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0521641144 - Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in
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Kenneth Mostern
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Part one

**Theorizing race, autobiography,
and identity politics**

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What is identity politics? Race and the autobiographical

I believe in the recognition of devices as *devices* – but I also believe in the reality of those devices. In one century men choose to hide their conquests under religion, in another under race. So you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device in both cases, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he will not become a Moslem or a Christian – or who is lynched because his is black – is suffering the utter reality of that device of conquest. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't *exist* – merely because it is a lie.

Lorraine Hansberry¹

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!

Frantz Fanon²

Representation has not withered away.

Gayatri Spivak³

Identifying “identity politics”

It has become typical to see the widest variety of writers of both popular and academic work arguing against, or discussing the limitations of, something which they call “identity politics.” The positions which are grouped together by this name are not generally categorized that way by anyone who actually holds these positions: such people might refer to themselves, variously, as “nationalists,” “feminists,” “Afrocentrists,” or “multiculturalists,” with further adjectival modifications referring to specific modes of nationalism or feminism (“cultural,” “economic”), or specific political modifiers, like “liberal,” “radical,” or “critical,” the last term of which once denoted marxist sympathies, but does not anymore. It is, by contrast, exceptionally rare to see someone arguing in favor of a position which they refer to as “identity politics,” since the term, as Micaela di Leonardo

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has pointed out, is “innately a term of opprobrium.”⁴ This fact should cause the reader sympathetic to the idea that power is not distributed equally under postmodern capitalism,⁵ with some categorical consistency among lines often referred to as “identities,” to wonder what the implications of such a category having so many opponents – di Leonardo among them – might be. Indeed, the specific politics I named do, in some way, all suppose that there is a structural relationship between the field of subjectivities widely termed “identities,” and the field of activities widely termed “politics.” But the meaning of these terms, and the forms of the connection made, vary widely from critic to critic and argument to argument, with people who have passionately denounced identity politics in one context often accused of engaging in it in others.

June Jordan’s work, which I take as an example of a particularly elegant contemporary radical humanism, will provide my first example. Jordan is periodically cited for being a (specifically) black woman who opposes identity politics, a fact which first of all should be taken as a sign that the field of identity politics is always already identified with women of color.⁶ Jordan has argued, obviously correctly, that stated political positions and the fact of being black and/or female are not necessarily connected, and that for this reason her own earlier assumption that political organizing ought to occur around such identifications can no longer be maintained. It is easy to agree with the critique of this simplified version of “identity politics” – the claim that, for example, since all women have common interests, feminist organizing only occurs when women join to fight for these interests. But, of course, it is difficult (though perhaps not impossible) to find any contemporary writer who maintains this simplistic position. In fact, this absolutist position was quite rare and widely maligned even in the period that supposedly typified it, that of the social movements of the period 1956–80: it has always been most common as a straw argument against which people work.⁷ For all that, I have used a recent Jordan text, an essay republished in the same volume in which she criticizes identity politics, called “Wrong or White”⁸ in a multi-racial classroom, and no piece of writing that I have taught has ever provoked the racist fury (or liberal patronization) against black women intellectuals for ostensibly engaging in “identity politics” than that piece did. To at least some of the students in the class where I used it, Jordan’s willingness to use the labels “black,” “white,” “male,” “heterosexual,” “people of color,” etc., in talking about political phenomena was *a priori* evidence of something that aca-

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demics (though not my students) call “essentialism.” As such, these terms challenged my students’ implicit individualism, their often honest attempts to “take people for who they are.” From my point of view, in opposing “identity politics,” instead of, for example, masculinist black nationalism, Jordan helps to obscure what is at stake in the term, the ways in which her opposition to identity politics is itself received *on the basis of her race and gender*. Jordan’s career in black feminism itself demonstrates Toril Moi’s point that “*even when they say the same things, women are not speaking from the same position as men, and consequently are not arguing the same thing at all.*”⁹ This is especially true for black women in the academy right now. It is because our speech is always received, in the rhetorical situation, as being from an identity-position, that identical political statements by me or by Jordan are, whatever their identity, understood socially in nonidentical fashions. Our identities literally *cannot* be disconnected from our politics.¹⁰

Di Leonardo traces the concern with identity politics in the contemporary US back through the “women’s culture” discussions of the 1970s to its “ultimate source in modern nationalist ideologies.”¹¹ From the point of view of the argument I will be sketching throughout this book, this tracing is historically inadequate inasmuch as it dwells on one lineage of identity politics that has, for historical reasons, become exceptionally simple to attack. In this book I trace identity politics through writings about the racialization process by members of the group whose minoritization is key to the structure of all major/minor positioning in the US – those visibly of African descent. My lineage will, like hers, intersect with the rise of third world nationalisms as constructed, generally bourgeois phenomena related to the full integration of global capitalism in this century. However, since di Leonardo’s position on cultural nationalism is unable to distinguish between the specific constructions of nationalism in Europe in the nineteenth century and in the decolonizing world in the twentieth (like her major source, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*), I will continually insist that power/value relations, and not “culture,” determine the limits of what she calls “the shifting nature of identity,”¹² and thus the significance of identity politics at a given moment. This is why Patricia Williams can state simultaneously, in the concluding “Word on Categories” in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, that “while being black has been the most powerful social attribution in my life, it is only one of a number of governing narratives or presiding fictions by which I am constantly

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reconfiguring myself in the world” and then, in the very same context, that

I do believe that the simple matter of the color of one’s skin so profoundly affects the way one is treated, so radically shapes what one is allowed to think and feel about this society, that the decision to generalize from such a division is valid. Furthermore, it is hard to describe succinctly the racial perspective and history that are my concern.¹³

We must learn to think both sides of this at the same time: race is not the sum total of Williams’ subjectivity; yet it is a “perspective”; what is unique about this perspective cannot be described succinctly or narrowly, yet the set of racialized experiences she has had have become the “valid” “concern” of an entire book of critical legal theory. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman write, “perhaps it is only a scholar, only a member of an oppressed group, who could feel trapped enough to intellectualize herself beyond the collective psyche of her group.”¹⁴ Writing a critical history of African-American identity politics is narrating the history of this “perhaps.”

All politics can be described as an engaged relationship between the social location of particular political actors and the social totality in which their action takes place. Since this is the case, I will not suddenly be the first person to defend “identity politics” from its attackers; often I agree with arguments against specific identitarian political claims; often I don’t. Rather I will try to describe the many and complicated ways in which intellectuals from a community both already constituted and always being reconstituted have attempted to work with existing racial positions in the formation of their political identities. “Race-ness” in the US is to this day primarily attributed to black and other nonwhite Americans, though, as African American intellectuals since W. E. B. Du Bois published “The Souls of White Folk” in 1920 have pointed out, white people “have” it too. That it is always being reconstituted in practice in no way eliminates the implications of the fact that it is always already constituted as an identity, an “always already” which implies (contrary to much recent opinion) its *relative stability* and *reproduction*. Thus I will argue that however differently we can demonstrate that “race-ness” was constituted in 1903, when Du Bois made his justly famous statement that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line,” from the way it is constituted today, it has remained an ever-present lens by which the world is viewed and has continued to be a primary force in social struggle. That something as biologically insignificant as skin-

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color has, in becoming raced, maintained such a role is precisely what should provide the impetus for an inquiry into the historical interrelations between the socioeconomic and psychological meanings of identity as it structures and determines politics.

Identifying “Black Autobiography”: determination, articulation, and the racial object

Imagining identity politics this way means adequately conceptualizing the verb “determine” in the previous sentence. Much recent political theory, since Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,¹⁵ resists marxist accounts of determination, which are seen as reductionist because of the observation that no automatic link can be made between a given subject’s relation to the means of production and her/his stated politics. Therefore, in the account of Laclau and Mouffe and those, like Stuart Hall, most influenced by them, the notion of “determination” has largely been replaced by the more relatively volunteerist term “articulation,” whereby it is said that while a cultural pattern of articulation may exist between various subject-positions and various political statements, this relationship is arbitrary, conforming to no objective conditions of social enforcement. (Indeed, for Laclau and Mouffe there is nothing that can be usefully termed “society” at all.) June Jordan’s discussion of race/gender position as implying no necessary politics follows a pattern consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s thinking, and this position is typical of much recent academic writing – and nearly all cultural theory – about women of color. This has served to accomplish the widespread articulation of social theory that takes the attack on “essentialism” as its primary object, generally called poststructuralism, to race and gender theory, in a formation professedly “postmarxist.”

In race theory, it is Hall’s formulations that have been most consistently influential. After twenty years of working in a generally marxist problematic,¹⁶ Hall decisively abandoned marxist parameters in the theorization of race after declaring “new times” with the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989. In his postmarxist period, the notion of race has been produced through emphasis on four elements: articulation, process, culture, and fragmentation. Thus:

[1] An articulation is the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time.¹⁷

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[2, 3] Perhaps instead of thinking identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term “cultural identity” lays claim.¹⁸

[4] [Citing the work of photographer Armet Francis:] Such images offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas.¹⁹

My book will not *disagree* with any of the above formulations. I will, instead, propose repeatedly that (1) while the concept of articulation defined above is useful and necessary, it supplements but certainly does not displace structural determination in thinking race, class, and gender; that (2) the rhetoric of “perhaps” and “never complete” in the discussion of the real processes of identity production serves to obscure the persistence of specific identity positions, which, while of course not “complete” (whatever that would mean) nevertheless could not become other than they are without a generalized rewiring of the identity-production machinery; that (3) this fact is masked further by the all-too-quick slippage from “identity” to “cultural identity,” as though this took care of the distinct question of “racial identity”; and finally that (4) the last passage quoted could just as easily read: “such images offer a way of forging a symbolic coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, one necessary to the political process of all enforced diasporas.” This sentence would not be better than Hall’s. But understanding that his sentence, and my rewriting of it, deserve each other is essential to the production of a genuinely radical analysis of political identities.

In the same two years that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published, Eric Olin Wright’s *Classes* and the English translation of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, the former a work of highly unorthodox marxism, the latter not marxist at all, gave elaborate statistical accounts demonstrating that patterns of consciousness – tendencies – based on class position do in fact exist.²⁰ Indeed, Wright’s account even provided some (by no means adequate) means for reading the US working class as predominantly female and nonwhite, and thus its political articulations as not only implicitly anti-capitalist in certain ways, but tending toward feminism and anti-racism as well.²¹ Theoretically, however, the point is not that for Wright (let alone

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Bourdieu) there is some kind of pure oppositional consciousness embedded in an already defined aggregate called “the working class,” but rather that there is a relevant structural *tendency* for certain objectively positioned groups to articulate certain positions, a tendency that conforms perfectly to Raymond Williams’ flexible, non-reductive double definition of structural class determination: for Williams, to say that consciousness is determined by economic location is to say simply that the economy “sets limits” and “exerts pressures” on what any given individual may think.²² Stated this way it is hard to know what is controversial: if one is unable to purchase expensive consumer goods, one will be limited in the opinions one may have of them; if one works chopping chicken parts in a locked building ten hours a day, there are specific physical and material events one’s thinking will be pressed to understand – like the experience of consistently poor health. In all cases there are multiple cultural and political ideologies that intersect these limits and pressures – but these ideologies will not be distributed in the same patterns as among middle class intellectuals. And indeed, the same point has been made available for race and gender theory, with nonessentialist accounts of determination a persistent presence, often under the name “standpoint epistemologies.”²³

We must be committed to defining identity politics – perhaps you will afford me with some better neologism, but I am content with this term for the moment – in a way that respects both identity and politics, which does not imply that identity *is* politics but rather recalls that identity and politics are not independent variables, and therefore that solidarity always stands in the complicated relationship between the two. One of the things that has been obscured by the contemporary presumption – especially strong in ethnic studies – that marxist theory is a relic of the past with nothing to teach us,²⁴ is that this is what marxism has attempted to do since at least *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.²⁵ In this context it is simply ignored that there have been serious pro-black nationalist and profeminist political positions generated from marxist ontologies throughout this century, accounts which have themselves described a structure for the determinate emergence of multiple identity positions. They differ from poststructuralist accounts not in their ability to account for race and gender, but in their insistence on systematicity. Since marxism derives class not from “discourse” but from the economy, when a marxist notices that race and gender, like class, are centrally important political categories, s/he asks what structure or

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system of material determination produces these categories as discourses.²⁶

Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* embarks on this project precisely.²⁷ For Robinson, the inadequacy of Marx's argument in *Capital* is that, by researching (with great perspicuity) the way in which surplus-value was wrest from the English working class during the mid-nineteenth century, he created a theory of capitalism which emphasized exploitation as first of all a diachronic issue: capital expands when the bourgeoisie controls value created in the course of the working day. In so doing, he neglected to see that capitalist exploitation began not in Europe at all, but in the development of the modern world system²⁸ via the settlement and expropriation of America (including the genocide of its residents), and the employment of a superexploited class of laborers: African slaves. As a result of being the first, and most exploited, class of proletarians, Robinson proposes that black diaspora peoples created the tradition of opposition most able to respond to capitalism at its weakest points; for this reason, black working class struggle for nationalist autonomy – which itself depends on the facts of already existing segregation – is the necessary point of reference for socialist politics. The persistence of race, in this analysis, is assumed rather than explained; because the labor force was split racially at the inception of capitalism, it must continue to be until the end of capitalism – and perhaps beyond. While Robinson's historical narrative is certainly correct in defining the origins of racialization, I am not convinced that contemporary capitalism requires continued segregation in the terms Robinson's analysis suggests. In fact, race is relatively unlikely to be determined by the needs of late capitalist production. However, once constructed, important discursive systems like race tend to take on lives of their own; thus this book accepts the category of the "memory of slavery," conceived by Gilroy as a determinate trauma – a psychoanalytic category, here sociologized – as an explanation for the persistence of "blackness" as a mechanism in US politics.²⁹

It is in this context that I employ the category of "autobiography," which is *not* "personal experience," but rather an articulation based on the determinate memory and recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics.³⁰ Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi suggest that "autobiography illustrates why racial identity formation occurs at the intersection of a person's subjective memory of trauma and collective remembrance of histories of domination."³¹ Yet autobiogra-

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phy does not illustrate this intersection in a simple way, as bell hooks reflects: after writing her autobiography she “felt as though [she] had an overview not so much of my childhood but of those experiences that were deeply imprinted in my consciousness. Significantly, that which was absent, left out, not included also was important.”³² In particular, autobiography is that *process* which articulates the determined subject so as to actively produce a newly positive identity. To the extent that racial trauma is, precisely, what autobiography recalls, racial identity politics is determined, and a variety of other politics may, as hooks knows, be repressed. Yet the recognition of the limitations of the process, like the identity itself, can only emerge through the process, to which there is no alternative.

African-American literary history begins with the self-consciously politicized autobiography. Paul Gilroy’s recent statement, that African-American autobiography “express[es] in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation”³³ has been demonstrated over the last two decades in work by William Andrews, Joanne Braxton, Stephen Butterfield, David Dudley, V. P. Franklin, Sidonie Smith, Valerie Smith, and numerous others.³⁴ James Olney, indeed, has claimed that the very development of autobiography as a field of study has depended on the entrance of African-American as well as other minority and feminist literatures into academic study.³⁵ Gilroy’s text continues:

the presentation of a public persona thus becomes a founding motif within the expressive culture of the African diaspora . . . Eagerly received by the [abolition] movement to which they were addressed, these [autobiographies] helped to mark out a dissident space within the bourgeois public sphere which they aimed to suffuse with their utopian content. The autobiographical character of many [public] statements is thus absolutely crucial.³⁶

The tradition of African-American writing is thus one in which political commentary necessitates, invites, and assumes autobiography as its rhetorical form. This is simultaneously the result of oppression, where, as Andrews states, the white reading public will not trust anything but the (supposedly) transparent testimony of the slave, who is presumed only to report, not theorize; but, dialectically, through the success of numerous slave narrators in making the testimonial space culturally available for the purpose of theorizing selves. Gilroy’s claim that the autobiographical mode of political representa-