AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-WHITE MAN

Why race is not a social construction

Walter Benn Michaels

"Music is a universal art," says the rich white man in James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. "Anybody’s music belongs to everybody; you can’t limit it to race or country." The novel itself, however, is skeptical about music’s claim to universality, approving of the colored man’s trip "into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in [his] inspiration firsthand," but disapproving of the white performers who go to Harlem "to get their imitations firsthand from the Negro entertainers they [see] there." Anybody’s music may belong to everybody, but there’s a difference between the imitations that whites get from blacks and the inspiration that blacks get from blacks. The logic of this position has a more general application: black musicians who listen to the spirituals are claiming their “heritage”; white musicians who imitate the spirituals (or ragtime or hip-hop or the blues) are, as one contributor to the publication Race Traitor puts it, denying blacks the “right to any heritage of their own.”

The contributors to Race Traitor—a journal devoted to “the abolition of whiteness”—are divided on the question of whether white people can or should sing the blues. And, indeed, the terms of this division are crucial to the very project of race treason—the project of abolishing not white racism but the white race. Are white people who “borrow from black culture” helping “to make white people cease to be,” or are they, like white performers who go to Harlem, just “ripping off” blacks? When Johnson’s colored man abandons the sources of his inspiration, he becomes an ex-colored man, which is to say that he becomes an imitation: he passes for white. Race Traitor imagines that white men—perhaps (as one of its editors, Noel Ignatiev, says) “by some engagement with blackness, perhaps even an identification as ‘black’”—can become ex-white men. But are whites who engage blackness just passing for black? The ex-colored man rejects his racial identity by concealing it; the ex-white man wishes not to conceal his racial
...from, but by rejecting it, to destroy it. The ex-colored man no longer wishes to be "identified" as a "Negro"; the race traitor—perhaps by identifying himself as black—wants to cease to be white.

The difference between these projects is a difference in race theory. Race in Johnson's *Autobiography* is a function of what its narrator calls "blood." It is because his skin is the color of "ivory" that the narrator can pretend to be white; it is because his "blood" is black that he isn't. By contrast, the editors of *Race Traitor*, like most contemporary racial theorists, believe that race is a "social," not a "biological," fact. Indeed, it is only because "race is socially constructed" that the commitment to "the abolition of whiteness" can make non-genocidal sense. To "make white people cease to be" is not to kill white people; it is to destroy the social fact of whiteness. Insofar as whiteness, like slavery, is a social fact, it can, like slavery, be abolished; just as there once were millions of ex-slaves, there may in the future be millions of ex-whites.

Of course, the project of abolishing whiteness is only made possible by the redefinition of race as a social construction, even if the celebration of racial difference has been a more characteristic ambition of contemporary race theory. To the extent that both of these projects—celebrating race and abolishing it—depend upon a conception of race as a social fact, I want to argue that neither can succeed. We cannot think of race as a social fact, like slavery or—to take the analogy that is even more fundamental to the project of race treason—like class. If, as Ignatiev puts it, "race, like class, is 'something which in fact happens,'" then—and this is the project of race treason—it can be "made to un happen." I will argue that race is not like class, that it neither happens nor can it be made to un happen. And despite those who wish to "respect and preserve" rather than abolish race, I will argue it makes no more sense to respect racial difference than it does to try to abolish it. Indeed, the very impulse to preserve race reveals the degree to which those who imagine that their accounts of race are "antiessentialist" or "performative" remain, in fact, committed to racial essentialism.

My criticism of the idea that race is a social construction is not a defense of racial essentialism. Rather, I want to insist that our actual racial practices, the way people talk about and theorize race, however "antiessentialist," can be understood only as the expression of our commitment to the idea that race is *not* a social construction, and I want to insist that if we give up that commitment, we must give up the idea of race altogether. Either race is an essence or there is no such thing as race. Regardless, there can be no ex-black or ex-white men. If race, to be what it is, *must* be essential, then Johnson's ex-colored man, because he once was black, can never stop being black; if there is no such thing as race, then the race traitors' ex-white men, because they never were white, can never stop being white. Either race is the sort...
Black Self/White Self

All of the illustrations appearing in this article are collaborative artworks by educator Wendy Ewald and children from the Durham, North Carolina, public schools. Ewald had taught for several years in both the predominantly white suburban schools and the predominantly black urban schools. In 1994, two years after the consolidation of the two school systems, Ewald began working with other teachers to find creative ways to get students and teachers talking about race in the newly integrated schools. “Black Self/White Self” was the result.

Ewald writes:

*Cathy Finoc, a white fifth-grade teacher, and Robert Hunter, an African American art teacher, asked their students to write detailed self-portraits. Then we asked them to write another self-portrait, this time imagining themselves as members of the other race. At first we met with silence, then laughter, then an enthusiastic barrage of questions: Could they change their names, their families? How could they know what it was like to be of a different race?*
Ms. Fine's class was racially mixed, so the students were able to pair up and interview each other. Mr. Hunter's class, however, was entirely African American. Once the students completed their written portraits, I photographed them posing as their "black" and "white" selves, using props they'd brought from home. I gave them the negatives to alter or write on, using ideas from their written portraits, so they could further describe their characters. For the students the idea of transforming the photographs and their own physical features was exciting. They had to think hard about scratching the negative to produce a black line or adding a mark on top of the emulsion to make a white line. Negative and positive and black and white took on a meaning both conceptual and physical.

Since white children had rarely dealt with blacks, they had no idea how to pose; some asked the African American children to direct them. African American children, however, had a clearly defined sense of how white people saw themselves and how they were seen by white people. The African American children needed no coaching; one simply slumped over in front of a white background and covered his head to represent his white persona—homeless, without a community.

"Black Self/White Self" is part of a larger project that will be published in 1999. Several of these images first appeared in DoubleTake 5 (Summer 1996). The images that appear here for the first time include collaborations with teacher Gail Taylor's students at the R. N. Harris Magnet School and Lisa Lord's students at Club Boulevard, both elementary schools in Durham.
of thing that makes rejecting your racial identity just a kind of passing, or passing becomes impossible and there is no such thing as racial identity.

... 

How, then, is passing possible? To an antessentialist, the question could be put this way: How is it possible to pass for something without becoming what it is you pass for? To an essentialist, the question could be put slightly differently: How is it possible to pass at all? What must race be in order for it to be the sort of thing that can be concealed? In a racial system where racial identity is a function of physical appearance—where it is the color of your skin rather than some
fact about your ancestry that determines your racial identity—this may be almost impossible. For if your racial identity is determined by your physical appearance (if being dark-skinned makes you black and being pale-skinned makes you white), then the only way to pass is by concealing or somehow altering the color of your skin.

The choice between altering or concealing—or, more precisely, the possibility of concealing by altering—raises a further question: if you do somehow manage to alter the color of your skin, are you really passing? Are you pretending to belong to one race when you really belong to another, or have you in fact stopped belonging to one race and begun instead to belong to the other? A relevant analogy here would be the transsexual. We probably don’t want to say that the transsexual is passing, and if we do say that the transsexual is passing, we are required to come up with some account of how a person’s body can be changed from one sex to another without the person’s being changed from one sex to another—of where or what the truth is that’s being concealed by the alteration. In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon imagines “a serum for ‘denegritication’” designed to make it possible for the Negro “to whiten himself.” Were there actually to be such a serum, would we want to say that the person who used it was now able to pass for white, or would we want to say that the person now was white?

Under the American racial system, however—under the rule that one drop of black blood makes a person black—passing need not require any physical transformation. In Johnson’s novel, given the “ivory whiteness” of his skin, the ex-colored man simply grows a mustache and changes his name. Where physical appearance, in other words, does not determine racial identity but is only a sign of it, you can pass without altering your body in any way. But to say that the one-drop rule makes passing possible without requiring physical transformation is not, of course, to say that it makes the body irrelevant. After all, even if we acknowledge that the concept of black or white blood has no biological currency nowadays, we can still understand the appeal to blood as a metaphor for whatever thing there is in the body that does determine your race—your genes, for example. Under the one-drop rule, then, for a black person to pass for white is for

The ex-colored man no longer wishes to be “identified” as a “Negro”; the race traitor—perhaps by identifying himself as black—wants to cease to be white.

that person to conceal whatever it is in his or her body that identifies her as being black. But since it is possible to pass only because that thing is already invisible, passing is therefore less a matter of hiding something than of refusing or failing to acknowledge something.

Racial identity under the one-drop rule thus emerges as something that is not only embodied (in the sense that the one drop is in the body) but must also be represented (since, without representation, the fact that it’s in the body cannot be known). This nonidentity of the truth of one’s race and the representation of that truth opens up—indeed, constitutes—the entire field of racialized dis-
course. At the simplest level, it inserts race into the field of ethics: if your racial identity is invisible, it becomes something you can lie about or something you can tell the truth about, something you can conceal or reveal. In itself, however, this possibility is of only limited significance. After all, hair color is also something you can conceal or reveal. But hair color, while it can be misrepresented, cannot be represented. If your hair is black, you can dye it blond and misrepresent its true color, but if you leave it black, you will not represent black hair; you will just have black hair. That race can be invisible, however, means that it must be either misrepresented or represented, since to leave it unrepresented will be to misrepresent it. In other words, if you are invisibly black, either you must find some way to represent your blackness or you must pass for white. Thus it is that the possibility of passing opens up the whole field of racialized discourse. The discourse of race is the discourse of people who can pass but who do not wish to.

This is true despite the fact that comparatively few people can pass. For it is the mere conceptual possibility of passing that proclaims the essential invisibility of race, that takes the color even of people who can’t pass (the vast majority) and changes it from the fact that constitutes their race into a representation of the fact that constitutes their race. This is why a writer like Howard Winant can plausibly say, in Racial Conditions, that “race is not a matter of color alone... It is more like a way of life, a way of being.” That is, since color does not determine race, color must be understood as only one way—and not necessarily the most important way—of manifesting race. The possibility of belonging to a race of people who don’t look like you produces the possibility of manifesting your racial identity in your actions—of acting black or white. It produces, in other words, the idea that certain actions (and we would wish to include under the rubric of “action” beliefs and values as well as practices, all those things that might be said to constitute one’s culture) properly accompany certain identities. Regardless of skin color, there are ways to act black or white. And once we recognize this, we recognize also that even if you can’t pass (even if you can’t help but look like what you are), you can still fail to act like what you are.

Thus the conceptual possibility of passing not only makes available, to those whose physical appearance is such that they can pass, the option of revealing or concealing their racial identity; it makes available to everyone the option of being loyal or disloyal to their race—of embracing or repudiating the way of life that their race supplies. Because race is invisible, all the things that make it visible are reduced to mere representations of a racial identity located elsewhere. At the same time, however, because race cannot be reduced to any of its representations, anything and everything can be understood as a representation of it. It is only because the thing itself is invisible that everything can be imagined as a way of seeing it.

... The invisibility of race makes an important contribution to its power, which is why early American racial thought was always tempted to locate a person’s racial
it way — of manifesting the possibility of belonging to a who don’t look like you possibility of manifesting identity in your actions — of white. It produces, in the idea that certain actions I wish to include under notion beliefs and values races, all those things that constitute one’s culture) upon certain identities. in color, there are ways white. And once we re-recognize also that even (even if you can’t help that you are), you can still that you are.

Sceptical possibility of makes available, to those appearance is such that the option of revealing one’s racial identity; it makes rone the option of being loyal to their race — of purifying the way of life applies. Because race is things that make it visit to mere representations ty located elsewhere. At however, because race ced to any of its repre- sents and everything can is a representation of it. the thing itself is everything can be imagined ing it.

•

Race makes an impop- nent to its power, which is seen racial thought was o locate a person’s racial identity not merely in a part of the person that’s hard to see — the blood — but in a part of the person that’s impossible to see — the soul. Indeed, locating race in the soul rather than the body makes the body itself only a representation of racial essence: it makes race immune to the fantasy of the denigration serum, for what is not actually in the body cannot be affected by the alteration of the body. And in contemporary racial thought — in racial thought at the end of the 20th century rather than at the beginning — the repudiation of the body as the site of racial identity makes the fantasy of biological denigration equally irrelevant. But racial thought today — which is to say, the commitment to race as a social construction — understands itself as antiessentialist, not as a kind of essentialism.

The claim that race is socially constructed is the claim that race is not a biological entity, that there is nothing in people’s bodies — visible or invisible — that constitutes their racial identity. There is, in other words, no such thing as black or white blood and no genetic equivalent to it. As biologist Richard C. Lewontin puts it (in “Of Genes and Gentlys,” Transition 69), “Race is simply not a category that biologists and anthropologists still take seriously, although as a social phenomenon race still has a compelling reality.” But if we don’t think that race is in the soul, and we don’t think it’s in the body, where do we think it is? What kind of reality is the compelling reality of race today?

One way that we might characterize this reality is as the reality of a mistake. Even if race is not a biological fact, many people have believed in it as such, and some people, no doubt, continue to do so. And this belief, mistaken though it may be, has obviously had and no doubt continues to have significant consequences. So we might think that the reality of race consists in the fact that we live in a world that is still organized along racial lines. And the point of our new knowledge — the knowledge that there are no biological races — would be to undo the consequences of our old ignorance, to produce a world in which race was not a compelling reality.

Those who are committed to “the social construction of race,” however, even
the race traitors, clearly do not think of racial reality as a mistake; they do not think of race as the sort of thing which, if it doesn’t exist in nature, doesn’t exist at all. In a well-known passage in Anti-Semitic and Jew, Sartre says that in the eyes of the anti-Semitic, what makes the Jew a Jew “is the presence in him of ‘Jewishness,’ a Jewish principle analogous to phlogiston.” But when people stopped believing that phlogiston existed in nature, they didn’t start believing that phlogiston was a social construction. Which is only to say that the claim that there are no races in nature—that race is a social construction—is not meant to deny that there is such a thing as race; it is meant to give us a better account of what race
So if we say that because there are no races in nature, racial thinking is just "an illusion," the social constructionist thinks that we have missed the point. If, on the one hand, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant put it in *Racial Formation in the United States*, it is a mistake to “think of race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete and objective,” it is, on the other hand, also a mistake “to see it as a mere illusion, which an ideal social order would eliminate.” Those who think of race as a biological fact make the first mistake; those who think of it as mere “ideology” and argue for the desirability of a “color-blind” society make the second. But “race consciousness” is not “false consciousness.” Indeed, to say that because there are no races in nature, there are no races, must be on this view as much a non sequitur as it would be to say that because there are no classes in nature, there are no classes. And just as the denial of the importance of class is a hallmark of liberalism, the denial of race is a strategy of what is now called “liberal racism.”

On this account, race is a compelling reality in the way that social class is, and the argument that because there is no racial phlogiston there are no races looks as politically problematic as its converse, namely, the anti-Semitic’s commitment to the principle of Jewishness. For Sartre, too, it is only the liberal who says that because there is no Jewish phlogiston, “there are no Jews,” and he does so out of his individualist hostility to the very idea of class. Fearing the “great collective forms” that threaten liberal democracy, the democrat seeks “to persuade individuals that they exist in an isolated state”: “he fears that the Jew will acquire a consciousness of the Jewish collectivity—just as he fears that a ‘class consciousness’ may awaken in the worker.” From this standpoint, then, the mistake of the liberal both repeats and corrects the mistake of the anti-Semite; the liberal is wrong to assert the reality of the “individual” and to deny the reality of the class, but he is right to analogize the consciousness of Jewish identity to the consciousness of class identity—to see, in effect, that if there are Jews, they don’t need a Jewish “essence” any more than, say, the workers need a proletarian essence, or the middle class needs a bourgeois essence.

The proletariat and the bourgeoisie don’t need an essence because they are who they are, Sartre says, by virtue of “an ensemble of various modes of behavior.” On the model of class identity, racial identity too would be what it is often said to be today: performative.

A truly performative conception of race would make passing impossible. For the space of passing, as we have already seen, is the space of representation, which is to say that passing is possible because we must in our actions either represent or misrepresent our race. But the possibility of representing or misrepresenting our race depends, as we have also already seen, on the nonidentity of the racial representation and the racial reality. And the idea of race as performative undoes this nonidentity; it eliminates the reality—the blood or the soul—and thus transforms the actions that represent racial identity into the actions that determine racial identity. Passing becomes impossible because, in the logic of social constructionism, it is impossible not to be what you are passing for.
This is the dream of what *Race Traitor* calls “crossover”—the dream that by ceasing to act white you can cease to be white—and it is this dream that produces both the distinctive technology and the distinctive anxiety of putative ex-white men. The distinctive technology is what Johnson disparagingly called “imitation,” what the race traitors de-

**Race no more follows music than music follows race. What you become by playing the blues is a blues musician, not a black person.**

scribe more hopefully as “borrowing” from black culture. The distinctive anxiety is about whether and when such borrowing can succeed, about whether and when white people acting like black people can cease to count as exploiting black people and can begin to count instead as becoming if not black, at least “mulatto.” Thus, although Paul Garon, a music writer and editor at *Living Blues* magazine, appears in *Race Traitor* as a reproachfully Johnsonian figure, criticizing “white blues” as “a weak and imitative form,” the cultural project of race treason will be to reconceive imitation as inspiration and to celebrate in particular those white musicians who, in the words of Albert Murray, “embrace certain Negroes not only as kindred spirits but as ancestral figures.”

Because the difference between imitation and inspiration depends on the ontological priority of racial identity—you are inspired by what you are, you imitate what you aren’t—*Race Traitor’s* “Crossover Dreams” depend on undoing it. They depend, in other words, on the idea that since race is a social construction, there is nothing about the bodies of black people that makes those bodies more suited to playing the blues than white bodies. And since even Garon acknowledges that “neither genes nor race-differentiated experience seem to affect one’s ability to form certain chords or play certain melodies,” it’s hard to see by what criteria the efforts of white people to play the blues can count as more imitative than the efforts of black people, or by what criteria the “white blues” can count as a more “imitative form” than the black blues. Indeed, since a formal description of the blues requires no reference to the color of those who perform it (any more than a formal description of the sonnet does), and since the very idea of a musical “form” is itself dependent on the possibility of imitation, it’s hard to see how there can be any formal difference between black and white blues. The white musician who learns to form the chords and play the melodies is, the objections of Johnson and Garon notwithstanding, no more or less committed to imitation than the black musician.

But the same argument that works against the idea that crossovers are somehow imitative and inferior also works against the idea that crossovers are actually crossing over. If you needn’t be black to play the blues, you don’t become black by playing the blues. Race no more follows music than music follows race; what you become by playing the blues is a blues musician, not a black person. Thus the distinction between white blues and black blues must be understood as a distinction between two kinds of people, not between two kinds of music. What
race is a social concept nothing about the people that makes those to playing the blues and since even Garon "neither genes nor experience seem to form certain chords dies," it's hard to see efforts of white people count as more efforts of black people the "white blues" vs "imitative form" vs. Indeed, since a of the blues requires color of those who's than a formal de net does), and since ical "form" is itself possibility of imit ation there can be any between black and white musician who hords and play the sections of Johnson anding, no more or imitation than the ugment that works crossovers are some inferior also works crossovers are actu ou needn't be black don't become black Race no更多 fol low race; what ing the blues is a black person. Thus en white blues and erstood as a dis kind of people, ds of music. What makes the music you are playing black is the fact that you are black; what gives the music its color is the color of the people who are playing it. If, then, it is only the antessentialist conception of race that makes the project of crossover possible (because only an antessentialist conception makes it possible for you to stop being white by giving up white behavior), it is only an essentialist conception of race that makes it desirable (because only an essentialist conception of race makes your behavior white and thus makes it something you can give up). So although the goal of the ex-white man (crossing over) is fundamentally opposed to the goal of the ex-colored man (passing), the fact that people want to cross

Autobiography 135
over, like the fact that people can pass, turns out to be a tribute to essentialism.

The antiesentialist performative is in this sense a version of the essentialist denigration serum: if race is a biological fact, then to change the color of your skin is to change your race; if race is a mode of behavior, then to change your "way of life" is to change your race. But because race, as Winant says, is "not a matter of color alone," you can't change your race by changing your skin. And because race, in not being a "matter of color alone," must nevertheless still be a matter of color, you can't change your race by changing your "way of life"
either. It must still be a matter of color because without the appeal to color there can be nothing distinctively racial about your "way of life": the social constructionist commitment to the racial performative, in other words, is only skin deep. It involves not the choice of behavior over color but the adjustment of behavior to color.

... 

This is true even if we focus not on racial but on what is today called cultural identity. In the preface to the most recent American edition of Anti-Semitism and Jew, Michael Walzer criticizes Sartre for presenting what he calls an "empty Jewishness," one without either religious or cultural content. But the Jewish religion is irrelevant to Sartre, because insofar as Jewishness is understood as a matter of religious belief and practice, the Jew is a Jew only in the way that, say, a Methodist is a Methodist or a member of the Elks Club is an Elk. We don't need antiessentialist accounts of Elks; their identities are purely performative, which is to say that they are entirely constituted by (rather than represented by) behavior. But a Jew does not become Jewish in the same way that an Elk becomes an Elk, and, of course, a Jew cannot resign as a Jew in the same way that an Elk can resign from the Elks Club.

Another way to put this is to say that Sartre sees that Jewishness is not a matter of biology or a "metaphysical essence" (that's the point of his denial of a Jewish phlogiston). On the other hand, he also sees that a "principle of Jewishness" cannot simply be replaced by a set of Jewish practices; the anti-Semitic hates what the Jew does only insofar as those practices represent what the Jew is. We can put this point more generally and more positively by noting that the celebration of difference in contemporary multiculturalism depends entirely on our thinking of people's cultural identities as expressed by (rather than constituted by) their practices. Why else should we not just tolerate but esteem actions that may seem to us wrong and beliefs that may seem to us mistaken? If, for example, we think that male circumcision is cruel and pointless, why should we allow it? If we think that female circumcision is even more cruel and equally pointless, why should we allow it? If we value such practices, we do so not because they

**Ontologically speaking, a gay man is like a religious Jew.**

seem to us intrinsically valuable but because they seem to represent identities that are valuable. So just as it is only the difference between one's identity and one's actions that makes passing possible, it is only the difference between one's identity and one's actions that makes the celebration of difference plausible. And if, as I have argued above, passing is a kind of tribute to essentialism, so, too, is the celebration of cultural difference—it is indeed only if difference is essential that it can, as such, be celebrated.

Sartre is right, then, to insist not only that the Jew is not a Jew because of his Jewish body or his Jewish soul but also that doing Jewish things does not make him a Jew. But if there is no Jewish body and there is no Jewish soul and there are no Jewish things to do, what's left? "We
must now,” Sartre says, “ask ourselves the question: does the Jew exist?” The liberal, as we have already seen, says no. But the liberal’s answer cannot be accepted, because the liberal also (and for the same reasons) denies that the worker exists. The analogy between the Jew and the worker is problematic, because the worker who saves a lot of money and buys himself a factory becomes a capitalist and ceases to be a worker, while the Jew cannot—by, say, converting to Catholicism—cease to be a Jew. So the fact that workers exist doesn’t mean that Jews must also exist. And yet, Sartre insists, the Jew does exist. In what amounts to the degree zero of social constructionism, Sartre famously asserts that the Jew is not someone who has a Jewish body or soul or religion or culture: “The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew.”

It is being considered a Jew that constitutes the Jew’s “situation.” The Jew, of course, is not alone in being in a situation: on the contrary, everyone is in some situation; some “ensemble of limits and restrictions” “forms” everyone and “decides” everyone’s “possibilities.” But not everyone’s situation is the same, and not everyone deals with his or her situation in the same way. The Jew has two ways of dealing with his. One way is by “running away from it.” The “inauthentic Jew” denies his Jewishness, either by denying that he himself is Jewish or by denying that there are such things as Jews—indeed, by espousing “a conception of the world that excludes the very idea of race.” The authentic Jew, by contrast, not only accepts the Jewishness the world imposes on him but himself chooses that Jewishness; if inauthenticity is “to deny . . . or attempt to escape from” one’s “condition as a Jew,” “authenticity . . . is to live [it] to the full.” The authentic Jew “asserts his claim” as a Jew.

But what claim does the Jew, as Jew, have? The inauthentic Jew claims to be a man like other men, but it is precisely this universalism that makes him inauthentic. The authentic Jew, on the other hand, “abandons the myth of the universal man” and replaces it with a “social pluralism.” But, as we have already seen, this pluralism cannot be understood along the lines of a pluralism that would value Jewish culture. There is no such thing as Jewish culture, Sartre thinks, which is to say that because the assimilated Jew remains Jewish, it cannot be his culture that makes him Jewish—and when the anti-Semite calls you a Jew, it is your “essence,” not your culture, that he is naming. So if to be a Jew is only to be called a Jew, one’s claim as a Jew—one’s claim to be what one is called—cannot be the claim to a culture; it can only be the claim to that essence.

The virtue of Sartre’s analysis is that it makes clear the irreducibility of the notion of essence to identity. Insofar as it is the “situation” (and only the situation) of the Jew that confers upon him his Jewishness, Jewishness is defined without recourse to essence. But the situation in which the Jew finds himself is the situation of having a Jewish essence attributed to him (as it happens, by anti-Semites, but the theoretical position would be no different if those who made the Jew a Jew by considering him to be a Jew liked Jews), and insofar as the situation in which the Jew finds himself is the situation of having a Jewish essence
attributed to him, and insofar as the authentic Jew makes himself authentic by choosing the situation in which the anti-Semite has placed him, the authentic Jew makes himself authentic by choosing essence.

Citing Sartre’s famous depiction of the garçon de café in the opening pages of Being and Nothingness, Anthony Appiah has recently argued (in Color Conscious) that it makes no sense to ask of the waiter what it does make sense to ask of “the black and the white, the homosexual and the heterosexual”—whether he “really is” a waiter. This is because, to use the terms we have derived from Anti-Semitism and Jew, the waiter is more like a religious Jew (or an Elk) than he is like the identity politics: female and male; gay, lesbian and straight, black, white, yellow . . . even that most neglected of American identities, class.”

But to what extent is being gay or straight like being black or white? To what extent is being middle class or working class like being black or white? It certainly is true that there is a sense in which gay men can pass as straight—a sense, that is, in which a gay man can act straight without thereby becoming straight. But it is only a very limited sense. A gay man can pass as straight by behaving like a straight man, but a gay man who not only behaved like a straight man but also desired what straight men desire and thought of himself as straight would no longer be passing as straight—he would be straight. Gay behavior does not represent one’s sexuality, it determines it. Ontologically speaking, a gay man is like a religious Jew. And what is true of religion and sexuality is even more obviously true of class. The garçon de café who saves his tips and buys the café is not a member of the proletariat passing as a member of the petit bourgeoisie—he is petit bourgeois. Although there aren’t any ex-white or ex-black men, there may well be ex-straight and ex-gay men, and there definitely are ex-waiters and ex-religious Jews.

Race, then, is not like class, and the Jew’s reasons for wanting to get rid of race are not the same as the socialist’s reasons for wanting to get rid of class: the inauthentic Jew, wishing for an end to racial difference, does so not on the grounds that it is unjust but on the grounds that it is unreal. What the inauthentic Jew and the socialist do have in common is their hostility to the very

If “I’m black and I’m proud” can be
“the modern rendition of ‘Workers of all
countries, unite,’” which is to say,
if hostility to private property can be
replaced by pride in Michael Jordan...

racialized Jew identified by the anti-
Semite. As Appiah writes, “There can be
a gap between what a person . . . is and
the racial identity he performs.” Therefore, racial identity—unlike religious or
professional identity—cannot be understood simply as the “performance” of a
“role.” It is this gap, Appiah notes, “that makes passing possible,” and if, as we
have already seen, the possibility of passing is constitutive of racial identity, then
racial identity, Appiah writes, is “in this way like all the major forms of identifi-
cation that are central to contemporary

Gregory Blake and
Wendy Ewald,
White Self. 1994
idea of identity; their hostility, that is, to the idea that their bodies, beliefs, and behavior represent rather than determine what they are. The inauthentic Jew expresses this hostility by denying that he is a Jew—since his body isn’t Jewish and he does not believe in Judaism. (If there are no essences, there are no identities.) And the socialist expresses his hostility in the same way—by dividing the world not into Jews and Aryans and blacks and whites but instead into workers and capitalists. Owning the means of production does not represent your identity, it constitutes that identity.

It makes no sense, then, to require of the capitalist or the worker what Sartre requires of the Jew—that he assert his claim as a Jew, that he demand recognition for what he is. One doesn’t have such a claim as a capitalist, or even as a worker—the worker’s claim is based on what she does (that’s the point, after all, of calling her a worker). It makes sense, in other words, to think of class as a social construction because it doesn’t make sense to think of class as an identity—your class is determined by what you do. And it doesn’t make sense to think of race (of Jewishness or blackness or whiteness) as a social construction, because racial identity is irreducible to action. The identity that is irreducible to action is essential, not socially constructed, and the identity that is identical to action is not really an identity—it’s just the name of the action: worker, capitalist. If, then, we do not believe in racial identity as an essence, we cannot believe in racial identity as a social construction and we ought to give up the idea of racial identity altogether—we should, like the inauthentic Jew, deny that there are such things as Jews, or blacks, or whites.

But the race traitor, denying that he is white, does not deny that there are such things as whites and blacks. On the contrary: “I’m black and I’m proud,” Ignatiev says, is “the modern rendition of ‘Workers of all countries, unite!’” Race treason treats race “like class” by turning class into race, turning one’s relation to the means of production into one’s identity and turning the abolition of private property into the abolition of whiteness. Where economic inequality is the problem, then socialism may be the solution; where whiteness is the problem, blackness is the solution. Thus the “many failings” of America are now understood to “result largely from the unwillingness of so-called whites to embrace” the “presence of Afro-Americans” without “qualification.” And, as identity replaces ideology, the way to correct these failings is to recognize how much “the distinctive character of America owes . . . to the presence of Afro-Americans.”

Ignatiev notes with surprise and approval the columnist George Will’s observation that because basketball is the “most American of all sports” and black people are “the most American of all Americans,” black people are “the most accomplished of basketball players.” He approves Will’s remark because it honors the “presence” of blacks; he is surprised by it because Will is “conservative.” But if “I’m black and I’m proud” can be “the modern rendition of ‘Workers of all countries, unite!’” which is to say, if hostility to private property can be
should like the inauthentically there are such things as whites.

But, denying that he or that there are whites and blacks. On the
talk and I’m proud, the modern rendition of countries, unite! To
trace “like class” by race, turning one’s res of production into
turning the abolition into the abolition of economic inequality is socialism may be the hiteness is the proble solution. Thus the America are now unlargely from the un-called whites to enter of Afro-Americans.” And, as identity the way to correct recognize how much America owes of Afro-Americans.” notice and ap t George Will’s ob be basketball is the all sports” and black not American of all eople are “the most ketball players.” He ask because it honors blacks; he is sure Will is “conservac and I’m proud” edition of “Workfinite,” which is to the property can be replaced by pride in Michael Jordan, then the sense in which George Will is conservative (or the sense in which race traitors are not) needs to be reassessed.

The “most subversive act I can imagine,” Ignatiev says, is “treason to the white race.” The failure of political imagination involved here is, perhaps, obvious. But my point has not been to demonstrate the unpleasant political consequences of seeking to be an ex-white man; it has been, rather, to demonstrate the impossibility of actually being an ex-white man. If there is such a thing as whiteness and you are white, you cannot stop being white, and if there is no such thing as whiteness, you also can’t stop being white. But whiteness is not—like class—a social construction. It is instead—like phlogiston—a mistake.
Contents

EDITORIAL

4
White Skin, White Masks
For an international conversation on the white race.

POSITIONS

6
The Overcoat
Soused, stuffed, and replaced, William S. Burroughs cooked the Haeminits and the Haari in equal measure. Hinton Ait mixes the politics of longing and the demands of loyalty.

10
The Shirley Temple of My Familiar
No figure symbolized the wholesome appeal of whiteness like Shirley Temple—and none more pathologically blackened. Ann duCille revisits her own revised relationship to the post-slave process of Depression-era film.

34
Ethnic Hash
If you are what you eat, and you eat a lobster, does that make you a blue blood? Is a white person? A lobster? Patricia J. Williams details the secret relationship between race and food.

40
The Yellow Negro
Like their white American counterparts, Japanese kids dig hip hop, jazz, and break dancing. In the clubs of Tokyo's Roppongi district, however, what separates the real from the pseudo is back-dancing. Joe Wood renders whether the Japanese music industry is trying to be just Jack Johnson... or Ali Jolson.

68
The Little Revenge from the Pariahage
Why is Thomas Jefferson the most important man in U.S. history? Jamaica Kincaid amends the myth of America.

74
Africans of European Descent
The annals of white bitterness in Africa are not yet complete, but there are signs that the continent's five million white-colored people are making a last stand with their adoptive homelands. Michael Chaje considers the destiny of the white Africans.

88
Along the Color Bar
White mother, black father—African son? Klaus de Albuquerque remembers growing up mixed in colonial Kenya.

98
White Like Canada
Canada prides itself on being the antithesis of America—clear, well-mannered, liberal, normal, etc... But the strange story of race in Canada suggests otherwise. George Elliott Clarke decodes the whiteness of whiteness.

110
The Mercenary Position
For nearly forty years, the white mercenary has been a fixture of African politics—a lethal, immutable, romantic figure, the very emblem of revolutionary integrity. Howard French considers the curious case of Bob Denard, a soldier of fortune who learned to love the scent of Ibo blood.

122
Autobiography of an Ex-white Man
If race is a social construction, what's the difference between passing for white and being white? Walter Beem Michaels analyses the predicament of colour.

144
The White Mother
For white women with black children, parenting is a political act. Frances Windschuttle Turner examines the sentimental literature of the new abolitionism.

156
The Feminist Mystique
How can Hitler's most successful propagandist be a feminist hero? Hell books praise the legacy of Leni Riefenstahl.

164
How to Make Love to a White Man
For a black boy growing up in the segregated suburbs, the danger that white men represented was cause for alarm, as well as alarm. Don Bello investigates the hidden investments of black masculinity.

CONVERSATIONS

176
I'm Okay, You're Okay
Can this conversation destroy the white race? Can say more mean it? White hip-hopper William "Lyrikal" Williams, race writer Joel Ignatow, and Trans-Hood's own Cornell West talk about—and argue over—what to do next.

204
Pale Face, Red Neck
Is it really worth it to hate? Might liberalism be more dangerous than Nazism? Darius Jones talks about politics, and liberal liberalism with Jim Goad, author of The Redneck Manifesto.

Cover photo
"White Dawn" 1935
Bruce & Jack George