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Slimy Subjects and Neoliberal Goods: Obama and the Children of Fanon

DANIEL MCNEIL

Don't buy the credo Diesel told *Time*: "I support the idea of being multicultural primarily for all the invisible kids, the ones who don't fit into one ethnic category and then find themselves lost in some limbo." That's just marketing talk. The only limbo kids fall into is pop culture.

– Armond White, "XXX," *New York Press*, August 20, 2002

Given the tragic cast of American race relations, a popular recognition of African-American inclusion, legitimacy, and competence in the White House is a substantial step forward. It is an advantage that will be forever associated With Barack Obama, earning him a well-deserved place in American, indeed global history.

– Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (2011)

At the dawn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois wished for a world in which African American elites could cross the color line and find a warm welcome from white men in the corridors of power.¹ At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Armond White offered a critical rejoinder to the patrician tone of Du Bois's early work and the system of privilege that constructs white, middle-class opinion in the United States as universal. Building on his work for *The City Sun* between 1984 and 1996 (a newspaper with the tagline, "Speaking Truth to Power"), White's reviews in *New York Press*, *City Arts* and other outlets consistently ask readers to think more deeply about the moral imagination of creative artists who have smuggled moments of honesty into corporate forms of multiculturalism during the digital age.² Although academic commentators rarely discuss White's work, his "principled, spirited, and tenacious engagement" with pop culture deserves extra elaboration from readers interested in the cultural politics of race and mixed race.³

White's treatment of Vin Diesel's "biracial, all-American miscegenation" in films such as *Pitch Black* (2000), *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and *xXx* (2002) is particularly germane to the transracial, transdisciplinary, and transnational field of critical mixed race studies. Claiming that Diesel's performances tap into subconscious fantasies about race and sex in America, White compares Diesel's self-fashioning to the cultural deconstruction of Dred Scott, a gay porn star with a "historically loaded name" and tattoos that say black and white on his pectoral muscles. Such comparisons reveal a critic who has little nostalgia for a time in which journalists reserved the term "all-American looks" for blond, blue-eyed whites. White refuses to waste time resenting the proliferation of a "racially blended, commercially co-opted New World Order." He also insists that we acknowledge

the traces of wit, imagination, and honesty that Diesel smuggles into his performances—if only to consider the fantasies and lived realities of a youth culture that “fuses inchoate consumerism with patriotism.”⁴

Much more can be said about White’s provocative, explorative, and suggestive reviews of movies and video games that portray young men racing around American inner cities and trashing exotic locales in Europe, Asia, and South America. In this paper, however, I am primarily interested in using White’s work to introduce a radical critique of Barack Obama and members of a post-civil rights generation who assert or rescind racial identity in order to seize the gains of a civil rights movement. After his striking comparison of Diesel and Dred Scott in 2002, White (born 1953) developed an equally revealing comparison of the performances of Obama (born 1961) and Will Smith (born 1968) during the 2008 campaign for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. Expressing manifest contempt for Obama, Smith, and other figures who construct a “black, white and in-between appeal [that] has a beige complexion,” White contrasted their personal ambition with that of African American progressives at the forefront of the struggle for human rights in the United States in the 1950s and 60s (“Adam Clayton Powell, Sidney Poitier, Fannie Lou Hamer and Harry Belafonte”). He also compared Obama and Smith to radical egalitarians who helped to shape the cultural politics of a Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 70s (“from Marvin Gaye to Julian Bond, Toni Morrison to Angela Davis, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to August Wilson”).⁵ Such historical comparisons reflect White’s affiliation with a transitional cohort, born in the 1950s, that can be positioned between a civil rights generation and a post-civil rights generation (born after the March on Washington in 1963 and the enactment of landmark pieces of civil rights legislation in the 1960s). They can also be extended in order to read Obama’s shifting racial identifications as part of a “changing same” in African American life. The critique of Obama bears some similarities to questions raised about W. E. B. Du Bois’s blackness in the early twentieth century. For example, the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier pontificated about Du Bois’s “mulatto characteristics” and black political leader Marcus Garvey questioned Du Bois’s commitment to a black identity and suggested he was happier extolling the virtues of his white ancestors from the Netherlands and France.⁶ Yet rather than follow White’s lead and develop a genealogy that connects Obama and Du Bois to pan-African political thought, liberal cultural gatekeepers have often chosen to associate Du Bois and Obama with a cast of African American icons that is more “acceptable to whites—or at least to a sufficient number to maintain a winning coalition.”⁷

Born in 1954, one year after White, Randall Kennedy has also invoked a list of African American icons in order to discuss Obama’s relationship to the canon of “black celebrity and accomplishment” in *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (“Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and even Martin Luther King, Jr.”).⁸ Yet whereas White uses his roll call of Black radicals in order to shame Obama’s political opportunism, Kennedy deploys famous African Americans who can be distanced from radical militancy—retrospectively and selectively—by strategic political operatives who wish to achieve political success in American senatorial and presidential elections.⁹ White defines his incisive reviews against the banalities of tenured “eggheads,” who receive the “blandishments of mainstream attention” and “fringe-group radicals.”¹⁰ Kennedy, the holder of the Michael R. Klein Professorship at Harvard Law School, critiques “black leftists” who have little traction beyond the small communities that read their magazines and websites. He also directs his criticism at self-proclaimed radicals, who are able to reach a larger audience in “left-wing venues, academia and politically active churches and in black glossies, black radio, commercial book publishing, and cable television.”¹¹ Whereas White dismisses the cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson as a “shallow, noisy race

hustler,”¹² Kennedy asks pointed questions about Dyson’s critique of Obama and suggests that it seemed to be based on the “long delay of an invitation to the White House.”¹³

Although their styles clash, White and Kennedy both offer important context for Obama’s public identification with symbols of African American culture (from basketball to barbershops), his claim that every other country in the world wants to be like the United States,¹⁴ and his decision to lampoon radicals on the fringes of college towns (the Chicanos, the Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets who discussed “neocolonialism, Franz [sic] Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy”).¹⁵ Their work provides a number of important reasons as to why Obama-the-political-candidate chose to distance himself from Obama-the-student and develop a convincingly (African) American persona with a faintly exotic and cosmopolitan twist. This carefully crafted image was appealing to pragmatic liberals who wanted a candidate who could shed an identity that seemed “too cosmopolitan” for an (African) American politician.¹⁶ It would also resist conservative opponents desperate to portray Obama as a disciple of Fanon committed to anti-white violence and “thoughtless, needless and frustrated destruction.”¹⁷

This paper is influenced by White’s polemical sorties against the system of privilege and networks that influence Obama’s self-fashioning. It is also informed by Kennedy’s defence of Obama’s disciplined political campaign in a book that eschews the types of jargon, locution, or idiom that are often associated with the so-called bad academic writing of leftist militants.¹⁸ However, I am also interested in reading the self-fashioning of Obama and other multicultural citizens in relation to intellectual work that uses difficult language to explore social, cultural, economic, and political developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I argue that the metaphors of animalistic, infantile, and commodified mixed-race subjects, which appeared in Frantz Fanon’s pursuit of anti-colonial liberation during the 1950s, are evident in the work of “Fanon’s children.” These include “honest intellectuals” such as Armond White, who were born circa 1952 (the first publication of Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*) and 1961 (the original publication of Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre*) and they have unabashedly discussed racial politics in the American public sphere with radical wit and dreadful objectivity. Ironically, I also contend that these metaphors of mixing and mixture are evident in the pronouncements of contemporary commentators, such as Barack Obama, who have sought to confine Fanon to the dustbin of history and are, as Randall Kennedy reminds us, often loath to “expatiate seriously upon racial matters in public.”¹⁹

* * *

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF FANON

A French wartime hero, a Martiniquan exile, and an Algerian freedom fighter, Frantz Fanon developed a psychoanalytic, existentialist approach to the problem of blackness in Eurocentric civilizations. His radical humanism resisted Eurocentric forms of knowledge production and tokenistic attempts to promote the inclusion of some non-white individuals in capitalist versions of democratic politics in North America and Europe. It also took aim at colonized intellectuals who offered outdated howls of black servility for the entertainment of middle-class consumers. Many readers of Fanon have found it difficult to forget his diagnosis of colonial fantasies and the lived experience of blackness in an anti-black world.²⁰ In the field of postcolonial studies, for example, Fanon is one of the few intellectuals from the decolonizing era in the 1950s and 1960s with whose work it is essential to be familiar, and he remains a powerful influence for critical scholars who investigate the politics of multiracialism in relation to bad faith and anti-black racism.²¹ Yet relatively

little has been said about the interlinked metaphors of animalistic, infantile, and commodified mixed-race objects that feature in Fanon's writing.

Fanon's language and style were attuned to the dominant narratives of race in the West during the 1950s and 1960s. In wryly noting that the expression "made in the bushes" was applied to all children with white fathers and black mothers in Martinique,²² Fanon talked back to the animalistic and bestial overtones of derogatory terms such as "Rhineland Bastard" (which was applied to children of mixed German and African parentage who were fathered by Africans in the French colonial army that occupied the Rhineland after World War I). He confronted some of his celebrated contemporaries such as Mayotte Capécia, a fellow Martiniquan writer whose books about "interracial relationships" were celebrated by the French literary establishment. He also anticipated the artistic and existential decisions taken by mixed-race Americans such as Philippa Schuyler, a child prodigy, concert pianist, Catholic writer, anti-Communist, and war correspondent who may be considered a precursor of "that contemporary quest of individuals who resist the one-drop rule and navigate the uncharted waters of multiracial identity."²³ Rejecting American culture as too puritan and unsophisticated, Schuyler repeatedly acknowledged the power of animalistic metaphors in colonial contexts. She also adapted *The Leopard* (a Sicilian novel by Lampedusa that was posthumously published in 1958 and turned into a 1963 film directed by Visconti) into "The White Leopard of Katanga," a commercial novel that chronicled the sexual adventures of a white colonialist with mixed-race women in the Congolese bushes.²⁴

While Fanon questioned the writings of "educated mulattoes" who perpetuated childish, colonial fantasies about white knights and black ugliness,²⁵ Schuyler connected animalistic and infantile metaphors about mixed-race individuals in order to explain why she ran away from a black identity that was associated with "simple children of nature." Schuyler was particularly concerned about the representations of blackness in *Black Orpheus*, a French-Brazilian production that won the best foreign picture Oscar in 1960. Her reaction to the film anticipated Barack Obama's claim to be disturbed by the film's depiction of childlike blacks in exotic locales that catered to the "simple fantasies" of white Americans like his mother.²⁶ Yet while Fanon and Schuyler lived and worked in environments in which words like "half-breed" and "mulatto" were considered acceptable forms of language in the public sphere, Obama has gained political prominence in a cultural environment that pokes fun at the antiquated language of people who talk about "half-breeds" and "mulattoes."²⁷ He is well aware of the anger and resentment caused by pejorative terms such as Mischling, which is still applied to people of mixed-race as well as mongrel dogs in Germany,²⁸ and bushie, which is still used to describe mixed-race people in Afrikaans.²⁹ He may even acknowledge the pitfalls of using a term like "hybrid," which appears as one of the definitions of "bastard" in online English dictionaries.³⁰ However, he also tends to assume that there are enough people of good faith, good taste, and good education to laugh along with him when he jokes about buying a "mutt like me" for his children.³¹

In a similar fashion to the ways metaphors of animalistic and infantile Others are used by "post-racists," who defend their use of racialized language as part of a comedic or ironic joke—and by neoconservatives who invoke the defense of traditions against dilution—metaphors of infantile and commodified Others about "coffee-colored children" and "little yellow dream children" continue to be mined by comedians and politicians.³² In the popular television show *Will and Grace*, the lead characters joke about the beauty of a mixed-race child by pouring milk in a macchiato. In the conventions of the British National Party, one finds far-right leaders expressing their fears about the proliferation of "mixed race, culturally rootless consumers."³³ Whether they are farcically employed by ironic television writers, or tragically repeated by melancholic political operatives, such metaphors about youthful mixed-race individuals cannot wish away their links to colonial desires and liminal figures serving Western business.³⁴ Indeed, the corporate celebration of difference and the continuing

fears about mixing and mixture are important reasons why some writers assert the continuing relevance of Fanon and his arresting critique of the neoliberal universalism that encouraged the cultivation of heroes for middle-class consumers.³⁵

OBAMA'S OTHERS: CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY

Much has been written about the pitfalls of mythology that obscures collectivist struggle, structural inequality and the role of class, gender, nationality, and sexuality in the construction of African American heroes. One thinks, for example, about the forms of middle-class respectability that influenced the decision of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People not to support Claudette Colvin, an unmarried mother with limited financial resources who refused to get on the back of the bus before Rosa Parks's famous protest in 1955.³⁶ Yet iconic representations of a civil rights movement in the United States continue to inform the ways in which we talk about the 44th President of the United States as an African American role model rather than highlight the structural constraints that inform his policy and public persona. In the words of one popular ditty, "Rosa sat so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run. Obama runs so our children can fly." This section reveals how the discourse of positive African American role models influences Obama's self-fashioning—his "A More Perfect Union Speech" and his reaction to the arrest of his friend, Henry Louis Gates Jr. Yet as much as Obama seems to eschew Fanon's warnings about the pitfalls of rhetoric that focuses on heroic or messianic leaders, it bears repetition that other elements of Obama's self-making, such as his memoir, share Fanon's masculinist language about revolutionary workers who could protect "half-breed girls" from Western tourists and the fate of the "educated mulatto woman" who asks "nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life."³⁷

In *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, first published in 1995, Obama self-consciously echoed African American leaders, such as Malcolm X, Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr., in order to define his mature, masculine identity against infantilized and feminized mixed-race subjects. To quote one revealing example at length, Obama distanced his mature identity against Joyce, a "good looking woman . . . with green eyes and honey skin and pouty lips."

People like Joyce . . . talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people. It wasn't a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitational pull, the way integration always worked, a one-way street. The minority assimilated into the dominant culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves, why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don't have to?

We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America's happy, faceless marketplace and we're never so outraged as when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse, not so much because we're bothered by the fact that such indignities are what less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives—although that's what we tell ourselves—but because we're wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet have somehow been mistaken for an ordinary nigger.

Don't you know who I am? I'm an individual!³⁸

In this extract Obama employs a white/black binary that assumes people who deny a singular black identity will try to assimilate into “white culture” (rather than, for example, spend time learning about Chinese or Indian cultures). He also associates the white/black binary with a winner/loser binary, much like others have attached them to intellect/emotion, respectability/non-respectability, honor/shame, etc. In cultivating such a Manichean worldview in order to critique Joyce, and other “half-breeds” who rushed to join a “multicultural marketplace,” Obama appropriates Fanon in order to infantilize and feminize a mixed-race identity that threatened to complicate Manichean views of the world.³⁹ However, Obama is also clear that his mature, masculine identity involved staking out distance between his days as a student who talked about Fanon and posed as radical on the fringes of college towns. After all, his memoir lamented Du Bois’s “withdrawal” from America to Ghana; it did not note the ways in which Du Bois’s renunciation of his American citizenship may have allowed him to develop stronger connections with pan-African movements.⁴⁰

In his famous speech delivered in March 2008 (“A More Perfect Union”), Obama described a range of experiences about race and racism that are often repressed in the American public sphere. Presenting himself as a God-fearing American leader able to empathise with black anger and white resentment, Obama distanced himself—without disowning—the black militancy of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor and, until shortly before the speech, a participant in the presidential campaign. The speech has been widely celebrated as “the most persuasive piece of oratory on US race relations since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech at the August 28, 1963 March on Washington,” as well as a pragmatic call for Americans to stop hiding their beliefs in private.⁴¹ Such affective appeals to an American public are not mutually exclusive with attempts to claim Obama as a global citizen. Yet they often end up caricaturing transnational histories, casting Wright’s black militancy as a sub-national threat (rather than a supra-national appeal that was informed by Fanon, black internationalism and pan-African intellectuals of the 1950s and 60s). They also end up choosing to talk about white flight to the American suburbs (rather than the wider context of Western honor in which pride was based on white skin tone and allegiance to European culture, or what Fanon called the sickness of Europe and North America).

Given the emphasis on frank exchanges and private property in Obama’s hopes for “A More Perfect Union,” it is not entirely surprising that one of the few cases to encourage explicit discussions of race and racism during the Obama presidency involved the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., a celebrity intellectual, at his home in the wealthy suburb of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Many details of the case are well known, but it bears repetition that Gates attracted the attention of a passer-by when he found it difficult to open the front door to his home after returning from a trip to China. The passer-by called the police and, when a police officer arrived at the scene, he found Gates inside his own property. After being asked to show the police officer some identification, the professor expressed anger and the dispute escalated to the point that he was arrested for disorderly conduct. Obama discussed the arrest at a press briefing about health-care reform the next day and claimed that the police officer had acted “stupidly.” Yet after being castigated for being soft on crime, racist towards white people, etc., Obama chose to emphasize rapprochement between Gates and the arresting officer rather than repeat claims he had made in his memoir that such indignities were common “for less fortunate coloreds” or call for Americans to stop hiding their sincere beliefs about race. In fact, the president and the professor chose to perform an uncomfortable, exhibitionist display of interracial friendship with the arresting police officer and the vice president in a “Beer Summit” in front of the American media.⁴² In a neoliberal environment, Gates and Obama may be able to carve out some space to discuss the intricacies and ironies of W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American creative artists in the privacy of their own homes. In public, they can feel compelled to treat discussions of race as parochial and divisive, or turn them into a stage-managed spectacle of bad faith

in which sincere beliefs and interests are suppressed in order to achieve an image of multiracial harmony for the American media.

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, is one of the best-known figures to cast Obama as a beacon of hope for America in the twenty-first century. At various moments in *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, Remnick glosses over the contradictions in an American ideology that considers an emotional commitment to multiracial nations to be “more rational” than similar commitments to Black politics (which are often multiracial and transnational, and have incorporated white progressives, as well as people of Asian, Caribbean and African origins). In fact, Remnick claims Obama worked hard to obtain the “emotional connection that marked his performances” during the 2008 Presidential campaign and then, two pages later, insists that Obama “felt that the days of nationalism and charismatic racial leadership were outdated and played out.”⁴³ Such aggressive attempts to place Obama within the confines of American history may provide an important rejoinder to the overt racism of Americans who refuse to accept the legitimacy of Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate, as well as the prejudices of individuals who consider Obama to be “less American” than Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2007.⁴⁴ Yet they also end up repeating well-worn tropes. These US-centric approaches position Obama as someone who connects blacks and whites, as well as different generations of African Americans (the “Moses generation” of civil rights campaigns and the “Joshua generation” that followed them); they do not consider the possibility that Obama may connect different generations of African diasporic peoples around the world (a “Bandung generation” that was aligned with the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Congress of Negro Writers in Paris in 1956 and other attempts to oppose forms of Western colonialism and neocolonialism by increasing Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation, and a post-Bandung generation). Despite writing over 600 pages, Remnick only offers one paragraph discussing the interest in Obama’s election outside of the United States.⁴⁵ More pointedly, he reports that Obama had little time for Edward Said who lectured on Fanon and postcolonial theory while Obama was at Columbia University,⁴⁶ and he cites Washington insiders who believe that Obama has moved beyond “Fanon and other leftists [he read] when he was young.”⁴⁷ We are reminded, in no uncertain terms, that Obama has been encouraged to repress, marginalize, and sublimate transracial, transnational, and transdisciplinary work that may appear radical to citizen-consumers in neoliberal times.

CRITICAL MIXED RACE STUDIES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

Neoliberalism is an extraordinarily flexible term that is often used in a pejorative and reductive manner to try and explain a variety of social ills relating to individualism, materialism, and capitalism.⁴⁸ Yet it can also be used in a specific, contextualized, and provisional manner in order to analyze the long march of a cultural, political, and economic project based on a strong faith in the beneficent effects of free markets and the veiling of race.⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham between 1968 and 1979, has paid particular attention to the role of new right think tanks, such as the Centre for Policy Studies, which was founded by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph in 1974, in the long march of neoliberalism.⁵⁰ Such think tanks sold a brand of authoritarian populism following the OPEC oil crisis of 1973 that involved appeals to a free economy and a strong state. This economic, cultural, and political project brought together neoconservatives who believed that white, English culture might be swamped by non-white groups and neoliberals, who were dissatisfied with the consensus politics of postwar Britain that defended Keynesian economics and the modern welfare state.⁵¹ Kobena Mercer’s *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994), an influential collection of essays influenced by Hall and other leading figures in British cultural studies, is a particularly good example of work that addressed

this coming together of contradictory forces in key sites and practices. For while the essays written in the mid to late 1980s focus on neoconservative targets, the essays written in the early 1990s address the impact of neoliberalism and neoconservatism on political figures, such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, who adopted economic deregulation into their transformation of mainstream centre-left parties in the United Kingdom and the United States.⁵²

Baby boomers like Clinton used neoliberal and neoconservative rhetoric about people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps through entrepreneurial activity, and highlighted people of color in high profile positions as part of a celebration of racial progress. Concurrently, mixed-race scholars and activists discussed the cultural productions of a so-called “biracial baby boom” who grew up after the United States Supreme Court’s 1967 decision to end all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in *Loving v. Virginia*.⁵³ Although he was born in England in 1963 and raised in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, Malcolm Gladwell illustrates many of the polemical debates that cast the “children of Loving” as visionary individuals who can guide Americans beyond “tired” racial debates and shameless opportunists who betray the legacy of the civil rights generation.⁵⁴ On the one hand, he is heralded as “just about the least political or ideological reporter” at *The New Yorker*—a writer who can synthesize interesting facts from scientific journals for North Americans grappling with a globalized world, the businessman looking for something light to read on the plane, the subscriber to *The New Yorker* wanting something to say at an upcoming dinner party, and the hipsters looking to connect with relatives that they rarely see. On the other hand, investigative reports have uncovered Gladwell’s role as a “third party” media asset for the tobacco company Philip Morris and denounced him as a parasite.⁵⁵

If one moves beyond the celebration and condemnation of a media outlier, one can also read Gladwell’s texts as examples of a neoliberal environment that encourages entrepreneurial subjects to suppress explicit discussions of race in public (unless it can be linked to unjust and irrational figures “living in the past”, or tied to national security, policing or medical research).⁵⁶ In the few essays in which Gladwell explicitly addresses racial politics, he insists that the middle-class family of his white father were not bigots (even though they expressed concern about his interracial marriage, Gladwell opines that they were simply acknowledging that their son’s decision was a “revolutionary” act that had cultural, social, and economic ramifications).⁵⁷ He considers it “too simplistic” to call people racists, bad people or bigots (even when they use racial profiling and shoot unarmed black individuals).⁵⁸ This does not mean that Gladwell ignores the limits of white liberals who freely associated with racist whites in segregated courthouses, restaurants, etc. during the Jim Crow era. In one of his most controversial articles in *The New Yorker*, Gladwell claims that Atticus Finch, the liberal hero of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was a racial accommodator who looked for racial salvation by appealing to hearts and minds rather than developing “constructive suggestions” that would lead to the structural reform of local institutions. Nonetheless, Gladwell is unable, or unwilling, to suggest many ways in which his middle-class readers in North American cities may confront prejudice, racism and de facto segregation in the twenty-first century. Indeed, one of the few proposals that he submits in the anti-racist cause is to call for the greater distribution and accessibility of favorable articles about talented people of color, such as “Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Colin Powell.”⁵⁹ Such faith in the power of journalistic articles about the deeds of “great men” and “Black role models” reflects conservative beliefs that black men are in jeopardy because they lack sufficient access to middle-class role models. It also evinces traces of neoconservative and neoliberal rhetoric that marginalizes, sublimates, and represses discussions about systematic racism.

Many intellectuals have drawn on Fanon in order to express their manifest contempt for profiteers and schemers in the early days of neoliberal multiculturalism. Alongside Armond White and other intellectuals outside of academia, David Theo Goldberg (born in South Africa in 1952), Paul Gilroy (born in England in 1956), and Lewis Gordon (born in Jamaica in 1962) are three distinguished

professors who have developed work that is deeply informed by Fanon's dense, ironic, and musical language.⁶⁰ For Goldberg, the sly civility of racial neoliberalism involves the veiling of race, except when it can be used for personal profit. His work analyzes commentators, such as Shelby Steele and Ward Connerly, who "refuse the resonance of race for all others while silently trading on its currency for self-benefit," as well as corporate forms of multiculturalism that treat (youthful) racial mixture as a virtue that can "fuel commercial intercourse."⁶¹ Gilroy has made similar points about the pitfalls of attempts to incorporate Obama and other individuals drawn from racial and ethnic minorities into a privileged caste of Americans.⁶² In the process of talking about the "celebrity half-castes" who are paraded as examples of multiculturalism's success, he has also alluded to Fanon's insights about the perils of childlike mixed-race individuals being sold as translators or exotic objects.⁶³

Yet if Goldberg and Gilroy have scratched the surface of mixed-race metaphors in their recent discussions of neoliberalism and neocolonialism, Gordon has written more extensively about the attempts to establish critical mixed race studies. Reflecting on the historical discrimination and colorism in an anti-black world, Gordon has argued that it is understandable—if not morally justifiable—for working-class individuals and darker-skinned individuals to be distrustful of middle-class individuals and lighter-skinned individuals who claim to be progressive.⁶⁴ Gordon's use of the concept of slime to describe the aims of a wide variety of mixed-race activists and "sensitive" scholars⁶⁵—who talk politely about racial transcendence while denying the facticity of their privileged position in an anti-black world—is particularly helpful if we are to explore the ways sliminess evokes animalistic behaviour and infantile play as well as salesmen pitching new, hip commodities for polyethnic cultures. It also points Gordon's readers back to Sartre's ontology of slime (a sticky, viscoelastic material that resists shear flow and strain linearly with time when a stress is applied), and reminds us of Barthes's famous description of neither-norism in which a "mythological figure . . . consists in stating two opposites and balancing the one by the other so as to reject them both [O]ne flees from intolerable reality."⁶⁶ Yet if Barthes took aim at the bourgeois liberal, who "no longer needs to choose . . . only to endorse,"⁶⁷ the children of Fanon also draw our attention to a neoliberal climate in which there has been an abrogation of responsibility for the infrastructure needed for a rational-critical bourgeois public sphere.

Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* is one of the few books to apply the work of Fanon and Fanon's children to discussions of mixing and mixture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In a monograph that posits that multiracialism stems from conservative and reactionary forces determined to undo the gains of the modern civil rights movement, Sexton pays homage to the "perspicacious" work of Fanon and Gordon, repeatedly cites the work of Goldberg and Gilroy, and alludes to three of the interlinked metaphors of mixing and mixture that were used by Fanon.⁶⁸ In regards to bestial metaphors, *Amalgamation Schemes* indicts multiracial advocates who invoke stereotypes about hypermasculine black male rapists—and talk about reproduction rather than sexuality—in the hopes of solidifying a respectable identity in the American public sphere.⁶⁹ In regards to infantile and commodified metaphors, Sexton suggests that many attempts to study or celebrate mixed-race identities in the United States are immature, lack intellectual rigour, and are unable to develop an effective critique of racial neoliberalism.⁷⁰

Unsurprisingly, there have been a number of combative responses to Sexton's monograph. For example, Paul Spickard has questioned the tone and methodology of *Amalgamation Schemes* in a review that takes issue with Sexton's decision to use "not-very-thoughtful activists" and "weaker writers" to illustrate the field of mixed race studies, and positions Sexton as a strident young man who doesn't quite have the maturity to produce a balanced and measured monograph. According to Spickard, Sexton cherry-picks his evidence, imputes some of the flaws of right-wing multiracial advocacy to "the whole movement and to the subject of study," and fails to appreciate the distinctions

between major scholars of multiraciality and scholars who have made only a small contribution to the field. To go further, he aligns Sexton with what he considers the poorly written bluster of Lewis Gordon and others (such as Jon Michael Spencer and Rainier Spencer), and claims that they resist the “trend” of “multiraciality” to 1) “deconstruct the categories created by the European Enlightenment and its colonial enterprises around the world”, and 2) acknowledge “the life experiences in the last half-century of a growing number of people who have and acknowledge mixed parentage.”⁷¹

Just as the divergent positions of White and Kennedy shed light on the politics and poetics of Obama’s candidacy and presidency, the debate between Spickard and Sexton is important if critical mixed race studies is to rigorously address questions of language, style, and methodology. That is to say, Spickard’s decision to describe some writers as “eminent” and central to multiracial studies—and dismiss others as “poor writers”—evokes the liberal sentiments of Obama, Kennedy, and other figures who dismiss radical writers as too abstract to gain traction outside of small groups on the fringes of college towns. In addition, the response to Sexton’s work reminds us that radical scholars may need to develop a clearer definition of mixed race studies if they are to help readers identify the commonalities between “genteel” scholars, a “liberal” multiracial political movement and a more “embarrassing right-wing” in neoliberal times.⁷²

Although such debates about language, style, and methodology can be confined to the field of American studies (Sexton’s text does not address studies of racial mixture outside of the United States),⁷³ critical mixed race studies need not limit itself to forms of neoliberalism in which the multiracial American subject is privileged as a figure more universal and legitimate than the multicultural world citizen.⁷⁴ As noted by the Canadian poet Wayne Compton, Fanon’s ghost haunts manifestos, monographs and magazines that call for mixed-race connections inside and outside of the United States. A field of critical mixed race studies that considers itself transracial, transnational and transdisciplinary cannot afford to repress, marginalize, or sublimate the insights of Fanon about Canada, Europe and other sites in the overdeveloped world in which corporate forms of multiracialism have called for the celebration of cultural difference and the deconstruction of racial identity. Nor can it wish away the metaphors of mixing and mixture that Fanon questioned with such dreadful objectivity.

NOTES

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¹ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 67.

² White, *The Resistance*, xiii, xvi.

³ Lott, "Public Image Limited," 65.

⁴ Armond White, "XXX," *New York Press*, August 20, 2002.

⁵ Armond White, "The Pursuit of Crappyness," *New York Press*, July 9, 2008.

⁶ Frazier, "The Du Bois Program," 11; Marcus Garvey, *Negro World*, January 8, 1921.

⁷ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103, 163, 167.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ White, *The Resistance*, 349.

¹¹ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, 260.

¹² White, "History Gets Lost in the Matrix," *First of the Month*, June 2003. Accessed August 1, 2005.

http://www.firstofthemonth.org/culture/culture_white_history.html.

¹³ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, 261.

¹⁴ Donovan Slack, "Obama: Everyone Wants to Be Us," *Politico*, August 8, 2012. Accessed August 9, 2012.

<http://www.politico.com/politico44/2012/08/obama-everyone-wants-to-be-us-131495.html>.

¹⁵ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 100.

¹⁶ William Finnegan, "The Candidate: How the Son of a Kenyan Economist Became an Illinois Everyman," *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2004. For other examples of journalistic commentary that pays lip service to Obama as an ideal American leader for a "multicultural, globalized world" see David Brooks, "The 21st Century Man," *New York Times*, August 26, 2008; Roger Cohen, "The Obamas of the World," *New York Times*, March 6, 2008.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/06/opinion/06cohen.html?_r=0.

¹⁷ Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 478. Also see Robert Fulford, "Frantz Fanon: A Poisonous Thinker who Refuses to Die," *National Post*, February 2, 2002; D'Souza, *The Roots of Obama's Rage*, 131–7.

¹⁸ Winks, "The Future of Imperial History," in Winks, *Historiography*, 653–68.

¹⁹ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, 17.

²⁰ See, for example, hooks, "Feminism as a persistent critique," in Read, *The Fact of Blackness*, 85; Schwarz, "Conquerors of Truth," in Schwarz, *The Expansion of England*, 16; Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic*, 31, 157; Clarke, *Odysseys Home*, 12–13.

²¹ Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 161. Also see, for example, Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, 155; Gibson, *Living Fanon*; special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, no. 7/8, (December, 2010); "Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Passing of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961)," (Panel, Caribbean Philosophical Association Annual Meeting, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, October 2, 2011); Marriot, "Whither Fanon?, 33–69.

²² Fanon, *Black Skin*, 46–7n5.

²³ Daniel, *More than Black?*, 96.

²⁴ See, for example, Schuyler, *The White Leopard*; Talalay, *Composition in Black and White*, 247–8; McNeil, "Black Devils, White Saints," 360–76.

²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 42.

²⁶ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 124.

²⁷ See, for example, "The Surrogate," an episode in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2004), season 4, episode 7; "Digital Estate Planning," *Community* (2012), season 3, episode 20.

²⁸ Haritaworn, "Hybrid Border-Crossers?," 119.

²⁹ Theroux, *Dark Star Safari*, 382.

³⁰ Dictionary.com, s.v. "bastard," accessed October 15, 2010, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bastard>.

³¹ Obama joked about wanting to obtain a "mutt like me" for the White House in his first press conference as president-elect.

Foon Rhee, "Chewing Over Obama's 'Mutt' Reference," *Boston Globe*, November 10, 2008, Accessed May 1, 2010.

http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2008/11/chewing_over_ob.html.

³² Washington, *Invented Lives*, 160.

³³ Nick Griffin, Speech delivered at the British National Party Leadership Conference, July 4, 2006.

<http://www.solargeneral.com/mirrors/national-vanguard/www.nationalvanguard.org/story66ce.html>.

³⁴ For more on the linkages between metaphors of hybridity, mixture, empire and nation see Young, *Colonial Desire*; Ahmed, "It's a Sun Tan, Isn't It?," in Mirza, *Black British Feminism*, 153–167; Rosa, "The Coming of the Neo-Hawaiian," in Williams-León and Nakashima *The Sum of Our Parts*, 49–56; Mahtani, "Mixed Metaphors," in Lee and Lutz, *Situating "Race" and Racisms*, 77–93.

³⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 169–78.

³⁶ The NAACP supported Parks, a longstanding member of its organization by emphasizing her status as a respectable lady. For more detail on the NAACP's refusal to support Colvin's legal campaign see, for example, Younge, *No Place Like Home*, 225, 271–2;

Maryam Abdulaleem, "Claudette Colvin: An Unsung Hero in The Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Jet*, February 28, 2005, 12-13; Hoose, *Claudette Colvin*.

³⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 42.

³⁸ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 99-100.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99, 124. Also see Clarke, *Odysseys Home*, 213; McNeil, "Black with 'White Blood?," in Mendible, *Race 2008*, 99-114.

⁴⁰ Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 86.

⁴¹ Daniel, "Race, Multiraciality, and Barack Obama," 51-59.

⁴² Fanon, *Black Skin*, 127. On public displays of interracial friendship also see DeMott, *The Trouble with Friendship*; Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, 29.

⁴³ Remnick, *The Bridge*, 283, 285.

⁴⁴ Nicholas D. Kristof, "What? Me Biased?" *The New York Times*, October 29, 2008.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/opinion/30kristof.html?_r=0.

⁴⁵ Remnick, *The Bridge*, 33, 108, 525.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 431.

⁴⁸ Brendan O'Neill, "These rioters are not 'Thatcher's offspring,'" *Spiked*, August 15, 2011, <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/10989#.UghqGn8qLoY>. Also see Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, 141-2.

⁴⁹ On "racism without race" and racial neoliberalism, see, for example, Grossberg, "The Figure of Subalternity," 59-89; Goldberg, *The Threat of Race*; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

⁵⁰ Hall, "The Neoliberal Revolution," 11.

⁵¹ See, for example, Gamble, *The Free Economy*. There were also a number of discordant affinities between the cultural project of the Centre for Policy Studies and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in relation to the deconstruction of identity and the celebration of difference. The ironies of these appropriations and overlaps were not lost by Hall and other cultural theorists influenced by Marxist humanism when they debated the "authoritarian populism" of Thatcherism with state theorists and political economists. Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," 14-20; Jessop et al., "Authoritarian Populism," 32-60; Hall, "Authoritarian Populism," 115-24; Jessop et al., "Thatcherism and the Politics," 87-101; Jessop, "Liberalism, Neoliberalism and Urban Governance," 452-72. Also see Grossberg, "The Figure of Subalternity," 66.

⁵² Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 77, 83, 260, 289, 305.

⁵³ Root, *Racially Mixed People*, 3; Root, "The Multiracial Experience," in Root, *The Multiracial Experience*, xxvii; McNeil, *Sex and Race*, 16.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Steele, *The Content of Our Character*; Baker Jr., *Betrayal*.

⁵⁵ Yasha Levine, "Malcolm Gladwell Unmasked: A Look into the Life & Work of America's Most Successful Propagandist," *S.H.A.M.E.*, May 31, 2012. Accessed June 1, 2011.

<http://shameproject.com/report/malcolm-gladwell-unmasked-life-work-of-americas-mostsuccessful-propagandist/>.

⁵⁶ Goldberg, "The Tale of Two Obamas," 203.

⁵⁷ Gladwell, "Lost in the Middle," in O'Hearn, *Half and Half*, 116.

⁵⁸ Gladwell, *Blink*, 93, 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁰ Goldberg has drawn on his own work as a music video director in order to develop interactive web projects; Gilroy continues to grow as a teacher and intellectual with the discipline instilled by careful listening, musical practice and critical reflection; and Gordon continues to examine the problem of maturity while performing as a jazz musician. See, for example, Goldberg, Hristova, and Loyer, "Blue Velvet.:" Green and Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style,'" in *Guillory and Green, Soul: Black Power*, 250-266; Gordon, "The Problem of Maturity," 367-89.

⁶¹ Goldberg, "The Tale of Two Obamas," 208; David Theo Goldberg, "Presidential Race" (2008), accessed August 10, 2010. <http://threatofrace.org/2008/10/blog/presidential-race-by-david-theo-goldberg/>.

⁶² Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, 172-3.

⁶³ Gilroy, *Against Race*, 21; Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 128.

⁶⁴ Gordon, "Mixed Race," in Gordon, *Existential Africana*, 112.

⁶⁵ Gordon, "Reply to Critics," 304-21.

⁶⁶ Gordon, "Mixed Race," 109; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 609-610; Barthes, *Mythologies*, 153. Also see Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness," http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.

⁶⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 153.

⁶⁸ Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 7, 10, 16, 26, 41, 51, 54, 99, 232-5, 240, 261, 274-5, 278n2, 287n7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 7, 15, 31, 74, 81, 154, 157-8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷¹ Spickard, "Review of *Amalgamation Schemes*, 125-27.

⁷² Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes*, 62-3, 82.

⁷³ See, for example, Mahtani, "Mixed Metaphors"; Ifekwunigwe, *Scattered Belongings*; Farred, *Midfielder's Moment*.

⁷⁴ Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 18.

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