



White Philosophy

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Critical Response

I

White Philosophy

Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield

The court acted like a philosopher who wanted to know positively whether a cat was on the mat in Mashpee.

—JAMES CLIFFORD, *The Predicament of Culture*

1. *Racism and the “Appeal to Race”*

Liberal racism has recently been attracting the attention it deserves. Its defining feature is an antiracist attitude that coexists with support for racist outcomes. Liberal racism rejects discrimination on the basis of race or color and abhors the subjection of groups or individuals on racial grounds. But it upholds and defends systems that produce racializing effects, often in the name of some matter more “urgent” than redressing racial subordination, such as rewarding “merit” or enhancing economic competitiveness.

A particularly powerful form of liberal racism displays two additional features that will be especially important here. First, rather than explicitly rationalizing racism, it treats the categories through which racism operates, is felt, and is addressed as conceptual errors. It thus directs less attention to the histories, current forms, and social effects of racism (though it agrees racism is a problem) than to the problems of race and racial identity, categories it considers politically troubling and intellectually flawed. Liberal racial thinking seeks to go “beyond race” and does

not support racialized perspectives on racism on the grounds that they are a kind of reverse racism. Second, it seeks to describe its own move beyond race as part of reason rather than of history; the move is not, in other words, a racial ideology in its own right, with a genealogy that links the gesture to the social positions and racial interests of white progressives, but an expression of the rational truth about race.

It is one of the virtues of Walter Benn Michaels's essay "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity" (*Critical Inquiry* 18 [Summer 1992]:655–85) that it focuses attention on liberal racism, particularly the kind that appears in cultural pluralism. We have learned a great deal from his insistence that racism is not an accidental by-product of the liberal reforms that replaced the appeal to race with the appeal to culture but is part of the structure of such reforms. We have benefitted from his unveiling of racialization where it is most often invisible and his outline of racism's historical persistence through major intellectual watersheds. It is one of the symptoms of the times, however, that Michaels's essay locates the racism of cultural pluralism in its use of racial and cultural identity rather than in the liberal racism with which pluralism coexists. Writing in a period when a post-civil rights liberalism has been accumulating increasing political and intellectual influence, Michaels's call for an America "without race" does not get beyond the white moderate position on race but furnishes it with a philosophical rationale.

This ascendent race liberalism thrives on a contemporary debate about whether racism or race consciousness is the greater social problem. Where race consciousness involves a sense of links between one's social position and historical patterns of racialization, is it racist to be conscious of one's "racial" identity?¹ Or is racial identity (including its deployment) the result of racism? These questions—starkly polarized here—have become especially confusing at the present time, when signs of racial progress and racial regression exist side by side and can be difficult to tell

1. Gary Peller offers an analysis of the "racial compromise" by which "the price of the national commitment to suppress white supremacists would be the rejection of race consciousness among African Americans" (Garry Peller, "Race Consciousness," *Duke Law Journal* [Sept. 1990]: 760).

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apart. Biologically defined racism appears very much on the wane, and color-blind hiring practices are a presumed norm; at the same time, racially patterned inequality has not only persisted but has gotten worse. The idea that we are "post" civil rights suggests the period of civil rights protest to have been a success but also a failure. It has produced indications that the genuine progress represented by civil rights has not been enough to withstand embedded institutional and psychological resistances like the white backlash against affirmative action programs or unabating white anxiety about the presence of social and political actors who insist on the continuing significance of racism. The changing U.S. economy has intensified the attention paid to the multiracial composition of the workforce, but this has encouraged an ambiguous stress on higher productivity through cultural sensitivity *and* the rejection of race politics. Many experience all this as a dilemma: should racism—as a mode of hierarchical social differentiation—be granted ongoing social significance, or is racial identity itself an obstacle to progress?

The latter response has been especially influential in the political realm, for it locates the solution to racism in color blindness and the end of race consciousness.² The New Democrats, for example, have argued that too much emphasis on minority (especially African American) concerns for equity has itself been responsible for the racial setbacks of the Reagan-Bush era. In analyses made most prominent by liberals like Thomas Byrne Edsall, Mary Edsall, and E. J. Dionne, and put into practice by Bill Clinton, the persistence of racial inequality gets blamed not on white racism but on the invocation of race.³ They regard the *explicit* appeal to race as separable from the racist past and present in which the appeal has most often been made.⁴ Once the appeal to race is seen analytically, free of the context of racism, the usual causality becomes reversed: racism does not make people talk about race; talk about race sustains racism. One overriding characteristic of post-civil rights is a spurious equalizing effect: uses of race are the same regardless of the

2. See, for example, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *Harvard Law Review* 101, no. 7 (1988): 1331–87, and Neil Gotanda, "A Critique of 'Our Constitution is Color-Blind,'" *Stanford Law Review* 44 (Nov. 1991): 1–68.

3. See Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991), and E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, 1991).

4. Such writers are themselves making an appeal to race in their address to the middle class as a supposedly inclusive and populist political category in the United States, but this appeal, though racially encoded as white, is not explicit. In this context, the concept of white supremacy is preferable to that of racism, which remains popularly conceived as intentional, psychological, and attitudinal, as a problem that minorities—those who are overtly racialized—create for those who are not, that is, whites. White supremacy, by contrast, views whiteness as a constitutive dimension of complex relations of governance in continual negotiation with other (and overlapping) governance systems.

race of the user; discrimination is no worse than reverse discrimination. In short, these analyses replace the race *problem* with the “race” problem.

This of course undoes civil rights era common sense, in which the more basic problem was considered to be racism itself. That sensibility promotes discussion of racism in all of its forms, particularly in its friendlier modern ones, like institutional racism. It asks for increased use of the category of race not because race is a biological fact or even because it defines one’s intrinsic personal or cultural identity but because it is one of the most important principles by which U.S. social relations are organized. This is something like the way scholars who are interested in gender relations can speak about the impact of the American sex/gender system without believing that this system produces its effects biologically. These writers, while expressing a considerable range of views, generally regard race “as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly transformed by political struggle,” a changing complex that nonetheless has decisive racializing effects.⁵ They hold that it is racism and racialization that keep race alive.⁶

How has this idea gotten completely turned around? How has the turnaround endowed white racial moderates with a political influence they have not enjoyed in years? Part of the answer is of course that many have become persuaded that it was too upsetting to talk about America as an apartheid state; it was too offensive to talk about who continues to benefit; it was too disruptive to talk about pointed remedies. So they have offered an effective pragmatic argument that good coalition politics requires working around the racial resentments of white voters offended by the old Democrat social agenda; lessened race consciousness would lessen racism. But for this position to succeed, it requires a more complete reengineering of the terrain of racial common sense; nothing less will keep this river flowing upstream. Too much in the American world says that race consciousness largely issues from racism to make it easy to show the reverse. The reversal, racism from race, requires bigger upheavals in the old terrain. Ideally, such an upheaval would dwarf empirical and sociological conditions like white racial backlash, where racism is too inextricably mixed in with appeals to race to allow the elimination of racism as a major social cause. It would be better to be able to show that the appeal to race is the prior problem on grounds that *it is itself intrinsi-*

5. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York, 1986), p. 68.

6. Racialization and racism operate autonomously but rarely alone. Understanding the intersections among race, class, and gender dynamics—three of the most important modern social determinants—has been a major preoccupation of scholars for decades. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to pursue this, but it may suffice to note that pluralist racism evades consideration of gender altogether and tends to use a specifically American-style understanding of class to chart the declining significance of race.

cally racist, solid gold racism, too much the fountainhead of racism to have received racism from any lesser source.

Such a demonstration appears in "Race into Culture." Our next section considers the construction of this demonstration—the reasons Michaels offers for shifting from criticizing a history of veiled white racism to criticizing the appeal to race. This shift hinges on Michaels's categorical association of race consciousness with essentialist identity practices. The final section describes three undesirable outcomes of the type of racial management that Michaels's work implies (irrespective of his undoubtedly antiracist personal intentions), and sketches an alternative.

2. Making Racial Ontology

Q.: If you were telling them about it, it would be because they didn't know about it, isn't that right?

A.: Not at all times, no.

—RAMONA PETERS under cross-examination from James St. Clair, *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury et al.* (1977)

Michaels's genealogy of U.S. cultural identity offers an extremely important general conclusion: "Our current notion of cultural identity both descends from and extends the earlier notion of racial identity" (p. 658). Cultural identity is "the project of lining up [one's] practices with [one's] genealogy" (p. 679). Lest one doubt the ongoing relevance of this description of certain cultural critics, *Time's* recent special issue on America as the "world's first multicultural society" pictures *multiculturalism* as technologized color blending of the facial characteristics of seven ethnic types of both genders.⁷ Michaels concludes that "the modern concept of culture is not . . . a critique of racism; it is a form of racism" (p. 683). To the extent that they have rested on the category of "cultural" identity, even liberal, progressive positions like cultural pluralism, positions that formally repudiate racism, have done little more than "rescue . . . racism from racists" (p. 684 n. 40).

But what is it about cultural identity that is racist? Is it that a certain group, like the white-acculturated corporate media professionals at *Time*, deploys cultural identity for its own interests or from its own exclusionary perspective? Or is something wrong with cultural identity itself, an inherent flaw that renders irrelevant historical or political distinctions among different uses? To polarize the issue again, does the problem lie in racist uses or in the appeal to race itself?

The former belief would lead to answers like this: the architects of

7. *The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society*, special issue of *Time* (Fall 1993).

pluralist identity held milder, more sophisticated, more culturalized but nonetheless deep-rooted views about white superiority. Pluralism would then be racist because it articulates a complex white supremacism. But Michaels's essay does not trace racist pluralism to the history of progressive white racial thought. It traces it to the presence of racial ontology in all uses of culture. His conclusion expands the source of the race problem from racial identity to cultural identity but retains the causal claim of the post-civil rights liberalism noted earlier: "It is only the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture, restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos. . . . Without race, losing our culture can mean no more than doing things differently from the way we now do them and preserving our culture can mean no more than doing things the same" (pp. 684–85). Michaels is suggesting that, without race, the deprivations and dominations linked to racism would disappear.⁸ Free of cultural identity, we will be able to treat people as people rather than as races. This ideal has strong appeal in a variety of racialized communities—if we could all stop talking race, then we would have a chance to get along. When Michaels exclaims, "But why does it matter who we are?" the question harbors an insistent entreaty: our dealings with one another can ignore the conflicts and coercions, the innumerable interdependent historical circumstances that make us who we are in the first place (p. 682).

We agree with Michaels that replacing racial with cultural identity fudges the central questions about what the invocation of identity means. But the tangled relations between cultural and racial identity do not necessarily point to their union in racial ontology, as Michaels suggests. How does he demonstrate that "accounts of cultural identity that do any cultural work require a racial component" (p. 682)? How does he show that liberal racism consists of the appeal to race rather than, for example, to an investment in a (gentler) regime of racial inequality?

The answer lies in his argument that any invocation of identity is a form of racial ontology.

But why does it matter who we are? The answer can't just be the epistemological truism that our account of the past may be partially determined by our own identity, for, of course, this description of the conditions under which we know the past makes no logical difference to the truth or falsity of what we know. It must be instead the onto-

8. Michaels appends a disclaimer to his text: "Needless to say, the situation is entirely different with respect to compulsory assimilation; what puts the pathos back is precisely the element of compulsion" (p. 685 n. 41). This suggests that he regards cultural relations and compulsion as usually separable things, that he thinks that appeals to race are not generally produced or even coexistent with the compulsions of racism. In spite of his conclusion, this merely brackets rather than resolves the causal connection between them.

logical claim that we need to know who we are in order to know which past is ours. The real question, however, is not *which* past should count as ours but why *any* past should count as ours. . . . The history we study is never our own; it is always the history of people who were in some respects like us and in other respects different. When, however, we claim it as ours, we commit ourselves to the ontology of "the Negro," to the identity of "we" and "they," and the primacy of race. [P. 682]

Michaels distinguishes between studying history and studying "our" history. The introduction of a connection between history and identity makes even a social or historical question about one's placement, one's power, and so on a question about one's essence—about biology, ancestry, or similarly determinate and constitutive cultural traditions. Michaels rejects the possibility that identity questions are about one's historical and social relations to others who "were in some respects like us and in other respects different." Nonessentialist history, for Michaels, avoids identity questions because it knows that "the conditions under which we know the past," our social position, can "mak[e] no logical difference" to historical knowledge. Identity questions and historical questions are essentially different, and the former are always ontological. *All* identity questions are about this because, logically, none are embedded in collective history: "The real question" is "why *any* past should count as ours." Cultural identity is ontological, the ontology refers to a prehistorical essence, and this essence is the idea of race.

What does it mean for Michaels to reduce group histories to racial identity? Taking this citation by itself, it appears that Michaels achieves his reduction of identity questions to racial ontology by proposing an essentialist definition of genuine knowledge of the past—such knowledge has no "logical" connection to the position of the person creating the knowledge. "What we know" is independent of who we are and what made us this way.⁹ Another factor may be his apparent indifference to a major development in cultural theory in the past decade, the attempt to

9. At the essay's pivotal junctures, Michaels imputes essentialism to identity as used by others: all uses (that do cultural work), and particularly pluralist uses, require "us to be able to say who we are independent" of what we do; "instead of who we are being constituted by what we do, what we do is justified by who we are" (pp. 683–84 n. 39, 683). In general, Michaels's antiessentialism works through a supplementary cultural *individualism*. Antiessentialism says only that we should not derive what we do from who we are in the sense in which "who we are" is logically prior to and undetermined by what we do. We agree with this sociological commonplace. It is *individualism* that allows us to ignore that what we do or who we are is always imposed and chosen within determinate social relations. Cultural studies must be antiessentialist to be *social* studies in the first place. We hope to be lending an air of gratuity—even of conformity—to the project that makes antiessentialism the vanguard of individualism. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin link Michaels's view of cultural identity to his individualism in "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 702, 704.

render the use of individual and group identity fully antiessentialist *and* social. Antiessentialist uses of identity have been pioneered by feminist thought, race and postcolonial studies, and lesbian and gay studies, to name some of the most active fields. Writers such as Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, Ed Cohen, Diana Fuss, Giles Gunn, Stuart Hall, Donna Haraway, June Jordan, Duncan Kennedy, Ernesto Laclau, Lisa Lowe, Wahneema Lubiano, Kobena Mercer, Chantal Mouffe, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Patricia J. Williams have emphasized the variable, indeterminate, shifting boundaries of any group identity. Many commentators on identity politics have lived through the abundant political failures of essentialism and have retained the use of *social* identities even as they have repudiated—with a passion born of disappointed hopes—a dream of sharing essences. Much of this work, though of course not all, has been associated with scholars of color. When Michaels proceeds without engaging the work that challenges his claim that identity is always essentialist, he is reproducing a “color line” in cultural studies.

These are some odd liabilities for Michaels’s demonstration that racism is the appeal to race, but we do not think they mean that Michaels “really” possesses essentialist or racist intentions; we presume he harbors neither of these. We see these features as signs of a broader discourse in play—a liberal racial common sense that transcends the present effects of racism by minimizing history. We will spend some time on Michaels’s attempt to bring a nonliberal description of cultural identity into his orbit. We do this to suggest that the apparently plausible color-blind outcome depends heavily on an implausible dehistoricization of culture. This dehistoricization wreaks havoc on descriptions of commonplace U.S. racial divisions and does so through a philosophy that, historically speaking, is white.

Michaels makes his most sustained argument against identities in his discussion of James Clifford, who, in a two-page footnote, is joined to a cultural theorist that Michaels shows to harbor racialist thoughts.¹⁰ Clifford’s account of a federal trial, *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury et al.*, argues for the kind of strongly historical contextualization of the uses of culture that Michaels denies. The Mashpee, as Clifford tells it, went to trial in order to determine whether they were legally a tribe under federal statute. Were they able to prove tribal status, the Mashpee would have been

10. This writer is Melville Herskovits. Andrew Apter offers a critique of Herskovits’s antiessentialism that leads to a different outcome from Michaels’s. Trying to avoid the “double bind” in which “either we essentialize Africa or renounce it” (the latter being Michaels’s solution to any “cultural identity”), Apter suggests a focus on cultural practices “as strategies of appropriation and empowerment” within “relations of domination.” His use of phrases like “inner logic of syncretic practices,” however, would be grist for Michaels’s mill, and the confusions in our vocabularies about culture suggests the heuristic value of Michaels’s criticisms (Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora,” *Diaspora* 1 [Winter 1991]: 251).

able to use the Non-Intercourse Act of 1790 to recover some land that had been sold to non-Indians, since the act prohibited such "alienation" of Indian land without the approval of the federal government. For Clifford, "Identity in Mashpee" makes sense only in relation to "complex historical processes of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention, and revival" (p. 680 n. 36). He explicitly criticizes the court's incomprehension of these processes and traces the Mashpee's defeat to the court's demand for an essential group identity, which effectively erased the contingencies of the group's actual history. Clifford also sees the court's position as reflecting a highly politicized Euro-American view of identity whose emergence cannot be separated from the history of interracial relations in the colonization of the New World. For Clifford, the appeals to identity on both sides of this case emerge from the history of colonization and of race as a mode of social organization. Given all this, Michaels will need to work hard to show that Clifford's use of cultural identity as a historical dynamic is actually an appeal to racial identity.

Michaels makes an argument that, as we read it, consists of four separate claims: (1) For Clifford, Mashpee tribal status turns on the existence of Mashpee identity. (2) Mashpee identity is expressed by the possession or recovery of a Mashpee cultural practice like drumming. (3) Any cultural identity that involves "remembering" as well as "reinvention" must rest on an appeal to a continuous, inherent, precultural identity, one that exists prior to the cultural practice (p. 680 n. 36). (4) This non-cultural identity is racial identity. Taking these claims in turn, it becomes apparent that they reflect and defend current liberal racial common sense rather than describe Clifford's actual deployment of cultural identity.

1. *Tribal status, which involves cultural practices, is about cultural identity rather than social relations.* To the contrary, Clifford describes the Mashpee as attempting to establish a valid *tribal* rather than cultural identity; culture comes up as the demand of the court. The tribe is a political entity; the reason there is a question about Mashpee identity in the first place has nothing to do with anyone's confusion over whether drumming makes you an Indian or being an Indian makes you drum but over the way to retain some control over land use around the town of Mashpee. The Mashpee had political independence until the 1960s, "when local government passed out of Indian control, perhaps for good, and . . . the scale of [white land] development increased."¹¹ The recovery of legal status as a tribe would restore to the Mashpee a town government that they felt had been seized by absentee developers; the Mashpee do not seek to affirm the racial or cultural integrity of this government so much as to make the government again responsive to the political wishes of the ma-

11. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 280; hereafter abbreviated *PC*.

jority of the town's historical inhabitants. Clifford makes his endorsement of Mashpee identity talk contingent on the legal and historical context of their petition for tribal status: "I concluded that since the ability to act collectively as Indians is currently bound up with tribal status, the Indians living in Mashpee and those who return regularly should be recognized as a 'tribe'" (*PC*, p. 336). Clifford's use of phrases like "act collectively as Indians" refers to relations both chosen and imposed within the history of power relations between different social groups. The most obvious sign of the Mashpee's identity as Mashpee is that they are on trial to see whether they are tribe enough to go on trial. *Culture* is one word for group agency; rather than express established identity, it is part of the process that creates it. In its complicated relation to tribal status, culture does not show that one is now or already was or can now become a Mashpee but that one has the right to petition a state apparatus for political sovereignty.¹²

In separating cultural identity from the history of intergroup conflict, Michaels approximates the epistemology of the federal court. It was the court that demanded cultural continuity as proof of valid tribal exist-

12. The Mashpee case was one chapter of the long and unfinished story of U.S. efforts to supersede the sovereignty of American Indian nations. The United States possesses title to its own land mass entirely because of land it acquired through treaties with Indians; American identity depends on this history of expropriation, and, for Americans, "Indian" identity existed and exists only within this history. The essentializing identity claims come most powerfully from the state's laws governing Indian identity. One native organization, Native American Consultants, Inc., summarizes the effect of the statutes this way:

1. An Indian is a member of any federally recognized Indian Tribe. To be federally recognized, an Indian Tribe must be comprised of Indians.

2. To gain federal recognition, an Indian Tribe must have a land base. To secure a land base, an Indian Tribe must be federally recognized. [Quoted in M. Annette Jaimes, "Federal Indian Identification Policy: A Usurpation of Indigenous Sovereignty in North America," *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. Jaimes (Boston, 1992), p. 133]

The Mashpee trial took place within federal identity designations that, on top of the catch-22 quality Jaimes observes, determine whether any Indian or group of Indians can hold land independently of the white property system that has been swallowing their land for centuries. The question of Indian identity has a long and violent political history. It ranges from the 1887 General Allotment Act, which established Indian identification according to the "blood quantum" or "degree of Indian blood"; the aim here was to transform collective land holdings into individual private property. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 endowed Indians or groups of Indians with American identity (as U.S. citizens) regardless of their wishes. The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act overrode existing Indian governing councils in favor of more pliable councils modelled on corporate boards. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1972 appeared to abandon the "blood quantum" standard of Indian identity in favor of "self-identification," only to be evaded by the Reagan Administration's attempt to "enforce degree-of-blood requirements for federal services, such as those of the Indian Health Service." Most recently, the Indian Arts and Crafts Law (1990) restricted "definition of Indian artists to those possessing a federally issued 'Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood'" (pp. 130–31). At no point can Indian identity be distinguished from struggles over Indians' right to collective self-governance.

tence (see *PC*, pp. 320–25, 333–35). Clifford insists that identity is social and historical, discontinuous and changing; he holds that a proper historical awareness of cultural practices around Mashpee would show that “often the ‘tribe’ in Mashpee was simply people deciding things by consensus, in kitchens or at larger ad hoc gatherings where no records were kept. . . . The ‘tribe’ in Mashpee was simply shared Indian kinship, place, history, and a long struggle for integrity without isolation” (*PC*, p. 310). The court eclipses Mashpee history with Mashpee culture and in so doing successfully ignores Mashpee sovereignty while *also* evading the federal role in regulating it for two hundred years. The problem of cultural identity comes up in the context of domination. The Mashpee are trying to *avoid* American-style cultural identity: “Identity as an American meant giving up a strong claim to tribal political integrity in favor of ethnic status within a national whole. Life as an American meant death as an Indian” (*PC*, p. 341).¹³ Tribal status would allow the Mashpee to avoid pre-given, ethnic identity in favor of the ongoing group agency made possible by national sovereignty (see *PC*, p. 280).

2. *Cultural identity is constituted by the possession or repossession of cultural practices.* Michaels writes that Clifford’s “appeal to memory makes it clear that the resumption of a discontinued Indian practice cannot in itself count as a marker of Indian identity; going to powwows, taking up drumming, and starting to wear ‘regalia’ wouldn’t turn a New York Jew into a Mashpee Indian” (p. 680 n. 36). “If, then,” he concludes, “the criteria of Mashpee identity are drumming, dressing in ‘regalia,’ and so on, it should be the case that anyone who meets these criteria counts as a Mashpee” (p. 681 n. 36). In fact, however, drumming and dressing are not the criteria of Mashpee identity, which is only as mysterious as there being more to an engineer than wearing a pocket protector.

Michaels offers no evidence that Clifford reduces group identity to the pursuit of stereotypical activities. Mashpee cultural practices include whatever engages the ordinary and extraordinary historical convergences of coercive force and attempted self-direction. What makes the Mashpee different are the different details of these convergences: the Mashpee are subject to the racial, cultural, political, and economic forms of subordination American Indians experience generally, yet they are not governed by the Indian Reorganization Acts of 1934 and 1972 as admin-

13. Clifford is by no means entirely consistent on this and other points. Elsewhere he says, “The individuals of Indian ancestry from Mashpee who filed suit in 1976 were American citizens similar to Irish- or Italian-Americans with strong ethnic attachments.” They were taking “advantage of the latest wave of pan-Indian revivalism” (*PC*, p. 301). Such an inconsistency might be explained through the many differences among the Mashpee involved in the suit, as one might expect of the individuals of any group. In any case, the point of reading Clifford, for us, is to continue to explore the complexities of radically discontinuous American sociocultural life by working through his contradictions and ambiguities rather than to use them to deny the major issue he addresses.

istered by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs; they had controlled local politics in Mashpee until the mid-1960s; they are more assimilated into Euro-American society than many Native groups; and they retain a certain ideological and political solidarity in spite of this relatively greater assimilation. These five of the most obvious and outsider influences on their experience could reasonably be supplemented by dozens of others, and they can only arbitrarily be reduced to the simplistic culturalism of “drumming, dressing in ‘regalia,’ and so on.”

The Mashpee themselves attempt to evade this drumming standard of culture when the court tries to apply it to them.¹⁴ They display no anxiety about the markings of continuous cultural identity. They regard regalia as something you use, that you invoke “as long as needed” and for contingent reasons (“when my hair was long enough”). The meaning of bandannas and drums must be sought in the framework of multiple, varying, and conflicting social determinations.

3. *All forms of cultural identity that “do any cultural work” rest on a personal identity that “runs much deeper than culture”* (pp. 682, 681 n. 36). Having claimed that culture is about identity and that attitudes toward identity can be evaluated by the drumming standard, Michaels says that Clifford grounds cultural identity in an appeal to a continuous, inherent, precultural identity:

Clifford rejects culture as a mark of identity because culture tolerates no discontinuities. But he himself can tolerate discontinuity only if it is grounded in a continuity that runs much deeper than culture: drumming will make you a Mashpee not because anyone who drums gets to be a Mashpee but because, insofar as your drumming counts as remembering a lost tradition, it shows that you already *are* a Mashpee. [P. 681 n. 36]

Michaels’s second and third claims set up this binary choice for a member of a group: either you perform stereotyped activities associated with a group and this makes you a member *or* you are a member ontologically.

14.

Q. (St. Clair): I notice you have a headband and some regalia?

A.: Yes.

Q.: How long have you been wearing such clothing?

A.: Oh, I have been wearing a headband as long as needed, when my hair was long enough.

Q.: How long has that been?

Judge: That which you have on there, is that an Indian headband?

A.: It is a headband.

Judge: It has some resemblance to an ordinary red bandanna?

A.: Right, that’s what the material is, yes.

Judge: A bandanna you buy in the store and fold up in that manner?

A.: Yes. [“Chiefy” Mills under cross-examination from James St. Clair, *Mashpee Tribe v. New Seabury et al.*, quoted in *PC*, p. 346]

If you are Chicano, this is either because you wear a T-shirt and khakis while driving a lowered Chevy *or* because you think *Chicano* describes your identity at birth. If you are not already doing Chicano things but think you “are” Chicano, then you must be assuming a biological identity with Chicano traditions. Either your connection to the status of Chicano consists of a set of existing behaviors or it is an essentialist and hence racial tie.

Why are these the two choices for the basis of group identity? The sentence that Michaels invokes in support of this reading says, “But is any part of a tradition ‘lost’ if it can be remembered, even generations later, caught up in a present dynamism and made to symbolize a possible future?” (*PC*, pp. 341–42). Clifford has just rejected the “either-or” choice posed by the face-off between plaintiffs and defendants—either continuous or wholesale assimilation. Both narratives are wrong for him, and “identity,” both “real yet essentially contested,” re-created yet potentially authentic, is precisely that which the “either-or” logic of the court is unable to capture (*PC*, pp. 341, 340). Identity involves culture and “tribal institutions,” the history of events, conflicts, defeats, and resistances that are put together, dismantled, and reassembled by the ongoing process of collaborative narrativization. The tradition once lost and now and again, here and there remembered is *knowledge of history* rather than interior identity, and it is used in the present, continually changing situation and redefined by the living in relation to a “possible future.”¹⁵ Clifford sees “Identity in Mashpee” as “relational and political” and, rather than posit its continuity, argues that it can be discontinuous with its previous forms and *unbaffled by this changeability*. In fact, he suggests that identity is always discontinuous since change constitutes the social and political dimension of collective life. Remembering consists of all of the stories, social relations, personal ties, “changing federal and state policies and the surrounding ideological climate” that make up what you could and could not do, what you have and have not done, and what you can and cannot

15. Michaels offers similar arguments for racial essentialism at various points in the essay. His other contemporary example concerns Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and this statement in particular: “We don’t have to believe that our values are absolutely better than the next fellow’s or the next country’s, but we have no doubt that they are better *for us*, reared as we are—and are worth living by and worth dying for” (quoted p. 683). Michaels notes that if these values “are not just better but are just better ‘for us,’ then our reason for holding them can only be that they are ours.” Schlesinger’s use of the word *ours*, Michaels argues, rests on “something stronger than the claim that . . . they are the beliefs we actually hold”; to be “ours,” these beliefs must be connected to an “essentialist assertion of identity,” of “who we are” (p. 683). But it may be that Schlesinger means to say that our beliefs are better for us for a whole host of historical and cultural reasons. For example, we may think they are better for us because we read our sociocultural experience as saying that we are better off because of our beliefs, or because we have read a lot of books like Schlesinger’s. Again, this separation of questions of identity from questions about history and society has more to do with individualism than with antiessentialism.

do now. Remembering, in Clifford's account, describes past social possibilities and is often invoked to imagine a different future through the collaborative destruction and invention of cultural processes. Mashpee memory is not deeper than culture but is culture, the historical narrative of a society.¹⁶

4. *The noncultural continuity that Clifford purportedly invokes is racial identity.* Having affirmed that Clifford's notion of cultural identity is rooted in something "beyond" culture, Michaels's next sentence defines what that beyond must be. Clifford winds up believing, as Michaels sees it, that since "your drumming counts as remembering a lost tradition, it shows that you already *are* a Mashpee"; thus "his rejection of cultural identity gets him no further away from racial identity than does the more usual insistence on cultural identity." This is true but only because, for Michaels, no amount of historical and social relations gets any discussion of culture away from racial identity. He offers no evidence to support his claim, and since everything Clifford says, inconsistencies and all, does in fact lead away from both racial and narrowly cultural identity toward some conjuncture like historical socioculture, Michaels backs away: "The point here is not that Clifford is secretly depending on some notion of racial identity" (p. 681 n. 36). This too is true: Michaels's point is less to detect proof of biological racial meaning than to discredit claims that a differential identity is also historical and political. Once again, Mashpee

16. Reflecting an indifference to this kind of depth, Mashpee witnesses, when asked in court about the source of their Mashpee identity, say they are Mashpee because other people have always thought they were, because they think they are, because they say they are.

Q.: How do you know you're an Indian?

A.: My mother told me. [quoted in *PC*, p. 301]

Q.: How do you know your ancestors?

A.: My mother, grandparents, word of mouth. [quoted in *PC*, p. 287]

The witness knows she is an Indian because she trusts her mother. The verification of identity is an interpretive decision made within a group. Identity emerges from the history of stories that members of a group tell to each other. The witness knows her ancestors not because they are already "hers" or are culturally "her" but because of stories told about them. Some come from family, some come from no specific source, and none lay claim to legal or ontological authority. None establish an identity of the kind a contractual, property-owning society would recognize.

Q.: How was your youth different from that of any small-town youth?

A.: We were different. We knew we were different. We were told we were different. [quoted in *PC*, p. 281]

The identity is in the experiencing and the hearing, the accepting and the telling. Mashpee on the stand, and against their best interests, do not claim to be Mashpee prior to the stories told to them. They reverse Michaels's dictum: "who we are" turns out to come from "what we do," most of us together, and in conjunction with what has been done to us.

identity in Clifford's texts leads a very different life, a life involving the dynamic of the Mashpee's relations to those that had long lived among them without racial or ethnic connection.¹⁷

Michaels's assimilation of cultural identity to racial essentialism lends an air of credibility to an analysis that would otherwise be more readily seen to reflect the perspective of historically white interests. This perspective denies its own historical presence in the creation of cultural relations and diverts attention from an ongoing struggle for power under conditions of inequality. It further avoids a reckoning with the fact that the moments of nearest approach between culture and race are, in U.S. history, those most likely to be utterly inseparable from power struggles. The Mashpee trial, where the state demands identification, is an example of the inappropriateness of this separation.

But we do not regard Michaels's reading as an individual mistake. When an analyst of his acuity draws such conclusions, some larger forces are affecting the instruments. We think these forces, to repeat, consist of post-civil rights race moderation, which makes certain arguments seem implausible and impractical. It is to these forces, their content and aims, that we now turn.

17.

Q.: And now, before you went away to school—Incidentally, is that a private institution, if you know?

A.: Private?

Q.: Is it owned and operated by the state or federal government or is it owned and operated on a private basis, if you know?

A.: Private.

Q.: Do you know or are you guessing?

A.: I am not sure what they call themselves, Daughters of American Revolution and some Christian organizations involved in it.

Q.: Let's see, the Daughters of the American Revolution is not an organization that you would associate with Indians, is it?

A.: In our history, yes.

Q.: Pardon?

A.: I said in our history, yes. Wampanoag history—Mashpee Wampanoag history.

Q.: Daughters of the American Revolution, in your understanding of what you say is your history, have an Indian origin?

A.: It is not our history, but we were involved with that revolution and 149 of our Mashpee people died in that fighting for your independence.

Q.: Fighting for what?

A.: Independence.

Q.: But is it your understanding that the Daughters of the American Revolution have an Indian origin or are in some way related to persons of Indian descent?

A.: They embrace me as a member.

Q.: Pardon?

A.: I said the women that I met that were involved with the Daughters of American Revolution felt a kinship with me because of the Mashpee Wampanoags that had died in the war. [Ramona Peters under cross-examination from St. Clair, quoted in *PC*, pp. 316–17]

3. *Postpluralism and the New Supremacism*

The question of my “identity” often comes up. I think I must be a mixed-blood. I claim to be male, although only one of my parents was male.

—JIMMIE DURHAM, a Cherokee, quoted in *The State of Native America*

Race moderation remains largely in the hands of cultural pluralism. Though pluralism takes a variety of forms, a diffusely evangelical type has recently become influential through high-profile works like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s, *The Disuniting of America*. Michaels explicitly rejects Schlesinger’s pluralism by suggesting that it rests on the same racial essentialism it attacks in Afrocentrism. This distinction between essentialist and antiessentialist views, even assuming its validity here, should not obscure the extent to which Schlesinger and Michaels are pressed in a similar direction by the same general structure of liberal racial thought. Michaels’s position repudiates Schlesinger’s cultural pluralism while preserving important aspects of its project. We will briefly survey what we regard as the negative aspects of this “beyond race” liberalism and, in closing, suggest some features of a more desirable white racial outlook.

Cultural pluralism may frequently reflect democratic expectations, but it harbors other features that become especially prominent in times of perceived threat. First, it regards race as consciousness rather than as a mode of social power and as *false* consciousness at that. Race refers to *identity* rather than to cultural or social relations, and this view, which prevails in most officially color-blind institutions, builds on the longstanding ethnicity paradigm which, since the 1920s, has assumed that “racial and ethnic groups are neither central nor persistent elements of modern societies. . . . Racism and racial oppression are not independent dynamic forces but are ultimately reducible to other causal determinants, usually economic or psychological.”¹⁸ Second, cultural pluralism sees racial or cultural differences as properly subordinate to common culture and shared social institutions. Schlesinger, for example, calls for a return to George Washington’s ideal of a “new race” forming “*one people*” in the

18. Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York, 1972), p. 2. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan offered such an influential version of this thesis because they acknowledged the persistence of “the ethnic group” even as they declined to allot race, as distinct from white ethnicity, any reality apart from—and any superior importance to—a whole range of factors like “history, family and feeling, [political] interest, formal organization life” (Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* [Cambridge, Mass., 1963], p. 19).

New World.¹⁹ Third, this cultural pluralism does not mean cultural equality but a putatively nonracial Western supremacism. As Schlesinger puts it, "Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the *unique* source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law. . . . There is surely no reason for Western civilization to have guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism, and fanaticism" (*DA*, pp. 127–28). Schlesinger's pluralist sense that there are indeed other systems of values that might be (or might seem to be) better for other people easily coexists with his general belief that ours really is better. The payoff of this strain of cultural pluralism is that it combines tolerance and hierarchy, difference and inferiority, into pluralist, democratic supremacism.

These features of pluralism form the influential background for Michaels's efforts to reject pluralism, whose gravitational field is difficult to escape. For our present purposes we will call this postpluralism, without meaning by this term to designate various nonpluralisms in existence and under development. We mean instead a position that opposes pluralism's use of identities, particularly group identity, while retaining other features of a pluralist project.

On the first issue, Michaels separates race from its social dynamics by defining it as a concept of biological identity; he pulls the ostensibly more social category of culture into the same biologicistic system. Rather than traditional pluralism's empirical or sociological arguments against the significance of race, Michaels sidesteps the social environments in which racism and race get deployed. His position excludes social relations not only from the analysis of racialized culture but also from any methodological discussion of the legitimacy of this exclusion. One need not make a historical or sociological case for the exclusion of history and society in this or that particular cultural system, a process that of course involves precisely those elements. One can offer instead reasons of philosophy, which perform clean separations of domains. The distinction between essentialist and antiessentialist uses of identity is itself a *historical* question, but Michaels uses the distinction to render history and politics irrelevant to the evaluation of cultural identity.

In this way, a controversial subject like race can be protected from the realm of politics and power without this protection being itself a political issue. The "truth" of race will then not vary depending on where the analyst stands in a network of racializing systems. With conventional cultural pluralism, these different political positions and interests are

19. Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1992), pp. 24–25; hereafter abbreviated *DA*. Horace Kallen's pluralism offered a far more tolerant celebration of the commerce in difference, but it too looks toward "unity . . . [as] a future formation we desirefully steer our present imaginations toward" (Horace Kallen, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea: An Essay in Social Philosophy* [Philadelphia, 1956], pp. 47–48).

bound up with any discussion about overcoming them. A cultural pluralist usually starts by conceding that racial reality looks different to Asian Americans and Chicanos and must then make some kind of ethical, historical, or social case for conceiving of race as an identity that should be set aside. Within the domain of philosophy, the question of power and society need not even arise.

Equally important, ahistorical antiessentialism allows the analyst to disavow his or her own social position. The analyst exists in a field of reason rather than a discontinuous terrain of social antagonisms. It is not surprising, then, that philosophy would come to the fore in the analysis of race issues at a time when pluralism itself is under more scrutiny as the racial ideology of a minority white culture than at any time since the zenith of black nationalism twenty years ago. For unlike pluralism, which has a racial history into which it drags its adherents, philosophy is, to itself, never white.

Second, while Schlesinger's nationalist "'American Creed'" (*DA*, p. 27) visibly demands compliance with some substantive principles, the postpluralist produces a common culture through constitutive rules.²⁰ While pluralists like Schlesinger write as though there is a common culture—whose core beliefs form a creed by which any group can be judged according to its adherence or rejection of these beliefs—the postpluralist establishes boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate uses of social identity. The mode here is not to suggest that a person or group's practices and beliefs place them on the margins of Western values but that a person's individual or group identity corrupts reason. The postpluralist need not contest the Afrocentric's interpretation of the race record of U.S. democracy but only say that the Afrocentric's constitutive sense of racial difference prevents his or her views from counting as genuine knowledge. "Common culture" is translated into the zone of rational discourse or public reason; it excludes certain factors not because they differ from white or Western beliefs but because their belief in difference violates a criterion of reason.

In Michaels's essay, that criterion is antiessentialism. While pluralists might have judged a group according to its espousal of a unifying value like representative democracy, Michaels writes as though a group can be judged by its relation to an antiessentialism that remains unaffected by cultural, ideological, or historical differences. Individuals and groups as otherwise dissimilar as Oliver La Farge, James Clifford, Melville Herskovits, the Mashpee, and a scrivener for the Klan can be tested for essentialism and assimilated via the presence of that quality. If they are found to be essentialist, they can be excluded not from Americanness but from

20. Michael Hardt has described how contemporary liberalism, as represented by John Rawls, defines the boundaries of political communities by constituting the rules of public rationality in "Les Raisonnables et les différents: Le Libéralisme politique de Rawls," *Futur antérieur* (forthcoming 1994).

the sphere of reason itself. Those who consider racial or cultural identity an asset, a liability, a source of social knowledge, or any combination of these, can, under postpluralism, be shown *not* violating nationalistic ideals like a unified “new race” but violating contemporary standards of valid reasoning. Racialized experience becomes irrelevant to and indeed obstructive of authentic knowledge, knowledge of the kind that can legitimately be applied to social and political disputes. A common culture stripped down to what are presented as the minimum requirements of knowledge avoids Schlesinger’s philistine assimilationism while excluding the identity talk that allows what opposes assimilation to enter into negotiation.

But is the postpluralist also a supremacist? Although reason seems to be an equal opportunity operation, and though it avoids oafish chauvinism and unprofessional derogations of others’ beliefs, the kind of race philosophy we have been discussing assumes the power of epistemology to make the rules for political or ethnographic arguments. This superiority of the epistemological is not directly argued in Michaels’s text, but it presumes its ability to settle the rules of discourse and judgment. Such a tacit supremacism easily coexists with political liberalism, flexibility, inclusion, and generosity; it consists of the quiet expectation that its procedures and standards will be taken as a dispute’s rules of arbitration—that its concerns count the most.²¹ This supremacism need never appear as an obviously rude insistence. When distinctively white philosophy criticizes someone for essentialism, it can work simply by taking for granted that people will care; it can proceed by assuming that the confusing intricacies of historical cases will have less weight. It knows that a Mashpee’s indefiniteness about the status of a bandanna will not seem brilliant, not compared to, say, the claim that a position secretly rests on its apparent opposite. The taste culture addressed by such assumptions is also white in a sociocultural sense, and postpluralism can assume that this fact about its audience’s group identity will seem less important within this group than the exposure of logical inconsistency. Schlesinger, still an old-fashioned pluralist, thinks he must openly state his belief that the West is the best and then marshal evidence for this belief. The postpluralist works with more pervasive and invisible presumptions that are not explicitly defended: the difference between essentialism and antiessentialism is independent of historical context; analysis of identity as a logic “knows” more than remembering a grievance, and so on. Postpluralist supremacism appears delicately, coasting on the historical prestige, the

21. Cheryl I. Harris importantly describes socially defined “whiteness” as the power to make rules *and* as the “settled expectation” that whites will face no “undue” obstacles. Of particular importance here is her claim that “whiteness as property is also constituted through the reification of expectations in the continued right of white-dominated institutions to control the legal meaning of group identity” (Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 [1993]: 1761).

institutional investments, and the economic and social superiority of the generally white powers with which it shares its modes. Lately, color blindness has been on the economic rise, and epistemology's assumption of the irrelevance of its social connections to the interests and history of this ideology, its irrelevance in creating the superiority of epistemological over political or identity claims, is itself a symptom of its assumed supremacy.

The pluralist's carefully relativized claims to his or her culture's superiority give way to the postpluralist's (perfectly liberal) discrediting of the modes by which a group's superiority might be overcome. Regardless of the postpluralist use of antiessentialism, many racialized groups know that their identity is bound up with their subordination and their pursuit of sovereignty; the Mashpee trial exemplifies this common phenomenon. Supremacism is maintained not by affirming the supremacy of one's own values but by defining contestations of the existing rules as irrational.

Postpluralism defines the most basic racism as the appeal to race. It says, in effect, that if you believe in a society beyond racism (meaning, it believes, beyond race), you must expose cultural difference as racist pathos. This rejection would not appear to reflect your racialized political agenda but simply your enlightened, postessentialist philosophy. Postpluralism, shorn of pluralism's more obvious supremacist outbursts, would take over its role as racial management. It would never need to say, It doesn't matter who you are, I don't care who you are, or I don't like who you are. It would only ask, whenever racial hierarchy comes up, "But why does it matter who we are?" (p. 682). Around race, the artificial separation of cultural processes from politics enables such containment, intended or not.

We have been trying to make more explicit the reasons why evangelical pluralism *and* postpluralism can be regarded as liberal racism—not because their advocates hold racist attitudes but because they support the dehistoricization, the monopolized rule making, and the subtle supremacy that allow democratic institutions to produce nuanced but still racially discriminatory effects. Indirect, contemporary forms of racial subordination receive (often unintended) support from the opposition to race.

Rather than go down Michaels's particular path of postpluralism, we would suggest taking his important insights into pluralist racism in a different direction. For white Americans, particularly professionals, this starts with avoiding postpluralism's "bad" . . . utopianism," which "grabs instantly for a future, projecting itself by an act of will or imagination beyond the compromised political structures of the present."²² It involves

22. Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said (Minneapolis, 1990), p. 25.

reconceiving postpluralism through the rejection of the three prominent features we have discussed.

First, this redefined white nonpluralism must refuse to associate the advent of reason with the white version of cultural separatism—the belief that culture can be cleansed of political history. It is especially important to evade the pull of cultural separatism around the study of race by acknowledging that the appeal to race cannot be separated from the endurance of racism. If we do not grant the presence of conflict and contestation, of politics and history, of context and determinations in the study of culture, we are not avoiding politicization, but we are avoiding cultural knowledge itself. Second, the common culture formed by portable antiessentialism should be replaced with negotiation across perceived boundaries. This will require granting the existence of such boundaries when one party declares them and avoiding the impulse to simply assert a principle of reason to rule all domains in the same way. It will involve white Americans in repudiating the protective and legislative power of both the “American Creed” and its color-blind philosophies. Finally, it means that white Americans must reject the forms of pluralism discussed here as liberal racism—as cultural racism, in Michaels’s useful concept—not because cultural pluralism rests on an essentialist notion of racial identity, Michaels’s problematic, but because it is white/West supremacist and remains so in ever more objectivist and managerially abstract guises. A better future for race relations will require supporting ongoing race consciousness as the basis of negotiated group identities, intergroup equality, separatism, and autonomy. The democratic solution entails more careful and complex race consciousness rather than less. And this will require cultural studies to respond more fully to its history of using pluralism as racial management.