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HUMAN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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I have been asked to discuss human cultural diversity, to define culture itself, to distinguish between race and ethnicity, to lay out the parameters of “whiteness,” and to articulate the social, economic, and political implications of race and ethnicity. In so doing, I have been asked to focus on the United States but to provide a cross-cultural perspective.

As many in this room will agree, cultural and racial categories cannot be defined for all time. None has a Platonic essence. All are highly politicized and entirely historically contingent—and thus my discussion inevitably must spill over onto the terrains of the other panels on historical processes of race and on racism. As an anthropologist who works in the history of theory, I have written repeatedly about the shifting meanings and the political and economic connectedness of all these terms in Anglophone scholarship. And indeed, these terms index not only sifting human social realities and politics, but also the histories of the outward adaptive radiation, as they competed with one another for turf and research funding, of the various social sciences and history over the course of the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

But I am also an ethnographer of the United States, and have spent nearly three decades “in the field” in various Western, Eastern Seaboard and Midwestern locations, looking explicitly at the shifting and various ways ordinary Americans construe themselves and others as racial, ethnic, white, and as culture-bearing.

In what follows, I will define culture and then offer a panoply of the shifting meanings and relations among culture, race, ethnicity, and “whiteness,” focusing on American demographic and political realities, on American popular culture, and on the role of American anthropology as a discipline in these discursive shifts. I will also introduce and analyze the rise of American identity politics from the 1970s forward, and the more recent processes of American racialization, as central to understanding these processes. I hope to provide, in the end, an historicized remapping of these crucial concepts.

Culture, seemingly the most basic term of the set, is like all of them, highly polysemous. This keyword, often seen as anthropology's *raison d'être*, lies at the center of contemporary political and intellectual contest. "Culture" inhabits one pole of two longstanding and highly destructive antinomies, culture/civilization and culture/economy. As Raymond Williams informed us more than two decades ago, culture was originally a "noun of process" (1983). In European languages, it referred to plant and animal husbandry, and then shifted, from the 17th century forward, to denote the cultivation of human capacities and sensibilities. The course of the 19th century saw the Great Chasm open between Arnoldian High Culture—largely Western art and civilization—and the globally varying ways of life documented by the newly labeled field of anthropology. Edward Burnett Tylor, who held the West's first named chair in Anthropology, at Oxford, defined culture in 1871 as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, morals, law, custom and any other habits and capabilities acquired by man as a member of society." While Tylor's so-called "kitchen sink" definition clearly applied to the West as well as the rest, 19th century notions of high culture, or civilization—and of those who did and did not produce it—clearly functioned to aid in securing elite rule in the metropole and imperial control abroad. And they were furthered by Victorian social evolutionary models that placed Euroamerican elites at the top of the ladder of human progress.

While many postmodernists from the 1980s forward have articulated a vision of anthropology's invariant imperial eye, the discipline's practitioners, by and large, have in fact stood in opposition to all who would deny the human worth, dignity, and cultural creativity of any human population, no matter how poor or technologically unsophisticated—as we see from Tylor's all-encompassing Victorian definition, and in that old warhorse of the college anthropology classroom, "cultural relativism" (see di Leonardo 1988:334ff). But in so doing, anthropologists have tended to mimic the tropes of the High Culture acolytes: Just as "civilization" was seen as an unchanging Western elite property, so anthropologists' "culture" came to be framed as the homogeneous, richly composed, timeless possession of Third and Fourth World societies and the poor everywhere. The practice of salvage ethnography-- documenting everything possible about the "traditions" of populations already conquered and thus frequently decimated by wholesale slaughter and Western disease--did not help matters, as it tended to provide idealized freeze-frame material devoid of its living institutional context.

With the decline of social evolutionary thought, and as the study of Western humanities developed in the early to mid-twentieth century, a new contrast emerged: the wealthy West had specific histories, while peasants and "primitives," and by extension, the Western (especially nonwhite) poor, had small-c cultures. They were the "people without history," in the late Eric Wolf's magisterial formulation. Wolf warned in the early 1980s that some schools of anthropology had erred in "endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects." In so doing, he pointed out, we "create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls" (Wolf 1982:6). The very concept of the "ethnographic present"—the time period during which fieldwork is undertaken--further underlined the framing of ethnography's objects as unchanging, outside history.

It is of course the case that there is “something” to cultural variation. Human beings vary wildly in the ways in which they understand themselves and the natural and physical world, in everything from the languages with which we think to the ways in which we apprehend and adorn our bodies to our visions of our own and others’ social worlds to wildly disjunctive notions of the supernatural. But these variations are vastly more historically contingent, changeable, and internally heterogeneous than the ahistorical billiard ball vision would allow. We all recognize nowadays that Native Americans’ so-called aboriginal lifeways—as in Seneca longhouse and hunting culture or Plains Indians’ equestrian buffalo-hunting—were actually historically contingent, agentive responses to the European fur trade and the Spanish colonial introduction of horses to the New World, respectively. Talal Asad and his contributors, in the mid-1970s anthology *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), documented for multiple famous ethnographic cases the profound historical changes so-called tribal or primitive societies had undergone prior to the arrival of anthropological interpreters. As Wolf pointed out, “Europeans and Americans would never have encountered these supposed bearers of a pristine past if they had not encountered one another, in bloody fact, as Europe reached out to seize the resources and populations of other continents” (1982:18).

The global pool hall vision, as Eric Wolf demonstrated, entirely misframes the lives of the global South. But it is the ground from which falsifying tropes of the Western self arise. If “they” are the people without history, then “we” are the people without culture. Just as “nasty savage” modernism always, ironically, implies “noble savage” antimodernism, Westerners since the Victorian era have sought refuge from the ennui of industrial capitalism in what they envisioned to be the timeless exotic. From the 1960s forward, as I have documented in *Exotics at Home* (1998), this romantic impulse has flowered repeatedly, and been repeatedly engulfed by the jaws of commerce—as in the commodification of ethnic and native arts and music, non-Western religion and medicine. It has thus also helped to institutionalize new industry around the globe, from The Body Shop to ecological tourism to the Thai, Japanese, Ethiopian, and Indian restaurants, salsa, banghra, and blues bars, Tai Kwan Do and yoga studios, and ethnic boutiques now considered ordinary elements of American cityscapes and suburban malls.

Ironically, the 1980s rise of interdisciplinary cultural studies, with its identity-politics emphases, has furthered these trends, sometimes even acting as a scholarly stalking horse for new, consumable cultural difference. And of course the New Right, in its well-planned and -financed *Kulturkampf* (culture wars), has repeatedly attacked this celebration of the multicultural and multiracial as the hidden agenda of those evil tenured radicals who, along with the feminists and gay-rights scholars, are bent on the overthrow of Western civilization, the sharing-out of metropolitan wealth to the “barbaric” poor everywhere (see di Leonardo 1988:135ff and 334ff).

Unfortunately, although modern anthropology and cultural studies have retrieved the processual quality of culture’s original meaning--recognizing that all people have culture *and* history, and done much to erase the culture/civilization antinomy--the “linguistic turn” affecting both of them has only intensified the false divide between

culture and economy. "Multiculturalism," like other trendy terms--hybridity, diversity, Otherness, the colonial gaze--is a Disneyland-doll, Benetton-ad image, lacking connection to the political-economic grounds from which people apprehend and reproduce their worlds. This stance fits only too well our era of neoliberal triumph, in which all identities and human rights are recognized-- except class status and economic justice. While there is no dearth of older and contemporary scholarship carefully linking culture and political economy, it attracts less scholarly attention and circulates less widely in this bizarrely postmodern and newly imperialist era.

Now let us consider, with this backdrop, the political meanings of race, ethnicity, and "whiteness" in the American past and present.

Contemporary scholarly and public policy debates on race in the United States include the categories African-American, Latino or Hispanic, pan-Asian, white, and Native American, and terms like identity politics, biracial identity, the urban underclass, and the new transnationalism. Only three decades ago, however, these categories and terms would elicit only puzzled incomprehension in the academy, inside the Beltway, or on the street. Then, key public race categories included blacks, WASPs, white ethnics (represented as the conservative Moral Majority), Chicanos or Mexican-Americans on the West coast and Puerto Ricans and Dominicans on the East, and separate categories for Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos--except when all "race" categories were grouped under the then-popular campus and street political rubric "Third World people."

This historical vignette illustrates, of course, both the flux of group labels and the changing demographics, linked to shifting migrant streams, of American race/ethnic relations. It also illustrates, though, the fundamentally political character of racial and ethnic labeling. Clearly, migration shifts tied to American foreign and economic policy have influenced the construction of racial categories. The post-Vietnam war migration of numbers of southeast Asians, and later, of South Asians, for example, has complicated earlier "Asian" categorizations containing East Asians alone. But equally clearly, political shifts alter our understanding of the American race scene in the absence of any demographic change. There is a long history, for example, of both consensual and coercive white/nonwhite sexual unions in the United States. But aside from interesting exceptions like the Creoles of Louisiana (Dominguez 1986), in general in the post-Reconstruction American past, white/nonwhite biracial individuals were automatically defined in the larger society as simply nonwhite. The renaissance of the biracial and multiracial categories is more a function of changing American race politics than of major demographic shift. And "WASP" is no longer a salient category, in part because of the fading of the salience of white ethnicity, to which it was counterposed. The rise of white ethnicity as a category in the 1970s was embedded in national conservative mobilizing, evolving struggles over resources in local urban politics, and simultaneous white resentment of and self-conscious borrowing from the tactics and rhetorics of the civil rights, Black Power, and other race-based liberation movements (di Leonardo 1991, 1994, 1998).

These points are not of mere historic interest. Because they illustrate our tendencies to naturalize the racial/ethnic present, and to elide its historically contingent

and politically constructed character, they have direct implications for contemporary national and local public policies concerning race relations. To illustrate these implications, I summarize some of my own and others' ethnographic and historical research on the developing formation of whiteness in the United States, and related critiques of contemporary mythologies of race and racism. I also sketch in some of the global historical background to American conceptions of race and relations. What follows will be highly selective, by no means a review of all relevant literature. In particular I omit the gendered implications of this research.

The Irish, migrating to the United States from the 1840s, and southern and eastern Europeans (including large numbers of Jews), largely arriving from the 1880s to the 1920s, comprise the populations labeled white ethnic in the 1970s. While the "white ethnic renaissance" of that period brought to the forefront of popular consciousness the suffering and endurance of members of that vast migration and their descendents, what was *not* brought forward was the intimate connection, as ideology and material reality, between these populations and those now labeled racial populations, particularly black Americans.

First, southeastern Europeans were widely labeled--even into and beyond the World War II era--as dirty, diseased, criminal, mentally deficient, overly procreative, and having improper family forms. These evaluations are familiar to us today, of course, as applied to stigmatized American racial populations. We have all but forgotten, for example, that IQ tests were first devised to evaluate immigrants' fitness for World War I service, and that Henry Goddard, in 1913, reported that 79% of Italians and 83% of Jews were feeble-minded (Block and Dworkin 1976). I noted, in my first ethnographic study in the 1970s, the irony of my California Italian-American informants using against blacks, Mexicans, and Asians precisely the rhetoric that had been used against them and their antecedents. As sociologist Stephen Steinberg has noted sardonically, for the same historical era, "the Poles and Slavs in Chicago, like the Irish in Boston and the Jews in Forest Hills, rarely experience their ethnicity so acutely as when threatened with racial integration" (1984:219).

Second, these "new immigrants" had complex and varying labor market relations with racial populations, particularly black Americans. At times employers hired and housed them together, at times apart. Populations were set against one another in work teams, and used against one another as strikebreakers. Europeans, blacks, and others were frequently thought to have specific "racial traits" making them good or poor workers at different tasks in different environments. John Bodnar's (1982) historical research on race and labor in Pittsburgh unearthed a 1925 "racial adaptability to various types of plant work" chart that evaluated 36 "races"--including white Americans, Irish, Ukrainians, Mexicans, Jews, etc--in terms of their abilities to do, e.g., night shift or dirty work, and to succeed at work "requiring speed" or "requiring precision."

Third, and as a consequence of the first two processes: these "new immigrant" populations were structurally "in-between peoples" who, in their efforts to improve their economic and social standing, frequently acted to distinguish themselves from "race" populations--as in long histories of immigrant exclusion of blacks, Mexicans, and Asians

from labor unions. In the cultural context of the early twentieth century, the Irish, southern and Eastern Europeans were widely described as belonging to separate races, as non-white. Thus it is historically accurate to describe white ethnics' "achievement of whiteness" over the twentieth century, and to note shifts in white racial formation across that period (Roediger 1991, Barrett and Roediger 1997). At the same time, it is important to note that the 1990s trend of American "whiteness studies" has been criticized, as for example by historian Eric Arnesen, for siphoning off public attention from ongoing racial discrimination in a retrogressive era (2001).

Noting the mutability and historicity of even the notion of whiteness in American history aids in illuminating the fundamentally socially constructed nature of race categories and race relations. And documenting the inherent interconnections among shifting racial/ethnic labels across the twentieth century foregrounds the necessity of perceiving particular populations' histories in the context of overarching race/ethnic relations. It is not only race categories, however, that are constructed, shift across time, and are defined in terms of one another, but also ethnic or racial "cultures." In my first study (1984), I reviewed the counter-empirical presuppositions of postwar social science literature on "ethnic mobility": the notion that there were clear-cut white ethnic "cultures," unchanging across space and time, that determined population economic mobility rates irrespective of regional economy or economic history. I labeled this set of assumptions the "ethnic report card model." I narrated my cross-class informants' families' economic life histories, embedded in regional and national economic history, to illustrate varying Italian immigrant economic strategies intersecting with shifting regional economies. I also tested the ethnic mobility model as laid out by Harvard quantitative historian Stephan Thernstrom in *The Other Bostonians* (1973). Thernstrom asserted that, for example, the Irish "lacked any entrepreneurial tradition" and that Italians "lived in a subculture that directed their energies away from work." He used 1950 census data on male income and occupation by ethnic origins to construct a stratified array of "good" to "bad" ethnic cultures. I simply reproduced his measures--but for the San Francisco/Oakland SMSA rather than Boston--and the ethnic income and occupational trends were entirely different. The thrust of my research findings as a whole was that regional economy, demographic mix, and employer and majority-society bias played far more role in mobility experiences than did "ethnic culture." These findings have direct implications as critique of the use of these same evaluative presuppositions brought into play in research on contemporary "racial" populations in the United States.

More recently, in *Exotics at Home* (1998), I traced the development and scholarly rebuttal of Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty" model in the 1960s and 1970s, and its rebirth in the 1980s as "the urban underclass"--race-minority populations characterized by low employment, "social isolation," high crime rates, drug use, and teenage pregnancy. I reviewed the counter-empirical claims of underclass theorists, their failure to include public policy decisions and political struggle in their model, noted the thrifty recycling of stigmatizing characterizations of Others, and traced the rise of "blame the victim" rationales in public culture making use of the larger frame of underclass ideology. (An excellent example of how racialization is based on political economy, not biology or culture, comes to us from China historian Emily Honig's (1992) work on contemporary Shanghai, where a new "ethnicity," the Subei, has come into existence. In

a hauntingly familiar litany of underclass claims, majority Chinese describe Subei as dirty, noisy, criminal, and overly sexual and procreative. Who are these new ethnics?— simply recently arrived local impoverished peasants.)

Directly connected to underclass ideology is the construction of American “model minorities.” Model minorities—construed as various Asian groups and, more recently, some Latinos--are those who "work hard," have "traditional family values," "respect their elders," and thus succeed in the United States without "extra help." Model minority discourse is thus simply an extension into the present, and onto different populations, of the ahistorical and anti-empirical "ethnic report card" model. Stephen Steinberg, in fact, has pointed out how the "theory of Asian success is a new spin on earlier theories about Jews, with whom Asians are explicitly compared."

Political scientist Claire Kim (2001) has charted two waves of model minority mythology in American popular political discourse. The first, in the 1960s, is associated with anti-civil rights politics. By "the rules of ideological triage," Kim argues, citing the long history of American anti-Asian racism, Asians were for the first time defined as good citizens as *non-black* and *non-Communist*. This new mythology was furthered by the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act's encouragement of well-off professional migrants, a significant "class drain" from the Third World. The 1980s Reagan revolution heralded the second wave, in which Asian-Americans' "success" was used to legitimate "moving back the clock" on civil rights. Kim points out that model minority rhetoric is not only racist against blacks and Latinos, but against Asians themselves: it obscures their heterogeneous national origins, their actually limited professional success, the widespread economic difficulties of non-elite Asian migrants (heavier users of welfare than whites in California, for example), and continuing American violations of Asian-American civil rights. Suzanne Model, in her historical analysis of ethnicity and economy in New York City, effectively destroys the "why can't blacks be entrepreneurs like Jews/Asians ?" line of argument. Stephen Steinberg starkly lays out the issue of privilege obscured by model minority claims:

In demystifying and explaining Asian success, we come again to a simple truth: that what is inherited is not genes, and not culture, but class advantage and disadvantage. If not for the extraordinary selectivity of the Asian immigrant population, there would be no commentaries in the popular press and the social science literature extolling Confucian values and the "pantheon of ancestors" who supposedly inspire the current generation of Asian youth. After all, no such claims are made about the Asian youth who inhabit the slums of Manila, Hong Kong, and Bombay, or, for that matter, San Francisco and New York (1981: 272,275).

In *Exotics at Home*, I also narrated my ethnographic work in a working-class New Haven, Connecticut neighborhood under stress during the urban immiseration of the Reagan/Bush administrations. My block shifted from nearly all-white to nearly all-black in a period of five years, street prostitution became common, and a major crack cocaine dealing area sprang up only a half-mile away. I show how underclass ideology, readily available in public culture, distorted white and black neighbors' interpretations of actual shifting urban political economy. Drug and prostitution customers, for example, were

largely whites--often white ethnics--driving into the majority-minority city from surrounding white suburbs, and yet they were mostly invisible to local press and to neighbors in their evaluations of the deterioration of the city's and neighborhood's quality of life.

Much excellent historical work has been done on actual American urban political-economic shifts, as opposed to those claimed by underclass theorists--for example, in John Bodnar's work on Pittsburgh, Tom Sugrue's (1996) on Detroit, and in Michael Katz' 1993 anthology, *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History*. Insightful ethnographic studies include Brett Williams' 1988 portrayal of daily lives, interactions, and mutual incomprehension among white, Latino and black owners and renters in a Washington, DC neighborhood as stalled gentrification takes hold; Mercer Sullivan's (1989) sensitive accounts of the varying positionalities of black, Latino, and white ethnic youthful criminals in New York City and the relative privilege and thus ability of the white kids to "graduate" from petty crime to legal employment; Dwight Conquergood's (1992) narration of the disjunction between the local homeowner/civic booster "underclass" accounts of life in a Chicago tenement and his own experiences of cooperation and mutual obligation with multi-racial tenement neighbors; and Gina Pérez's, Ana Yolanda Ramos Zayas's, and Nicholas de Genova's richly detailed ethnographic work on new processes of racialization among Puerto Rican, Mexican, and white Chicagoans (2003).

Returning to the larger global setting, research by anthropologists, historians and others lays out the growth and circulation of stigmatizing, racialized tropes of Otherness in the West coincident with the rise of colonialism. This is not an issue of litanies of injustice, but of tracing the evolution of cognitive and affective frameworks in use in the present. John Szwed (1975) notes that the first historical likening of a stigmatized population to monkeys and apes was the 16th century colonizing British representation of the Irish, not of black Africans. John and Jean Comaroff (1992) point out the Victorian British elite use of images of "African savagery" to devalue the London poor, and vice versa. Robert Rydell (1984) and others have documented the late 19th century to 1930s imperialist culture of European and American world's fairs and the newly established natural history museums, which enacted as mass entertainment and education a stratified ladder of human races topped by white Americans and Europeans. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993), in their study of the history and contemporary reality of *National Geographic*, discover that contemporary white Americans, on average, approve magazine representations of "bronze" (relatively light) peoples, and disapprove of "black" people, misidentifying darker-skinned Pacific and Latin American populations as African and wildly overstating the percentage of "Africa" stories in the magazine. (Given the upwelling of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice, discrimination, and violence in the United States since the Gulf War and especially since 9/11, however, Lutz and Collins findings today would no doubt exclude persons so identified from the desirable "bronze" category.)

Thus, recognizing the historicity and political construction of culture, race, ethnicity, and whiteness leads us to examine critically the presuppositions of race research, to view with skepticism claims of ethnic or racial "cultural" characteristics, and

to note widespread popular and scholarly misapprehensions arising from long histories of stigmatizing racial tropes in use in the West. An important *Washington Post*/Kaiser Foundation/ Harvard University study in 1995 (Morin 1995) reported that Americans, across racial categories, greatly overestimate the proportions of minority Americans in the population as a whole. As well, whites who were "least informed" about actual black American statuses in six economic categories were most likely to favor cuts in government spending to help the poor and to call for an end to affirmative action. Clearly, widespread ignorance of raced realities, ongoing popular cultural stereotypes, and continuing American political demobilization are intimately interrelated. The concept of human cultural diversity, extracted from history, economy, and power, simply allows the continuation of the counter-empirical report card model of racial and ethnic functioning in the United States and around the globe.

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