than others and why some lives have historically mattered more than others. Whereas antiracism “requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions...” a post racialist ego encourages “forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference” (quoted in Feldman, 2015, 7).

The Neoliberal Post Racial Discourse as a Culture of Forgetting

When the gates of the Nazi concentration camps closed at the end of World War II, Hitler’s Third Reich had exterminated some 80% of European Jewry (Engert, 2010). In the end, the death toll surmounted 11 million people (6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews) (Ridley, 2015). In the seventy years since the end of the Second World War, Germany has “atoned” politically and financially for the genocide committed against Jews.

The Washington Post reported, “Germany won respect by addressing its World War II crimes” (Taylor, 2015). The conversation continues over whether modern Germany should still bear the burden of collective guilt (Engert, 2010). While Taylor (2015) might insist that Germany deserves respect for her valiant efforts at atonement, what most scholars and journalists fail to realize is that the Holocaust was not Germany’s first genocide.

Germany’s first Holocaust did not take place in Europe. Buried beneath the desert wastelands of what is today modern-day Namibia lay the scattered skeletal remains of over 100,000 thousand Africans: the Herero and Nama people. In the early twentieth century, the Kaiser’s Second Reich exterminated thousands of Nama and Herero people, ultimately claiming African ancestral lands. This marked the first genocide of the twentieth century (Olusoga, 2010). Why hasn’t this narrative gained the same kind of historical currency as the Holocaust?

Germany, although it has atoned for the Jewish Holocaust, has barely come to terms with this piece of history. Carried out thirty years before the rise of Hitler, the story of Germany’s first holocaust is not only snubbed in history books, but has been effectively wiped from the memory of three generations of white German-descended Namibians who take their colonial history to be the only official narrative of what was formerly called German South West Africa. What is more surprising is that white German-descended Nambians adamantly insists that descendants of the exterminated Herero and Nama are not owed reparations (Olusoga, 2010).

In recounting Germany’s deliberate erasure of the Herero and Nama Holocaust from official memory and historiography, there is a deeper lesson to be learned. To make this germane to our present discussions, the tendency of first-world nations (like Germany or the United States) to erase from popular memory their history of injustice toward darker nations speaks to the culture of social forgetting that is necessary in order to validate the claim of an arrival at the post-racial. Following Frankowski’s (2015) work on the violence of social forgetting or “the violence of post-racial memory” (n.p.), a point can be made about the post-racial as an epistemology of social forgetting. If the neoliberal post-racial discourse points to the moving of groups away from race consciousness and toward an interest purely in the self as a market, then the neoliberal post-racial as a culture of social forgetting is indicative of the ways in which a post-racial logic attempts to dictate which narratives are considered as relevant and which narratives are considered irrelevant to historical memory.

This represents the dishonesty of a post-racial teleology because the anxieties between remembering and forgetting demonstrate how these so-called “post” moments encourage a fiction about the past and its relationship to the present. As Frankowski (2015) noted, “social forgetting is far more political than we might think initially since it includes not only what is forgotten, but also, the ways in which events are remembered.” (n.p.)

The current trend toward rendering certain historical moments as defunct is not only consistent with how Westerners have generally been taught to understand history as a redemptive saga headed toward inevitable perfection, but also can be seen as a thrust to make a moral judgment about the history we've supposedly overcome. In this way, the post-racial becomes a morality, a kind of axiological narcissism that drives the emotions and intellect away from the reality of anti-black violence.

As Frankowski (2015) stated, we live in a time of abundant memory. "Books, articles, and online resources make old school ignorance nearly impossible, since there is no want for representation or other forms of aesthetic evidence" (Frankowski, 2015, n.p.). This begs the question: How is memory (under a neoliberal post-racial ego) distorted in a time of abundant aesthetics? The abundance of aesthetic material furnishes the opportunity for disremembering and erasure. In other words, aesthetic excess made available through the internet, blogs, smartphones, and social media provides opportunities to cut-and-paste histories, manufacture associations, and fabricate realities. Hoerl (2012) gives an important analysis about the post-racial's abuse of historiography, or how our era of abundant memory under a post-racial discourse promotes a culture of forgetting (bad knowledge) and false juxtapositions.

The culture of forgetting (what I refer to as bad knowledge) is what Hoerl (2012) calls "selective amnesia" (179). With the election of the nation's first Black U.S. President, the media pointed its attention to the tumultuous sixties for a narrative that would tell a redemptive story about the nation. In lieu of this, Hoerl (2012) maintains that the post-racial abuse of memory is best seen in the media's juxtaposition of Martin Luther King, Jr. and former President Barack Obama during the 2008 election frenzy. Hoerl (2012) maintained that the characterization of Obama's election as the embodiment of King's dreams "functions as a site for the production of selective amnesia" (179). Selective amnesia, or what Alfred Frankowski also calls "cultural amnesia," (Frankowski, 2013, n.p) is the activity of picking what one wants to remember and how one chooses to remember those events. Following this argument to its natural conclusion, then, means that constructing the post-racial as embodied in Obama as therapy for the nation's racial ruptures constructs "a myth of transcendence in which the trauma[s] of racial injustice" (Hoerl, 2012, 179) become frozen properties of the past.

This begs the question: what does a post-racial abuse of historical memory look like? For example, sequestering King to his 1963 "I Have a Dream Speech" moment as merely an eloquent preacher with high hopes without looking at the entire trajectory of his intellectual thought serves to ignore the radical King who planned to deliver a sermon entitled, "Why America May Go to Hell" on April 7, 1968. The post-racial reliance on a sanitized King obscures alternative archives of Black thought; thereby, foreclosing honest reflection on the continued need for a movement of critical Black consciousness that holds the nation accountable.

Conclusion

Inasmuch as neoliberal values train the individual away from communitarian ideals in deference to the opportunity for self-aggrandizement, the danger of a post-racial teleology as the embodiment of historical forgetting is that it obscures a new generation's connection to the radical traditions of their fore parents and the existential agonies that necessitated the emergence of Blackness as a pedagogic instrument aimed at critical consciousness. Furthermore, it detaches young Black millennials from an awareness of the genocidal logics and the anti-Black racism that necessitated the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, Garveyism, the civil rights movement, the Black Arts movement and the Black Power movement. Each of these intellectual and communitarian movements respectively represented the ways in which Black folks chose to give their particular genius to the world and thereby offer a new definition of what "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" could mean as an American ideal.

Following Hoerl's (2012) point, the struggles over "public memories of race relations are ultimately struggles of forgetting racial injustice" (181). This makes for an environment that takes issues like the dirty water in Flint, Michigan, or the problem of multi-generational poverty in the nation's inner cities to be the results of personal failure, and not the results of racism.

As an intellectual mood, the move toward post racialism has fatal intellectual implications on the ability of young African-descended people to both remember, reclaim, and re-inscribe the radical intellectual positions of their ancestors. The move toward post racialism as an intellectual priority displaces the tradition of race-first consciousness promoted by historical men-folk and women-folk like Edward Blyden, Amelia Etta Hall Johnson, Maria W. Stewart, Alexander Crummell, and Martin R. Delany. It also de-radicalizes the anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and internationalist critiques levied by community defenders like Martin Luther King, Kwame Ture, Marcus Garvey, Huey P. Newton, and Robert F. Williams in order to narrow them to American cartography and disregard them as global thinkers. In addition, it takes the Pan-Africanist vision of a Robert Alexander Young or an Amy Jacques Garvey to represent a dangerous spectacle whose only end is disintegration. All the traditions articulated by Black thinkers, whether integrationist, nationalist, or Pan-Africanist are necessary to remember in order to never forget that these movements collectively represent the repository of thought that Black folks articulated in order to deal with the contradictions they witnessed in America.

From the moment African people were hijacked from the interior of Africa and ejected onto the shores of the New World, the task has been to define a Black mission and peoplehood against the ugly caricatures attached to Black life. The production of African American memory was formerly "positioned against the impulse to forget the debt our country owes to the lives lost during the slave trade, but now it is positioned against forgetting anti-Black violence as such" (Frankowski, 2015, 47). This is the "sorrow" about which Du Bois (1903) spoke of in the *Souls of Black Folks* (1903).

Sorrow or mourning is fluid memory, the handing down of memory from generation to generation, the collective sense of mourning that saves one from being conscripted into the totalizing narrative of American exceptionalism. Mourning is greater than memory because, as Frankowski (2013) mentions “mourning does not settle the issue but rather makes the limits of our sensibility questionable” (n.p).

The mission now will be to reclaim the full gamut of Black radical possibility against the dishonesty of a post-racial teleology. Re-examining the significance of Blackness in the twenty-first century means to both maintain our critical consciousness and reclaim the thought of our forefathers with the realization that their ideas have implications on our lives today.

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