

Notes *on a* Nominal Report

Nikhil Singh

Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.

—Ralph Ellison

It is difficult to comment upon *One America in the Twenty-First Century: Forging the Future*, without noticing that the “President’s Initiative on Race” has been a relative non-event. The so-called national conversation on race that it was supposed to spur simply has not taken place. Although the Advisory Board to the president, under the noble leadership of John Hope Franklin, pursued its charge with dignity and forthrightness, the report it has produced means very little in itself but takes its meaning from the context in which it has been disseminated and discussed. This context is marked by the sustained assault on “race” as a meaningful, or even an intelligible, political category. The orchestrated political campaign to wipe out state-based affirmative action, the academic impatience with anything smacking of “identity politics,” the market-driven multiculturalism that turns the system of racial marks into apolitical figures of gift and variety, the disingenuous neo-leftism that “trumps” “race” with “class,” and the new enclosures of the carceral state that redraw the color line

behind a facade of steel and stone—are all in various ways signs of these times.

The times for lack of a better word are “postmodern.” Today, the virtual realities of the corporate media compete for our allegiances, and national-symbolic imperatives wane in importance, except when they cater to the spectacle. By national-symbolic, I mean those signifying practices that enable us to locate ourselves and constitute the terms of our participation within (or exclusion from) the widest possible, public, political enterprise most of us are capable of imagining. The military enterprise remains preeminent in this regard (“as we take a station break for the bombing . . .”). Indeed, it is ironic the extent to which state violence has been a precondition and/or model for both the creation and the purported resolution of racial division and hierarchy, from our national origins in slavery and conquest, to the civil war, to the beginnings of institutional desegregation at midcentury, to the various “wars” on poverty, crime, and drugs of our own time. That ineluctable relationship between “race” and violence, it would seem, must forever oscillate between a ruthlessly internalized exclusion, and an explosive catharsis, both real and imaginary. (Had they called this fin-de-siècle initiative “the war on race,” you can be

sure there would have been some "national" conversation. Some silences at least must be counted a blessing.)

To continue in this vein, it is not an accident that the three major "race reports" published since 1940—the Carnegie/Myrdal Commission Report (1944), Truman's civil rights initiative *To Secure These Rights* (1948), and the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders (1968), respectively—coincided with World War II, the onset of the cold war, and the escalation of the war in Vietnam. In each of these cases, the "race" question was elevated to an unprecedented national-symbolic centrality. Its inevitable resolution through the dismantling of Jim Crow, Gunnar Myrdal wrote, would only confirm the universality of the "American Creed," and legitimate, as Truman's appointees recognized a few years later, America's inherent national greatness and its leadership of "the free" world. Twenty years later, against the backdrop of a stalled civil rights movement, massive resistance, and civil insurgencies within the urban "black belt," the Kerner Commission threw a wrench into this favored, nationalist teleology, suggesting that "we" had become (at the very least) "two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." The urgent challenge of this austere social fact, presented without the soothing balm of premature or unilateral declarations of national unity and moral redemption, was quite simply never met.

In subsequent years, Nixonian "benign neglect" and neo-racist revanchism, culminating in Ronald Reagan's victorious electoral stance as a "state's righter," have left the nationalist teleology of racial reform in tatters. As an example, we might take note of the fact that the largest civil disturbance in the twentieth century, the L.A. riot/rebellion of 1992, (precipitated by the acquittal of the four police officers who bludgeoned speeding black motorist Rodney King), was

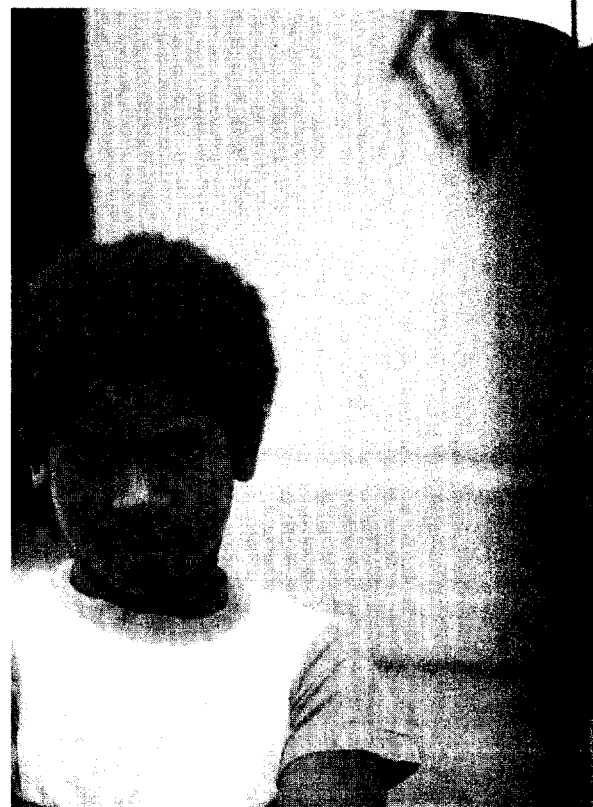


Photo by Philippe Cheng.

processed less through any serious national public accounting such as might be signaled by "a race commission" than through the spectacular trial of one Orenthal James Simpson. As the O.J. trial filtered reality to us from channel zero to infinity, it modeled the contemporary race divide and disconnect. Split screen scenes of black jubilation and white dejection told a tale not of "two nations" but of apparently incommensurable epistemological horizons and life-worlds.

To its credit, the Advisory Board's report acknowledges this situation, though primarily in the breach. It admits, for example, that perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the (post)modern racial regime is the fact that there now exist impossibly divergent beliefs and perceptions about how and why race matters, adding that a significant majority of



so-called whites "believe . . . the problem of racial intolerance in this country has been solved and that further investigation is unwarranted and inappropriate." At the same time, the report acknowledges, I think correctly, what may be the obverse fact: that we are in a time of pronounced "racial transition," with dramatic shifts in racial demographics (due to new immigrant populations) and perhaps even more consequential changes in racial identification underway. "There are no easy metaphors or key slogans to describe what we are becoming," the report states. Yet rather than responding to the immense challenge posed by this insight, it instead falls into the worn groove of consensus, drawing upon an all-too-familiar repertoire: "bridging the gap," "forging the future," "redeeming the promise," "lifting the

burden," "celebrating our differences," "searching for common ground," "one America," and so on, and on.

I am by no means suggesting that the contents and recommendations of the report are not in and of themselves entirely salutary. By itself, the report's call to reverse the gutting of federal civil rights enforcement under Reagan and Bush, if it were heeded, would go some distance toward reestablishing national-symbolic momentum toward racial equality. Similarly, its recommendations about restricting the widespread use of racial profiling by police and eliminating egregious drug sentencing disparities represent immediate, practical ways to begin chipping away at the racist criminal justice system. More cautiously, the report's promotion of universalist, social policies such as raising the minimum wage, targeting federal money for "urban revitalization," establishing job-training programs, expanding health-insurance coverage, and investing in K-12 through higher education initiatives are clearly aimed at benefiting underserved, economically disadvantaged groups and communities. The push for interracial dialogue and transformation within affective relations of everyday life must also not be underestimated. In all these ways, the Advisory Board, at its best, tries to broadly resuscitate a liberal social policy agenda and civil rights ethic organized around antipoverty initiatives and nondiscrimination principles.

Given what now exists, it is hard to find fault with any of these recommendations. To see this, we need look no further than the statistical appendix to the report prepared by the board's Council of Economic Advisors. The appendix measures invidious racial disparities along economic, juridical, health, and educational axes to powerful effect. Even a cursory reading of the appendix shows what benign neglect has meant in practice for the nation's longest-standing minority groups, as

the overall life chances of Indian peoples and peoples of African descent, as measured by the bulk of the statistical evidence, have either stagnated or declined since the early 1970s. Yet at the same time, statistics can be deceiving. The statistics on so-called whites,

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Hispanics, and Asians, for example, while expanding the scope of "race" as an analytic category, actually demonstrate how confusing this time of "racial transition" really is. Thus, the "racial" character of the "Hispanic" category (which the report notes is the fast-growing statistical aggregate) is entirely unspecified, even as it remains

coded in relation to white and black (with the latter two designated by the ubiquitous qualifier "non-Hispanic"). Meanwhile, the report shows the "Asian" category to be profoundly bifurcated, possessing both the highest rates of educational and occupational achievement and also the highest rates of indigence and poverty. Finally, the white category (the largest and, as I will suggest later, the most elastic of all) entirely occludes differentiation within itself, effectively obscuring the existence of anything we might want to term the "white" poor.

Do not misunderstand. I am not making the familiar argument, heard so often today, that our differences are "really" about "class" and material deprivation and have very little to do with "race." Our differences are certainly about class. The confusion of the categories, however, is at least in part the result of a bewilderingly complex, heterogeneous

apartheid. Furthermore, I think we must note an ironic and perhaps unintended consequence of the production of race as a statistical aggregate. The effect of "race" as an aggregate works largely by suppressing salient internal differences within and across "racial" categories, whether they be of class, gender, or even "race" itself (not to mention age, sexuality, nationality, and region). Now, one might counter that this is precisely the kind of hairsplitting that must be avoided at all costs and that the valid purpose and valuable achievement of the Advisory Board's report is that it works to reestablish—in the face of a tremendous cultural and political assault on the legacies of antiracist struggle—the idea that invidious racial disparities exist and that they need to be investigated and remedied. In fact, the report acknowledges the dangers of statistics and emphasizes the need to establish and refine a lasting framework for data collection and analysis of these issues. Yet the problem remains: To gather statistical data on racial disparities, one must first presume the existence of well-defined, racially subordinated populations, precisely the idea that is under such intense social pressure and political scrutiny today.

Arguably, it is here that the Advisory Board's mission is clearest: to educate and even persuade the public as to how and why "race" matters. As Gunnar Myrdal noted over forty years ago, there has never been a sustained, systematic national effort to educate U.S. publics about the historical legacies and contemporary aspects of racism and racial formation. The so-called culture wars of the last two decades have in many respects revolved around precisely this issue, and the report comes down decisively in supporting greater public commitment to multicultural/multiracial democracy. Yet the pieties of multiculturalism and pronouncements of a putative "left" victory in the culture wars



Hanging out in New York City. Photo by Philippe Cheng.

notwithstanding, it is difficult to evade the fact that we continue to wage a monumentally defensive struggle simply to hold the line against neo-racist social policy and what I call "post-racist" common sense. The problem in part is that the "race (still) matters" argument, as important as it is, is not supple or sophisticated enough to answer the attacks on the legitimacy or coherence of the categories. Nor is it able to provide compelling justification for, or direction to, progressive social and political action.

For evidence of this, we might look at the report's comments on affirmative action and so-called welfare reform, each of which is a "proxy" for a real, ongoing "national conversation on race." Significantly, the report has very little to say about welfare reform, only that more study is needed. Yet the fact is that Clinton's "ending of welfare as we

know it" now has an almost untouchable, normative political salience, even as its devastating consequences, including quasi-forced, disposable labor (and laboring bodies), downward wage pressure, and intensified policing of poor, single women, proceed behind a veil of political platitudes about autonomy and self-worth and the temporary fortunes of a high-employment economy. With regard to affirmative action, the report is more decisive, expressing a commitment to what is an increasingly controversial and rapidly eroding public policy and calling for a new consensus highlighting its benefits in "promoting diversity" and "moving us to the goal of one America." The report argues further that a majority of Americans actually support affirmative action when they understand it as a means of overcoming racial discrimination. It mildly

rebukes efforts to use it as a political "wedge issue" as misleading.

As with many of its recommendations, the Advisory Board ultimately defends affirmative action as one more "down payment on our future success as a multiracial, internally strong, globally competitive democracy." Yet, here above all, I want to flag how the report's reflexive lapse into nationalist teleology—the ritual appeal to "our common interests beyond race"—betrays us. According to this script, racial reform in the United States is paradoxically something that is always already accomplished, because our national principles are sound, and yet never quite complete, because our social practices still deviate from those principles. Yet the arguments against affirmative action have been successful precisely in their ability to draw upon and rewrite this national script as a story of fulfillment of the teleology—the effective end of (racial) history. What the anti-affirmative action momentum demonstrates is the ease with which universalism (especially juridical universalism) can become the mask worn by majoritarian (national) interests constituted as whiteness. This process has less to do with misinformation about the "real" extent of past or ongoing discrimination against people of color, or even with a regrettable moral lapse in judgment. Rather, it is about the calculated mobilization of a politics of white self-interest, or, more accurately, the mobilization of a political self-interest in "whiteness."

I do not have time to develop this argument further here, but I do want to stress that teleology or rationalization will not save us from this continuous and increasingly subtle reinvention of racism. The latter is above all a *political* project like any other and must be attacked as such, through alternative mobilizations. The kinds of mobilizations I have in mind are quite characteristically left out of

the report's reassuring consensual lists of "promising practices" and "community heroes." I am thinking here of the Critical Resistance group, the Black Radical Congress, Race Traitor, and many others. I would add that the warning against teleology applies equally to the canard that surfaces prominently in the report, that the "face of America" is changing or that "we" are in the process of (slowly) becoming a majority minority (or nonwhite) country. Although this may be true within the terms of contemporary racial scripts and categories, it is precisely the elasticity of whiteness that should give us pause. As France Winddance Twine and Jonathan Warren point out, whiteness is an ever-expanding, constantly moving target. In this light, the report's own statistics on interracial marriage are revealing, suggesting that both blacks and whites are mostly endogamous, while immigrants are significantly less so but are much more likely to intermarry with whites than with blacks. (Blacks, by the way, marry nonblacks more often than whites marry nonwhites). In light of my previous comments on the elasticity of whiteness, I want to suggest here that we need to acknowledge the degree to which blackness is a category of relative racial fixity in the modern United States (and perhaps in the world) and remains the functional template of a much wider societal differentiation. "Blackness," in this sense, is both the glue and the solvent of the body politic. "We" don't know what to do with it, and yet what would "we" be without it?

I am not saying that black and white are merely empty or arbitrary signifiers. Into these containers, very specific historical contents have been poured, mixed, and recombined. Being historical, indeed being at base a theory or philosophy of history, what Howard Winant (following Du Bois) calls "racial dualism" is our modernity's (and now post-

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modernity's) most uncanny time traveler. Through its magic, hierarchies are constructed and enforced, just as resistances are forged and won. Nonetheless, it is important, I think, to remain scrupulously nominalist about racial categories. They are the result of human practices of reduction, identification, domination, division, exploitation, and even affection, which have over time become an (illusory) account of those selfsame practices and, in turn, of distinct human populations we still call "races." To be nominalist, however, is not to believe that our task is simply to unmask or demystify racial categorization. As the complex, ramified, continuously remade "product" of an accumulated history, "race" continues to do its work as an insistent historical referent, cultural repertoire, and mechanism of social enclosure and prophylaxis.

Finally, by calling race an insistent historical referent, I also mean to suggest that race and racial division may be the only true "national" conversation that has ever existed in the United States. It is a conversation, consistent and interminable, about the nature of this "national" social reality, where we came from and where we are going. In the current conjuncture (the product of this accumulated history), "race" has come to represent the impossibility of stabilizing an interpretation of the nation as a guarantor of justice for all, and yet it remains the means by which we continue to gesture at that very possibility. This

is one reason that *One America . . . Forging the Future* (and most of the rest of us) continues to speak a convoluted and self-contradictory rhetoric of race as burden and blight, as gift and variety.

Here one might recall Duke Ellington, who understood what this all meant for black people down at the charred bottom of the melting pot as well as anyone: "Race" is that "*something apart that is also an integral part.*" The only way to deal with it, he counseled, was to embrace "a strategy of dissonance." Today, I would suggest that strategy of dissonance requires us to cultivate skill with the politics and history of racial nominalism, while renewing our commitments to everyday communities of racial resistance. We need to understand the extent to which our postmodern racial regime is at once highly flexible and resistant to change, even as we try to develop new vocabularies with which to confront it, beyond the tired dichotomies of race versus class and the outworn teleologies of national transcendence. We must counter color-blind universalism with an insistent analysis of the *universal effects of racism*, the ways it shapes and energizes a wider social conservatism and authoritarian politics. Finally, we must refuse the real and imaginary politics of national (in)security that continues to organize the collective racial unconscious and keep trying to think differently about our unity.