EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

FOR PAUL GILROY 'RACIOLOGY' (a term he invented) means the discourse of race-difference and all the stereotypes, prejudices, images, identities and knowledges it carries in its wake. He sometimes goes so far as to call raciology, 'compulsory raciality' in analogy to the 'compulsory heterosexuality' of queer theory. At any rate, Gilroy makes a bold argument that what is necessary is not some overturning of concepts of race and raciology but their total abandonment. We need to give up the idea of race altogether. And as he is well aware that is going to be hardest for many of those who have suffered most historically from racial prejudice, since they have invested so much in restoring and transvaluing their racial identities. He is thinking most of all of African-Americans, and the cult of a distinct, racially-thought African identity and culture.

But Gilroy is not recommending an end of raciology in the interests of an abstract disembodied humanism. And this is where his analysis becomes both very complex and very interesting. He is arguing that we can end raciology only by immersing ourselves more thoroughly into the human body and human-engagement-in-the-world as material practices, and in particular by fully considering the diasporic mobility of bodies, cultures and images. The sheer complexity of the lived world is the most effective antidote to raciology. Not the ideals of a rational and transcendent humanness but what he calls 'planetary humanism'. This is a truly original thought, and one whose implications have not been fully thought through yet in cultural studies, particularly where raciology affects different cases than the tragic one between blacks and whites which is Gilroy's main point of reference.

It is indeed the case that human social and political organization is a reflection of our biological being, for, after all, we are material biological objects developing under the influence of the interaction of our genes with the external world. It is certainly not the case that our biology is irrelevant to social organization. The question is, what part of our biology is relevant?

Richard Lewontin

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is impossible to deny that we are living through a profound transformation in the way the idea of "race" is understood and acted upon. Underlying it there is another, possibly deeper, problem that arises from the changing mechanisms that govern how racial differences are seen, how they appear to us and prompt specific identities. Together, these historic conditions have disrupted the observance of "race" and created a crisis for raciology, the lore that brings the virtual realities of "race" to dismal and destructive life.

Any opportunities for positive change that arise from this crisis are circumscribed by the enduring effects of past catastrophe. Raciology has saturated the discourses in which it circulates. It cannot be readily re-signified or de-signified, and to imagine that its dangerous meanings can be easily re-articulated into benign, democratic forms would be to exaggerate the power of critical and oppositional interests. In contrast, the creative acts involved in destroying raciology and transcending "race" are more than warranted by the goal of authentic democracy to which they point. The political will to liberate humankind from race-thinking must be complemented by precise historical reasons why these attempts are worth making. The first task is to suggest that the demise of "race" is not something to be feared. Even this may be a hard argument to win. On the one hand, the beneficiaries of racial hierarchy do not want to give up their privileges. On the other hand, people who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily color-coded) have for centuries employed the concepts and categories of their rulers, owners, and persecutors to resist the destiny that "race" has allocated to them and to dissent from the lowly value it placed upon their lives. Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose, these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture. The currency of "race" has marginalized these traditions from official histories of modernity and relegated them to the backwaters of the primitive and the prepolitical. They have involved elaborate, improvised constructions that have the primary function of absorbing and deflecting abuse. But they have gone far
beyond merely affording protection and reversed the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt, which are unexpectedly turned into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength. When ideas of racial particularity are inverted in this defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish. For many racialized populations, "race" and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up.

These groups will need to be persuaded very carefully that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of "race" as the basis for belonging to one another and acting in concert. They will have to be reassured that the dramatic gestures involved in turning against racial observance can be accomplished without violating the precious forms of solidarity and community that have been created by their protracted subordination along racial lines. The idea that action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of "race" is one of the most persuasive cards in this political and ethical suit.

Historians, sociologists, and theorists of politics have not always appreciated the significance of these sometimes-hidden, modern countercultures formed by long and brutal experiences of racialized subordination through slavery and colonialism and since. The minor, dissident traditions that have been constituted against the odds amid suffering and dispossession have been overlooked by the ignorant and the indifferent as well as the actively hostile. Some initiates, who should certainly know better, have even rejected and despised these formations as insufficiently respectable, noble, or pure. Nonetheless, vernacular cultures and the stubborn social movements that were built upon their strengths and tactics have contributed important moral and political resources to modern struggles in pursuit of freedom, democracy, and justice. Their powerful influences have left their imprint on an increasingly globalized popular culture. Originally tempered by the ghastly extremities of racial slavery, these dissident cultures remained strong and supple long after the formalities of emancipation, but they are now in decline and their prospects cannot be good. They are already being transformed beyond recognition by the uneven effects of globalization and planetary commerce in blackness.

Where the dangers represented by this historic decline have been recognized, the defense of communal interests has often mobilized the fantasy of a frozen culture, of arrested cultural development. Particularity can be maintained and communal interests protected if they are fixed in their most authentic and glorious postures of resistance. This understandable but inadequate response to the prospect of losing one's identity reduces cultural traditions to the simple process of invariant repetition. It has helped to secure deeply conservative notions that supply real comfort in dismal times but do little justice either to the fortitude and the improvisational skills of the slaves and their embattled descendants or to the complexities of contemporary cultural life.

We need to understand the appeal of the idea of tradition in this context. Where it is understood as little more than a closed list of rigid rules that can be applied consciously without interpretation or attention to particular historical conditions, it is a ready alibi for authoritarianism rather than a sign of cultural viability or ethical confidence. Indeed, the defense of tradition on these grounds
can, as we shall see, open a door to ultraconservative forms of political culture and social regulation.

In identifying these problems and moving beyond them, I shall try to show that the comfort zone created in the fading aura of those wonderful cultures of dissidence is already shrinking and that the cultures themselves are not as strong, complex, or effective as they once were. They do still occasionally flicker into spectacular life, urging desperate people to stand up for their rights and giving them a potent political and moral language with which to do it. However, there is no reason to suppose that they will be able to withstand all the destructive effects of globalization and localization, let alone the corrosive power of substantive political disagreements that have arisen over the nature of black particularity and its significance relative to other contending identity-claims: religion, sexuality, generation, gender, and so on.

The dissident traditions inaugurated by the struggle against slavery, a struggle for recognition as human rather than chattel, agent and person rather than object, have already been changed by translocal forces, both political and economic, that bear heavily on the symbolic currency of “race.” This situation is another fundamental part of the crisis of raciology. It provides further inducements to recognize that the current disruption of race-thinking presents an important opportunity. There is here a chance to break away from the dangerous and destructive patterns that were established when the rational absurdity of “race” was elevated into an essential concept and endowed with a unique power to both determine history and explain its selective unfolding.

If we are tempted to be too celebratory in assessing the positive possibilities created by these changes in race-thinking and the resulting confusion that has enveloped raciology, we need only remind ourselves that the effects of racial discourses have become more unpredictable as the quality of their claims upon the world have become more desperate. This is a delicate situation, and “race” remains fissionable material.

A crisis of raciology

Any inventory of the elements that constitute this crisis of raciology must make special mention of the rise of gene-oriented or genomic constructions of “race.” Their distance from the older versions of race-thinking that were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries underlines that the meaning of racial difference is itself being changed as the relationship between human beings and nature is reconstructed by the impact of the DNA revolution and of the technological developments that have energized it. This book is premised upon the idea that we must try to take possession of that profound transformation and somehow set it to work against the tainted logic that produced it. In other words, the argument here unfolds from the basic idea that this crisis of “race” and representation, of politics and ethics, offers a welcome cue to free ourselves from the bonds of all raciology in a novel and ambitious abolitionist project.

The pursuit of liberation from “race” is an especially urgent matter for those peoples who, like modern blacks in the period after transatlantic slavery, were
assigned an inferior position in the enduring hierarchies that raciology creates. However, this opportunity is not theirs alone. There are very good reasons why it should be enthusiastically embraced by others whose antipathy to race-thinking can be defined, not so much by the way it has subordinated them, but because in endowing them with the alchemical magic of racial mastery, it has distorted and delimited their experiences and consciousness in other ways. They may not have been animalized, reified, or exterminated, but they too have suffered something by being deprived of their individuality, their humanity, and thus alienated from species life. Black and white are bonded together by the mechanisms of “race” that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity. Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquean psychiatrist and anticolonial activist whose work frames these concerns, observed this dismal cycle through its effects on the lives of men: “the Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., another influential pathologist of “race,” whose work counterpoints Fanon’s own, was fond of pointing out that race-thinking has the capacity to make its beneficiaries inhuman even as it deprives its victims of their humanity.

Here, drawing implicitly upon the combined legacies of King and Fanon, his sometime interlocutor, a rather different, postracial and postanthropological version of what it means to be human might begin to take shape. If this radically nonracial humanism is to be placed upon more stable foundations than those provided by King’s open-minded and consistent Christianity or Fanon’s phenomenological, existential, and psychoanalytic interests, it must be distinguished from earlier, less satisfactory attempts to refigure humankind. Its attempt at a comprehensive break from those traditions of reflection is signaled fundamentally by a refusal to be articulated exclusively in the male gender. From this angle, the precious, patient processes that culminate in community and democracy do not exist only in the fraternal patterns that have proved so durable and so attractive to so many. The ideal of fraternity need no longer compromise or embarrass the noble dreams of liberty and equality. This willfully ungendered humanism is not reducible to demands for equality between men and women or even for reciprocity between the sexes. Those revolutionary ideas are already alive and at large in the world. They can be complemented by a change of the conceptual scale on which essential human attributes are being calculated.

This change, in turn, entails the abolition of what is conventionally thought of as sexual division. Minor differences become essentially irrelevant. The forms of narcissism they support need not retain their grip upon the world. If that aim seems to be an unduly Utopian or radical aspiration, we would do well to recall the important practical example of these principles currently being pursued by the military organizations of the overdeveloped world. Forced by recruitment shortfalls and other demographic changes to accept the possibility that women are just as physically capable of front-line combat duties as their male counterparts, these organizations have undertaken a partial but nonetheless significant demasculinization of soldiery. While Demi Moore was being incarnated as GI Jane, Western military organizations were conducting a number of technical studies of exactly how the female body can be modified by exercise and training so that its physical potential for military activities can be optimized. Scientists at Britain’s Ministry of Defence
Research Agency have, for example, outlined a form of basic training, cryptically known as "personnel selection standards," for their new female recruits. The British Army has emphasized that it cannot eliminate intrinsic physical differences such as hip size and varying proportions of fat and muscle; however, "initial results from the new training regime have, on average, added 2 lbs more muscle while removing 6 lbs of fat." One British officer said: "Brute strength is not a great part of military life in the 1990s." Comparable strategies are also being revealed on the other side of scarcity in the underdeveloped parts of the planet. The active and enthusiastic contribution of women to the genocide of Tutsi and the killing of Hutu political opponents that took place in Rwanda during 1994 provides one warning against any desire to celebrate these changes as inherently progressive.

Perhaps, pending the eventual sublation of governmental militarism, the ideal of military genderlessness can enhance our understanding of moral and civic agency. As a sign of transition, it hints at a universality that can exist in less belligerent forms. There need be no concessions to the flight from embodiment that has been associated with the consolidation of abstract, modern individuality. Here, the constraints of bodily existence (being in the world) are admitted and even welcomed, though there is a strong inducement to see and value them differently as sources of identification and empathy. The recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial.

Some other features of this pragmatic, planetary humanism can be tentatively enumerated. Though most political philosophers who consider these questions have ignored this possibility or failed to recognize its truly subversive force, I would suggest that a certain distinctiveness might also be seen to emerge through the deliberate and self-conscious renunciation of "race" as a means to categorize and divide humankind. This radically nonracial humanism exhibits a primary concern with the forms of human dignity that race-thinking strips away. Its counteranthropological and sometimes misanthropic orientation is most powerfully articulated where it has been accompanied by a belated return to consideration of the chronic tragedy, vulnerability, and frailty that have defined our species in the melancholic art of diverse poetic figures from Leopardi and Nietzsche to Esther Phillips and Donny Hathaway. Its signature is provided by a grim determination to make that predicament of fundamentally fragile, corporeal existence into the key to a version of humanism that contradicts the triumphal tones of the anthropological discourses that were enthusiastically supportive of race-thinking in earlier, imperial times.

This is not the humanism of existentialists and phenomenologists, short-sighted Protestants or complacent scientists. Indeed, mindful of raciological associations between past humanisms and the idea of progress, this humanism is as unfriendly toward the idea of "race" as it is ambivalent about claims to identify progress that do not take the de-civilizing effects of continuing racial division into account. I want to show that important insights can be acquired by systematically returning to the history of struggles over the limits of humanity in which the idea of "race" has been especially prominent. This humanism is conceived explicitly as a response to the sufferings that raciology has wrought. The most valuable resources for its elaboration derive from a principled, cross-cultural approach to the history and
literature of extreme situations in which the boundaries of what it means to be human were being negotiated and tested minute by minute, day by day. These studies of the inhumanity inspired by and associated with the idea of “race” are not, of course, confined to slavery or the brutal forms of segregation that followed it. They have arisen from numerous episodes in colonial history and from the genocidal activities that have proved to be raciology’s finest, triumphant hours. They are especially worthwhile, not because the suffering of the victims of extreme evil offers easy lessons for the redemption of the more fortunate; indeed, we cannot know what acute ethical insights the victims of race-thinking may have taken with them in death. The victims of these terrors are necessarily mute, and if there are any survivors, they will be beset by guilt, shame, and unbearably painful and unreliable memories. They will not be the best guides to the moral and political lessons involved in histories of pointless suffering, but they may still be able to yield important insight into the moral dilemmas of the present. We should therefore pay attention to the doubts that the most eloquent and perceptive survivors of systematic inhumanity have thrown on the value of their own testimony. We must be alert to its unspoken conventions and genres, for there are tacit rules governing the expectations of the reading publics that have formed around these painful, moving words and texts.

However, in an unprecedented situation in which ambivalence reigns and general laws of ethical conduct are difficult to frame, this legacy of bearing witness should not be 

spurned as a distraction from the laborious tasks of documentation and historical reconstruction. It is far better to make this dubious testimony our compass and to seek our bearings in the words of witnesses than to try vainly to orient ourselves with the unreliable charts supplied by covertly race-coded liberal or even socialist humanisms, which, if they did not steer us into this lost position, have offered very few ideas about how we might extricate ourselves from it and find ourselves again without the benefit of racial categories or racial lore.

Genes and bodies in consumer culture

The contemporary focus on the largely hidden potency of genes promotes a fundamental change of scale in the perception and comprehension of the human body. This change is not an automatic product of only the most recent scientific developments and needs to be connected to an understanding of techno-science, particularly biotechnology, over a longer period of time. Its impact upon the status of old, that is, essentially eighteenth-century, racial typologies has been inexcusably neglected by most writers on “race.”

The tragic story of Henrietta Lacks, an African-American mother of five from Baltimore who died of cervical cancer at the age of thirty-one in October 1951, can provide important orientation as we move away from the biopolitics of “race” and toward its nano-politics. Cells taken without consent from Lacks’s body by Dr. George Gey, a cell biologist at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, were grown in tissue culture and have been used since then in countless scientific experiments all over the world. The cell-line extracted from her cancer, now known as HeLa, was the first human tumor cell-line to be cultivated. It had a number of unusual properties.
The unprecedentedly virulent cells grew rapidly and proliferated, invading adjacent cultures and combining unexpectedly with other organisms in the labs where they were in use. They were soon being marketed as a "research organism" and have proved to be an indispensable tool in the burgeoning biotech industry.

The Lacks case raises important issues about when material of this type extracted from a body can be considered human tissue and the point at which it is to be identified alternatively as a form of property that belongs, not to the person in whose body it began, but to the commercial interests involved in selling it for private profit. The story of HeLa cells is also instructive for the confusion that was created when enzymes that suggested Mrs. Lacks's "blackness" revealed themselves, confounding and perplexing researchers who had assumed her "whiteness" or had, more importantly, failed to think racially about her legacy or their own research. This episode can be used to mark the point at which an important threshold in thinking about "race" was crossed. The message conveyed by commerce in HeLa cells exceeds even the old familiar tale in which black patients have sometimes been abused and manipulated by the white doctors employed to treat them. It would appear that race-defying cells, the body's smallest vital component, have become absolutely central to controversies over the limit and character of species life.

At the risk of sounding too anthropocentric, I would suggest that the cultivation of cells outside the body for commercial and other purposes is an epoch-making shift that requires a comprehensive rethinking of the ways we understand and analyze our vulnerable humanity. Like the speculative manipulation of genetic material between various species that has followed it with unpredictable and possibly dangerous results for all human beings, this change suggests a wholly new set of boundaries within which humanity will take shape. The "engineering" of transgenic animals and plants, some of which have supposedly benefited from the insertion of human genes into their DNA, is a related phenomenon that has also been the subject of intense debate about its potentially catastrophic consequences. The international and therefore necessarily "transracial" trade in internal organs and other body parts for transplant, sometimes obtained by dubious means, is another pertinent development. The challenges that have arisen from the manipulation and commerce in all aspects of human fertility, including the vividly contentious issue of whether mothers of one "race" might perversely choose to bear babies of another, represent yet another key change, while a number of recent attempts to patent or hold copyright in organisms, cells, and other elements of life itself would be the final sign that we have to adjust our conceptions of life and our mutable human nature.

All these changes impact upon how "race" is understood. Awareness of the indissoluble unity of all life at the level of genetic materials leads to a stronger sense of the particularity of our species as a whole, as well as to new anxieties that its character is being fundamentally and irreversibly altered. With these symptomatic developments in mind, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that this biotechnological revolution demands a change in our understanding of "race," species, embodiment, and human specificity. In other words, it asks that we reconceptualize our relationship to ourselves, our species, our nature, and the idea of life. We need to ask, for example, whether there should be any place in this new paradigm of life for the idea of specifically racial differences.
The well-known and surprisingly popular portrait of human beings as an essentially irrelevant transitory medium for the dynamic agency of their supposedly selfish genes is not the only morally and politically objectionable consequence of emergent, genomic orthodoxy. It, too, has fundamental implications for the coherence of the idea of "race" and its relationship to the increasingly complex patterns of natural variation that will no doubt be revealed in a geographically distributed species and the endlessly varying but fundamentally similar individuals who compose it. The specification of significant differences can only be calculated within specific scales, what the physicist Ilya Prigogine calls "domains of validity." Sadly, however much common sense and popular comprehension of "race" lag behind these developments, they do not mean that ideas of "race" based upon immediate appearance have become instantly redundant, acquiring a residual status that contrasts sharply with the conspicuous power they enjoyed previously in the ages of colonial empires, mass migration, and mass extermination.

As actively de-politicized consumer culture has taken hold, the world of racialized appearances has become invested with another magic. This comes courtesy of developments like the proliferation of ever-cheaper cosmetic surgery and the routine computer enhancement and modification of visual images. These changes, which build upon a long history of technical procedures for producing and accentuating racial differences on film, undermine more than the integrity of racialological representation. They interact with other processes that have added a conspicuous premium to today's planetary traffic in the imagery of blackness. Layer upon layer of easily commodified exotica have culminated in a racialized glamour and contributed an extra cachet to some degree of nonspecific, somatic difference. The perfect faces on billboards and screens and in magazines are no longer exclusively white, but as they lose that uniformity we are being pressed to consider and appreciate exactly what they have become, where they fit in the old hierarchy that is being erased, and what illicit combination of those familiar racial types combined to produce that particular look, that exotic style, or that transgressive stance. The stimulating pattern of this hyper-visibility supplies the signature of a corporate multiculturalism in which some degree of visible difference from an implicit white norm may be highly prized as a sign of timeliness, vitality, inclusivity, and global reach.

A whole new crop of black models, stylists, photographers, and now, thanks to the good offices of Spike Lee, a black advertising agency, have contributed to this change of climate in the meaning of racialized signs, symbols, and bodies. The stardom of prominent iconic figures like Tyson Beckford, Tyra Banks, and, of course, Lee himself supplements the superhuman personalities and conspicuous physical attributes of the latest heroic wave of black athletes who built connections to the emerging planetary market in leisure, fitness, and sports products. In that domain, blackness has proved to be a substantial asset. What Fanon, pondering the iconic stardom of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens, called "the cycle of the biological" was initiated with the mythic figure of The Negro: either unthinkingly lithe and athletic or constitutionally disposed to be lethargic and lazy. That modern cycle may also be thought of as terminating in the space of black metaphysical. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the primal scene of postmodern social life in the overdeveloped world is being staged in a distinctive private relation to one's...
own corporeality, through a disciplinary custodianship that can be specified as the idea of the body "as task." This has unexpected consequences where the ideal of physical prowess, to which blacks were given a special title in exchange for their disassociation from the mind, assumes an enhanced significance.

It is best to be absolutely clear that the ubiquity and prominence currently accorded to exceptionally beautiful and glamorous but nonetheless racialized bodies do nothing to change the everyday forms of racial hierarchy. The historic associations of blackness with inhumanity, brutality, crime, illness, excessive threatening fertility, and so on remain undisturbed. But the appearance of a rich visual culture that offers blackness to be beautiful also feeds a fundamental lack of confidence in the power of the body to hold the boundaries of racial difference in place. It creates anxiety about the older racial hierarchies that made that revolutionary idea of black beauty oxymoronic, just as it requires us to forget the political movement that made its acknowledgment imperative. It is as though these images of nonwhite beauty, grace, and style somehow make the matter of "race" secondary, particularly when they are lit, filtered, textured, and toned in ways that challenge the increasingly baffled observer's sense of where racial boundaries might fall. In this anxious setting, new hatreds are created not by the ruthless enforcement of stable racial categories but from a disturbing inability to maintain them. Conforming enthusiastically to wider social patterns, the surface of black bodies must now be tattooed, pierced, and branded if they are to disclose the deepest, most compelling truths of the privatized ontology within. The words "Thug Life" famously inked onto the eloquent torso of the late Tupac Shakur, like the hexagrams, Oriental characters, cartoon pictures, and other devices sported by a host of stars—Treach, Foxy Brown, and Dennis Rodman, to name only three—conform to this trend and have the additional significance of showing the world how far from the color black these muscled black bodies really are.

It should be clear that the shape-shifting and phenotype-modifying antics that abound in the world of black popular culture did not culminate in the strange case of Michael Jackson. His physical transformation of himself ushered in this new phase of creative possibilities. Playful mut(ilation) did not contradict either his affirmation of an African-American heritage or his well-publicized distaste for Africa itself. Similar patterns enjoy a far more insidious afterlife in the antics of the legions of models, athletes, and performers whose beauty and strength have contributed to the postmodern translation of blackness from a badge of insult into an increasingly powerful but still very limited signifier of prestige. The ongoing activities of this group in the worlds of television, music, sports, fashion, entertainment, and, above all, advertising supply further proof that as far as "race" is concerned, what you see is not necessarily what you get.

All these developments stem from and contribute to the same uncertainties over "race." They help to call the self-evident, obvious authority of familiar racialized appearances, of common-sense racial typologies, into question. Bodies may still be the most significant determinants in fixing the social optics of "race," but black bodies are now being seen—figured and imaged—differently. Thanks to Adobe Photoshop® and similar image-processing technologies, skin tones can be more readily manipulated than the indelibly marked musculatures that sell the sweated and branded products of Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Timberland, and
Guess in the glossy pages of overground publications like Vibe and The Source that trade widely in aspects of black culture but are not primarily addressed to any black reading public. This crisis has ensured that racialized bodies represented as objects—objects among other objects—are never going to be enough to guarantee that racial differences remain what they were when everyone on both sides of the line between white and colored knew what “race” was supposed to be.

These timely occurrences should be placed in the context of the leveling forces of placeless development and commercial planetarization. The meaning and status of racial categories are becoming even more uncertain now that substantial linguistic and cultural differences are being flattened out by the pressures of a global market. Where cultural continuity or overlap is recognized between different racialized groups, the smallest cultural nuances provide a major means of differentiation. Once the course of the mainstream is diverted through marginal, underexploited cultural territory, an emphasis on culture can readily displace previous attention to the receding certainties of “race.” In these conditions, the relationship between cultural differences and racial particularity gets complex and fraught. Culture, no less than Mrs. Lacks’s valuable cells, becomes akin to a form of property attached to the history and traditions of a particular group and regulated by anyone who dares to speak in its name. This can produce some odd conflicts over the assignment of fragments that resist all disciplinary powers. One small illustration springs to mind from the workings of the British political system. Much to the disgust of the Labour Party’s black members of Parliament, Bernie Grant and Paul Boateng, who wanted to place it in other political traditions, some of Bob Marley’s music was employed as the curtain raiser for a fringe meeting of the European Movement (UK) at the 1996 Conservative Party conference. The person responsible for this grave affront to Marley’s inherent socialism was Sir Teddy Taylor, an eccentric, Euro-skeptic but reggae-loving right-winger who explained to the media that he “thought the song [“Three Little Birds”] summed up the Tory policy on Europe.”

The emphasis on culture as a form of property to be owned rather than lived characterizes the anxieties of the moment. It compounds rather than resolves the problems arising from associating “race” with embodied or somatic variation. Indeed, we must be alert to circumstances in which the body is reinvoked with the power to arbitrate in the assignment of cultures to peoples. The bodies of a culture’s practitioners can be called upon to supply the proof of where that culture fits in the inevitable hierarchy of value. The body may also provide the preeminent basis on which that culture is to be ethnically assigned. The body circulates uneasily through contemporary discussions of how one knows the group to which one belongs and of what it takes to be recognized as belonging to such a collectivity. Differences within particular groups proliferate along the obvious axes of division: gender, age, sexuality, region, class, wealth, and health. They challenge the unanimity of racialized collectivities. Exactly what, in cultural terms, it takes to belong, and, more importantly, what it takes to be recognized as belonging, begin to look very uncertain. However dissimilar individual bodies are, the compelling idea of common, racially indicative bodily characteristics offers a welcome short cut into the favored forms of solidarity and connection, even if they are effectively denied by divergent patterns in life chances and everyday experience.
Even more pernicious symptoms of the crisis of raciology are all around us. They are more pronounced in Europe now that the racial sciences are no longer muted by the memories of their active complicity in the genocide of European Jews. The special moral and political climate that arose in the aftermath of National Socialism and the deaths of millions was a transitory phenomenon. It has receded with the living memory of those frightful events. The Nazi period constitutes the most profound moral and temporal rupture in the history of the twentieth century and the pretensions of its modern civilization. Remembering it has been integral to the politics of “race” for more than fifty years, but a further cultural and ethical transition represented by war-crimes trials, financial reparation, and a host of national apologies is irreversibly under way. It aims to place this raciological catastrophe securely in an irrecoverable past, what Jean Améry called “the cold storage of history,” designed more to be cited or passed en route to other happier destinations rather than deliberately summoned up, inhabited, or mourned in an open-ended manner. Official restitution promotes a sense of closure and may be welcomed as a sign that justice has been belatedly done; but it may also undercut the active capacity to remember and set the prophylactic powers of memory to work against future evils. The effects of trauma may be modified if not moderated by the passage of time. They are also vulnerable to the provision of various forms of compensation: substantive and vacuous, formal and informal, material and symbolic.

This is not a straightforward conflict between a culturally sanctioned public obligation to remember and a private desire to forget the unforgettable. The manner, style, and mood of collective remembrance are absolutely critical issues, and the memory of racial slavery in the New World is not the only history of suffering to have been belittled by the power of corrosive or trivializing commemoration. One small example suffices here. The slaves in Steven Spielberg’s courtroom drama Amistad arrive at their Cuban auction block fresh from the horrors of the Middle Passage. They are buffed: apparently fit and gleaming with robust good health. They enjoy the worked-out and pumped-up musculature that can only be acquired through the happy rigors of a postmodern gym routine. Against the grain of white supremacy’s indifference and denial, the Middle Passage has been deliberately and provocatively recovered, but it is rendered in an impossible and deeply contentious manner that offers only the consolation of tears in place of more challenging and imaginative connections. It may be that those coveted abdominal muscles are now deemed to be an essential precondition for identifying with the superhuman figures of heroes like Spielberg’s Joseph Cinqué.

There has never been spontaneous consensus over how to commemorate and memorialize histories of suffering. Significant discrepancies have been apparent, for example, between the ways that African Americans and Ghanaians have approached the conservation of fortified sites of slave-trading activity that have recently become places of pilgrimage and cultural tourism for some of the more affluent daughters and sons of the Atlantic diaspora. In the very same moment that these sharp divisions have appeared inside what we were once urged to see as a single “racial” group, a torrent of images of casual death and conflict have been transmitted instantaneously from all over the African continent. For some, these dismal reports have ushered in nostalgia for the orderly world of colonial empires...
and threatened to make savagery something that occurs exclusively beyond the fortified borders of the new Europe. Through genocide in Rwanda and slaughter in Congo and Burundi, civil strife in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, corruption and violence in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and Mozambique, government by terror has been associated once again with infrahuman blackness reconstituted in the "half-devil, half-child" patterns favored by older colonial mentalities. Attempts to emphasize that many of the architects of mass killing in Rwanda and Bosnia were educated to the highest standards of the Western humanities have not achieved the same prominence. Placing some of them on trial for war crimes or for the genocidal activities involved in their crimes against humanity has raised more difficult questions about the specificity and uniqueness of earlier mass killing and the central place of the "race-thinking" that has recurrently been featured as a means to justify more recent episodes.

Interestingly, the important work of South Africa's Truth Commission has mobilized a version of the history of Apartheid that accentuates its political affinities as well as its concrete historical connections to the criminal governance of the Nazi period. With these connections underlined, Apartheid's elaborate theories of cultural and tribal difference can be swiftly reduced to the bare bones of raciology that originally warranted them and dispatched Broederbond commissioners back to Europe during the 1930s in pursuit of an appropriate ethnic content for the ideal white culture that was being actively invented.

An even blend of those deceptively bland terms "ethnicity" and "culture" has emerged as the main element in the discourse of differentiation that is struggling to supersede crude appeals to "race" by asserting the power of tribal affiliations. These timely notions circulate in more specialized language, but any sense that they bring greater precision into the task of social division is misleading. The culturalist approach still runs the risk of naturalizing and normalizing hatred and brutality by presenting them as inevitable consequences of illegitimate attempts to mix and amalgamate primordially incompatible groups that wiser, worldlier, more authentically colonial government would have kept apart or left to meet only in the marketplace. The unfolding of recent postcolonial history has sent out a less nostalgic and more challenging message: if the status of "race" can be transformed even in South Africa, the one place on earth where its salience for politics and government could not be denied, the one location where state-sponsored racial identities were openly and positively conducted into the core of a modern civic culture and social relations, then surely it could be changed anywhere. If it is as mutable as that, what then does racial identity comprise?

The widespread appearance of forms of ultranationalist race-thinking that are not easily classified as either biologicist or cultural but which seem to bear the significant imprint of past fascism is another dimension to the crisis of raciology. In Britain, today's patriotic neo-fascists are still undone by the memory of the 39-45 war, torn between their contradictory appeals to the figures of Churchill on one side and Hitler on the other. The French Front National has included a full complement of Holocaust deniers and apologists for colonial brutality, but it also managed to stand black and Jewish candidates in the elections of May 1997. The most prominent of these, Huguette Fata, the organization's secretary for France's overseas territories, proudly declared, "I'm black and proud of it ... I'm a free
woman, and I accept my difference,” as though democratic denunciations of her then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as a racist, required her to deny it. In other places, the loquacious veterans of Apartheid’s death squads have protested at length that, speaking personally, they are not themselves inclined to antiblack racism. The Italian-born Belgian broadcaster Georges Ruggiu faces a trial for crimes against humanity as a result of being arrested and charged with complicity in the 1994 genocide of Tutsis. His inflammatory programs on Radio Mille Collines famously compared the Hutu assault to the French Revolution. Thus, in their genocidal confrontation with the African proxies of “Anglo-Saxon” geo-political ambition, the francophone killers seemed to have imagined themselves as an extension of the French nation to which they were bound. Gérard Prunier has described this as “the Fashoda syndrome.”

The advocates of these unsettling varieties of racialized politics have been forced to become fluent in the technical, anthropological language of ethnicity and culture. Their opinions are also likely to be leavened with mechanistic determinism and neurotic hyper-patriotism. Nonetheless, these obvious ties to past raciologies should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the language produced by this crisis of race-thinking differs from its predecessors. When facing these new phenomena, what we used to be able to call an antiracist opposition must involve more than merely establishing the secret lineage that associates these contemporary groups with their radically evil, authentically fascist antecedents. What Primo Levi, with characteristic precision, referred to as “the silent Nazi diaspora” continues to go about its strategic work, but soon, mobilizing the fragmentary memories of Hitlerism will not be enough to embarrass its activists, never mind defeat them. Nazism and other related versions of populist ultranationalism have found new adherents and, more worryingly, new bands of imitators in all sorts of unlikely locations. The glamour of that particular political style and its Utopian charge will be explored later on. They, too, have increased as emotional, psychological, and historical distance from the events of the Third Reich has grown.

All these factors contribute to a situation in which there are diminishing moral or political inhibitions against once more invoking “race” as a primary means of sorting people into hierarchies and erecting unbridgeable chasms around their discrete collective identities. Why, then, describe this situation as a crisis of raciology rather than its crowning glory? It is a crisis because the idea of “race” has lost much of its common-sense credibility because the elaborate cultural and ideological work that goes into producing and reproducing it is more visible than ever before, because it has been stripped of its moral and intellectual integrity, and because there is a chance to prevent its rehabilitation. Prompted by the impact of genomics, “race,” as it has been defined in the past, has also become vulnerable to the claims of a much more elaborate, less deterministic biology. It is therefore all the more disappointing that much influential recent work in this area loses its nerve in the final furlong and opts to remain ambiguous about whether the idea of “race” can survive a critical revision of the relationship between human beings and their constantly shifting social nature!

Whether it is articulated in the more specialized tongues of biological science and pseudo-science or in a vernacular idiom of culture and common sense, the term “race” conjures up a peculiarly resistant variety of natural difference. It stands
outside of, and in opposition to, most attempts to render it secondary to the overwhelming sameness that overdetermines social relationships between people and continually betrays the tragic predicaments of their common species life. The undervalued power of this crushingly obvious, almost banal human sameness, so close and basically invariant that it regularly passes unremarked upon, also confirming that the crisis of raciological reasoning presents an important opportunity where it points toward the possibility of leaving “race” behind, of setting aside its disabling use as we move out of the time in which it could have been expected to make sense.

There is a danger that this argument will be read as nothing more than a rather old-fashioned plea for disabling ourselves of the destructive delusions of racism. Injunctions of that kind have been a recurrent feature of some liberal, religious, socialist, and feminist pronouncements on these matters since the term “race” was first coined. While I value that political pedigree, I want to try to be clear about exactly where this line of thought departs from its noble precursors in those traditions that have contributed so extensively to the ideas and the practice of antiracism. All the earlier arguments conform to the same basic architecture. They posit the particular, singular, and specific against the general, universal, and transcendent that value more highly. In contrast, the approach I favor attempts to break up these unhappy couples. It has less to say about the unanswerable force of claims to singularity and particularity that have fueled ethnic absolutism. Instead, it directs attention toward the other side of these simultaneous equations. We should, it suggests, become concerned once again with the notion of the human into which reluctant specificity has been repeatedly invited to dissolve itself. My position recognizes that these invitations would be more plausible and attractive if we could only confront rather than evade the comprehensive manner in which previous incarnations of exclusionary humanity were tailored to racializing codes and qualified by the operation of colonial and imperial power. In other words, the alternative version of humanism that is cautiously being proposed here simply cannot be reached via any retreat into the lofty habits and unamended assumptions of liberal thinking, particularly about juridical rights and sovereign entitlements. This is because these very resources have been tainted by a history in which they were not able to withstand the biopolitical power of the race-thinking that compromised their boldest and best ambitions. Their resulting failures, silences, lapses, and evasions must become central. They can be reinterpreted as symptoms of a struggle over the boundaries of humanity and then contribute to a counterhistory that leads up to the rough-hewn doorway through which any alternative conception of the human must pass. This can only be attained after a wholesale reckoning with the idea of “race” and with the history of raciology’s destructive claims upon the very best of modernity’s hopes and resources. A restoration of political culture is the evasive goal of these operations.

Another curious and perplexing effect of the crisis of raciology is a situation in which some widely divergent political interests have been able to collaborate in retaining the concept and reinvesting it with explanatory power. Strange alliances and opportunistic connections have been constructed in the name of ethnic purity and the related demand that unbridgeable cultural differences be identified and respected. This desire to cling on to “race” and go on stubbornly
and unimaginatively seeing the world on the distinctive scales that it has specified makes for odd political associations as well as for less formal connections between racial thinkers of various hues. In doing battle against all of them and their common desire to retain and reinflate the concept so that it becomes, once again, a central political and historical reference point, we must be very clear about the dimensions of this moment and the significant discrepancies that have arisen between different local settings. We should recognize that “race” has been given a variety of accents. Problems of compatibility and translation have been multiplied by the globalization of culture in which local codes may have to fight against the encroachments of corporate multiculturalism if they are to retain their historic authority and explanatory power. For example, America’s distinctive patterns of color consciousness may not be anything other than a fetter on the development of the planetary market in health, fitness, leisure, and sports products mentioned above. Certain common features, like the odd prestige attached to the metaphysical value of whiteness, do recur and continue to travel well, but they too will be vulnerable to the long-term effects of this crisis. Some distinctive local patterns undoubtedly persist, but their anachronistic longevity compounds the problem. Where communication becomes instantaneous, the crisis of racial meaning is further enhanced by the way attachments to the idea of “race” develop unevenly and remain primarily associated with the context of overdevelopment.

We cannot remind ourselves too often that the concept of “race” as it is used in common-sense, everyday language to signify connectedness and common characteristics in relation to type and descent is a relatively recent and absolutely modern invention. Though it would be foolish to suggest that evil, brutality, and terror commence with the arrival of scientific racism toward the end of the eighteenth century, it would also be wrong to overlook the significance of that moment as a break point in the development of modern thinking about humanity and its nature. Even prescientific versions of the logic of “race” multiplied the opportunities for their adherents to do evil freely and justify it to themselves and to others. That problem was compounded once confused and unsystematic race-thinking aspired to become something more coherent, rational, and authoritative. This threshold is important because it identifies the junction point of “race” with both rationality and nationality. It is the beginning of a period in which deference toward science, scientists, and scientific discourses around “race” began to create new possibilities and orchestrate new varieties of knowledge and power centered on the body, what Foucault identifies as “political anatomy.”

The story of how this change was influenced by imperatives of colonial trade and government and shaped by growing imperial consciousness, how it was endorsed and then challenged by the developing science of anthropology, discredited by the catastrophic consequences of racial science, silenced by the aftereffects of Nazi genocide only to gain another commanding voice in the wake of Watson and Crick, is a familiar one. But the most recent phases in this process—which we have already seen is not simply and straightforwardly reducible to the resurgence of biological explanations—have not been understood adequately.
Beyond the new racism

Some years ago, a loose group of scholars in which the English philosopher Martin Barker was especially influential began, in recognition of changed patterns in the way the discourse of racial difference was employed in politics, to speak about the emergence of what they called a New Racism. This racism was defined by its strong culturalist and nationalist inclinations. Whereas in the past raciology had been arrogant in its imperial certainty that biology was both destiny and hierarchy, this persuasive new variant was openly uncomfortable with the idea that “race” could be biologically based. Consciousness of “race” was seen instead as closely linked to the idea of nationality. Authentic, historic nations had discrete cultural fillings. Their precious homogeneity endowed them with great strength and prestige. Where large “indigestible” chunks of alien settlement had taken place, all manner of dangers were apparent. Conflict was visible, above all, along cultural lines. Of course, these regretfully transplanted aliens were not identified as inferior, less worthy, or less admirable than their “hosts.” They may not have been inhuman, but they were certainly out of place. The social, economic, and political problems that had followed their mistaken importation could only be solved by restoring the symmetry and stability that flowed from putting them back where they belonged. Nature, history, and geopolitics dictated that people should cleave to their own kind and be most comfortable in the environments that matched their distinctive cultural and therefore national modes of being in the world. Mythic versions of cultural ecology were invented to rationalize the lives of these discrete national and racial identities. The Germans became a people in their forests, whereas the British were a nation whose seafaring activity shaped their essential inner character. In all cases, fragments of self-evident truth nourished the fantasies of blood and belonging, which in turn demanded an elaborate geopolitical cartography of nationality.