

Introduction: The University to Come

It is an idea that is probably bound up with the whole Western organization of knowledge, namely, the idea that knowledge and truth cannot not belong to the register of order and peace, that knowledge and truth can never be found on the side of violence, disorder, and war.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, 1976

Now when we compare the technical mastery which man has over the world, with the utter failure of that power to organize happiness, and peace in the world, then we know that something is wrong. Part of this wrong is our conception of education.

—W.E.B. DU BOIS (1944?)

We ain't goin' study war no more.

—AN "OLD NEGRO SPIRITUAL"

This book engages an uneasy set of questions about the relationship between the university and public life at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The conditions that have prompted this investigation are all too obvious for those readers who number among humanistic or social scientific faculties, and perhaps only slightly less so for those who have acquired a passing knowledge of current events. For the past few decades, mainstream media have loudly disparaged the ongoing crisis of the university—a crisis the contours of which beg the widest possible interpretative

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dimensions, as pundits and critics from across the political spectrum can attest. My specific concern is in the ways in which this crisis can be said to be *racially predicated*, even as the prevailing common sense impatiently insists that race is now an irrelevance in national public life.

To be sure, African American intellectuals like Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Du Bois in the first decades of the twentieth century exposed the ways in which a democracy's self-assured and unambiguous allegiance to universal education could be perverted, producing generations of "miseducated" adherents to mythologies of racial superiority, nationalist provincialism, and techno-scientific idiocy, rather than inspiring an intellectually engaged, cosmopolitan, and democratic citizenry. Du Bois's magisterial *Black Reconstruction* delivers a clear rebuke to historians of the day, who sacrificed a faithful and accurate record of human action for "the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion."¹ More recently, the work of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Robert Young, Gayatri Spivak, and others has drawn critical attention to the relationship between modern European and American imperial adventures and forms of cultural invention and self-creation; between the university's transcendent quest for truth and knowledge and its role in the production of aesthetic, philosophical and scientific modes of legitimization that subtend liberal modernity's commitment to an utterly knowable, malleable, and ordered universe—to the task, in short, of mastery and so subjugation. Said's now classic *Orientalism* stands at the apogee of this tradition, tracing in meticulous and bracing detail how the backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality in scholarly and popular representations of the Islamic Orient—an imagined space standing outside of Western progress in the arts, science, governance, and commerce and hence requiring its "attention, reconstruction and even redemption"—derived from biologically defined analyses of racial inferiority fashioned by and circulated among the European intelligentsia for nearly two centuries.² Young concurs with this assessment in his study of racially fashioned disciplinary formation in the modern university in *Colonial Desire*. "Race became the fundamental determinant of human culture and history," he observes; "indeed, it is arguable that race became the common principle of academic knowledge in the nineteenth century."³ Far from a premodern relic, race was a foun-

dational force in this first wave of globalization, ranging from the age of insatiable exploration to enlightened enslavement, to imperial conquest and colonization, and finally to their formal, violent denouement. From the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century, race prompted and promoted, altered and refined forms of statecraft, population management, political economy, wartime strategy, scientific discovery, technological progress—the very content and condition of modern thought.⁴

Building on this vast and significant body of work, which focuses on the racially inflected period of Western modernization and its world-transforming consequences, my interest is in intellectual practices and institutional policies that have influenced the American university since the 1960s—a period defined by any number of epochal shifts ubiquitously yet ambivalently signaled by the prefixes “neo” and “post.” In particular, I am concerned to examine intellectual complicity with a new “post-racial” politics that parallels the ascendancy of the latest phase of world capitalist development, or global neoliberalism. Whereas the racially shaped imperial politics of the modern era prompted intellectual discussion and analysis of the “white man’s burden,” the contemporary organization of intellectual labor in the academy, I hope to show, is in large part predicated on his *unburdening*. In contrast to the forms of racially patterned paternalistic imposition and oversight that accompanied glove-in-fist the various nation-building and empire-expanding projects of liberal modernity, the modes of racial management, control, and containment that mark the present moment, or what Zygmunt Bauman aptly calls “liquid modernity,” seek more often than not to dissolve all forms of socially contracted responsibility. Neoliberal states, in other words, rush to dismantle the social safety nets on which citizens rely, alleging they promote dependency and sloth, dismiss as quaint cosmopolitan conventions that commit nations to observe the rights of others to move about the globe unharrassed and unharmed, and destroy preemptively in the name of national security threats to “our way of life”—threats, all of them, inevitably racially conceived though never identified as such. In a clear echo of Du Bois’s analysis of the scholarly transformation of black Americans into a “problem people,” Said asserted that Islamic “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined—or as the colonial powers openly coveted

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their territory—taken over.⁵ So too in our “post-racist” present, blacks and Arabs, among other groups formerly and newly raced even where race is in denial, remain problem peoples—“rogue” populations, to borrow David Theo Goldberg’s clever designation, who augur threat from within and without, as much economic as existential, political as physical.⁶ The intellectual challenge, so to speak, is no longer (primarily) how to facilitate or justify the extraction of labor, the expropriation of lands, resources, and wealth, the monopolization of political power or militarized force. Rather, it is a question of how to dispose of—without being precisely seen or understood to dispose of, and so without accompanying forms of guilt or self-doubt—those populations whose culture or character is alien and alienating, whose patterns of work and consumption are neither required nor adequate, whose presence takes up too much valuable space, whose movement remains the source of too much unease, whose settlement threatens to drain once abundant and now dwindling economic and ecological resources, posing any number of risks to homeland security. In this new endeavor, race comes to assume an underground existence. Coded culturally or individually, targeted populations are “raceless,” in that they are no longer racially identified in any traditional sense. What “naturalist” and “historicist” racisms were to the modern era, racelessness is to the contemporary moment.⁷ The abiding faith in racelessness, Goldberg explains, is the “neoliberal attempt to go beyond—without (fully) coming to terms with—racial histories and their accompanying inequalities . . . to transform, via the negating dialectic of denial and ignoring, racially marked social orders into racially erased ones.”⁸

The now-widespread belief that race no longer matters grew out of the civil rights victories of the 1960s, which dismantled the legal apparatus of racial segregation and conferred on the United States an officially post-racist or race-transcendent status. So too the biologically determined attribution of racial inferiority thought to legitimate such legalities fell into scientific and scholarly disrepute—along with the possibilities of a refashioned racism, appropriately privatized and deregulated, in keeping with a new free market edition of state sovereignty. If inequalities exist, they are the consequence of a culture of deprivation or a deficit in individual character, not the result of institutional injustice or its enduring legacy. Indeed the self-confident assertion that racism is part of America’s past,

slam-dunked in the dustbin of history, found its most potent symbolism in the November 2008 election of Barack Obama, now the forty-fourth president and the first African American to serve in the nation's highest office. My argument, however, is not that institutional policies and practices, or individual beliefs and attitudes, that govern and mediate how race is lived in America have not changed; it is rather to challenge whether recent changes necessarily signal social progress for all men and women of color—progress defined not by the acquisition of material wealth and middle-class comfort for a few but by full incorporation into and due influence upon the body politic. It is also to question whether the nation's post-racial pretensions ever correspond with robust forms of anti-racist commitment or represent merely their curtailment, when not their explicit repudiation.⁹

Although the electorate has found Obama “likeable enough,” a clear majority appears to have neither the will nor the stomach to challenge and transform deepening racial disparities in employment, education, housing, health, and mortality—to say nothing of the existential crises to which such injustices give rise. It is both a tragic and an ironic commentary that the first African American in the Oval Office presides over the worst socioeconomic decline for blacks in recent memory—and the highest rates of incarceration ever recorded. As a result of the current recession, preceded by decades of post-industrial decline, Economic Policy Institute President Lawrence Mishel estimates that 40 percent of African Americans “will have experienced unemployment or underemployment in 2010 . . . increasing child poverty from one-third of African-American children to over half.”¹⁰ Since taking the oath of office, Obama has not addressed growing racial inequality and exclusion—a fact less reflective of personal indifference (I don't believe he is indifferent) than of his demonstrated ability to read painful political realities. Understanding the generalized ambivalence, where not open hostility, of most whites to any mention of race, Obama owes his electoral success in part to his efforts to ride the post-racial wave and to distance himself—generationally, politically, rhetorically—from civil rights advocates. So it remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will adhere to its commitment to change and usher in an era of purposive, collective action informed by sober reflection of the ongoing injustices that stem from the nation's racial past and a pres-

ent commitment to serve in the interests of public freedom and human dignity—or whether it will inspire the symbolic unfurling of yet another gratuitous “mission accomplished” sign and feed the amnesiac tendency of Americans to forget the past, and in so doing condemn the present to subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racist mimicry.

Another open question, and one which I hope the present study influences to some small degree, is the role that intellectuals in the academy play, will in fact choose to play, in this strange new phase of what Gunnar Myrdal once called, in reference to the distance between the nation’s democratic ideals and its racial realities, the “American dilemma.” Aware of it or not, willing or not, intellectuals who devote their lives to studying, teaching, and writing about the human condition regardless of disciplinary location are acting with moral consequence, and often with political effect. Hence it is imperative to ask: What pressures will intellectuals in the academy bring to bear on the issues of our time? Which values and whose interests will they reflect in the identification of problems said to require scholarly attention, in the formulation of key concepts, in the choice of methodologies, and in the staging of solutions? And what pressures, in turn, will be brought to bear on them? The task at hand is, then, to assess critically the last forty years of academic allegiance to colorblindness and to theorize the possibilities for a much-needed reconciliation with a social reality that is highly and historically raced, as well as a rehabilitation of critical and creative thought.

This book thus investigates the emergence of, and effective responses to, the new racism, or raceless racism, in this officially post-civil rights era, which has prompted in turn new vocabularies, social sensibilities, and everyday practices reflective of contemporary colorblind consciousness.¹¹ More specifically it explores the impact of colorblind commitment on the academy, on the quality of intellectual thought therein, given the rise of the new forms of expertise, discursive strategies, analytic models, pedagogical practices, and institutional imperatives that are rhetorically nonracial and presumptively neutral. For Goldberg, colorblinding logics exact primarily three discursive prohibitions: a silencing of public analysis of what Philomena Essed calls “everyday racisms” in society; an emphatic denial of history such that it proves difficult to connect contemporary racial formations to past configurations of institutional power predicated

on whiteness; and finally, a displacement of racially charged relations in the public sphere to the private, more or less out of reach of public policy interventions.¹² This triple effect is evident in the ways in which the discursive work of race obscures itself in—disappears into—the broad language of reified cultural or civilizational differences, or more narrow psychological assessments of individual prejudices or group instincts effectively silencing historical and structural analyses. Colorblinding imperatives, moreover, chameleonically assume the form of a contemporary cult of professionalism, a set of institutional pressures Edward Said identified that are often internalized by academicians in their pursuit of “objective,” “specialized,” and “non-political” research, which have been more recently buttressed by conservative calls for “balanced” scholarship that reflects a “diversity of views,” regardless of their intellectual merit.¹³ Putatively objective, nonpolitical, and noncontroversial research is particularly prized by increasingly corporatized universities, where scholars are urged to be “practical,” particularly where practicality comes to mean not “effective social reform,” as it once implied, but “efficiency” and “cost-effectiveness” in the bureaucratic monitoring and management of global flows of goods, information, and populations. Intellectual projects of merit, according to neoliberal logics, are essentially projects fundable via outside sources of revenue; their often specialized and piecemeal orientation are designed to garner clear results quickly before grant money runs out—without upsetting (racial) politics as usual.

These unambiguous institutional preferences have produced a shift away from qualitative and critical research to quantifiable and empirical data collection, one already exacerbated by the hierarchical arrangement of scientific over humanistic inquiry explored by C. P. Snow half a century ago, where the numbers are taken unproblematically to reveal more readily “social reality” and unmediated “truth.” Such inputs, amassed in surveys or interviews or test scores, necessarily bespeak a “presentist” agenda rendering historical assessment irrelevant and thus in keeping with colorblinding protocols. The foci of data-driven studies are, moreover, narrowed to the particularity of time and place—all the better to control the play of variables. Such efforts, however, come at the expense of a false sense of pervasive social homogeneity—a condition which, despite its considerable normative appeal, renders investigators blind to social differ-

ences. The quest for neutrality and transparency thus reproduces the ideal of racelessness and the norms of whiteness they nonetheless express. Not only does this specificity preclude comparative assessments of outcomes, but structural or institutional changes that occur over time cannot be detected adequately, thus it becomes difficult in such instances to imagine alternatives to a present reality that appears immutable and fixed. Another victory for the established order. The predilection to analyze a singular factor among an assumed myriad of causal elements in the study of a social phenomenon, moreover, lends itself well to the always partial and inadequate reforms espoused of late by liberal and conservative politicians. Rather than engage the obvious racial and class disparities perpetuated by grossly unequal public school funding, for example, school administrators hip to the latest studies tinker with single-sex classrooms to bolster self-esteem or introduce pre-packaged commercial curricula into the classroom guaranteed to produce small spikes in standardized test scores among the chronically bored. Speaking at Teachers College in late 2008, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, for example, criticized teacher education programs for failing to provide more hands-on classroom experience to new initiates and for failing to prepare them to use empirical data to inform and improve teacher preparation. Once the analytic value of history, social structure, and other increasingly suspect “theoretical” concepts is removed from the intellectual field, researchers have little recourse but to capitulate to the distinct tendency of the time to psychologize and hence depoliticize results, as I will elaborate further in the later chapters.

Significantly, the displacement of the discourse of race and the hermeneutic sophistication it requires finds its corollary in another order of displacement, with specific ramification for the university. Simultaneous with the redefinition of racism as a private and individual problem as opposed to a public and institutional one, we have witnessed a profound shift in conceptions of “good government.” Specifically, the ideals that informed Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society have been abandoned to a new civic common sense that is anti-statist, anti-political, and deeply anti-intellectual. Though in execution it proved a thoroughly compromised affair, in his memoir, *My Hope for America*, Johnson elaborated his vision. Succinct and to the point, he insisted that “the Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and

racial injustice. But that is just the beginning. The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents.”¹⁴ A neoliberal society, strikingly, offers citizens an utterly opposed reality—point for point—delivering deeper poverty, more racial injustice, and radically diminished opportunities for thought, let alone intellectual growth. Not only has the gap between wealth and poverty grown exponentially, but economic standing is increasingly predicated on racial standing. The conservative mission to shrink “big government” has expanded, through a series of privatizing and deregulating policy shifts, the role of the market in circulation and control of various flows of commodities and peoples, and a singular logic of cost-efficiency has replaced the prior era’s investment in expanding the rights and entitlements of citizens. As a result, public goods like education have been radically defunded at all levels—from elementary to postsecondary—leaving them open to “failure” or further privatization. The welfare state apparatuses that once provided social safety nets and a measure of security to all citizens (at least in theory) were condemned in racially coded language as too solicitous of so-called special interests, too inefficient in their reproduction of moral degeneracy and social dependency, and far too expensive, condemning taxpayers (understood as white) to foot the bill for tax recipients (understood as black). Thus, social progress has come to be measured exclusively in the language of economic growth—alleged to be transparent, morally neutral and, crucially, colorblind—even as growth nonetheless is procured only for the nation’s wealthy and (mostly) white. The consequences for substantive democratization have been devastating, and especially so for children—the moral referent, ironically, of Johnson’s social vision.

The recession that has come to define the latter half of the millennial decade has resulted from this perfect storm of deregulated system-wide market mendacity, greed, and corruption, an intellectual culture co-opted by forms of instrumental rationalization openly hostile to reason and reflection, and a distracted citizenry binging on a junk diet of spectacle, violence, apocalyptic harangue, and unapologetic idiocy. To failed health care, we have added failed schools, failed banks, even failed states such as debt-ridden California—and a booming prison-industrial complex. We should be deeply concerned at this point with the lingering faith in accounting figures that boast the robust health of a lending institution, the

charts of improved test scores indicative of a child's or a school district's scholastic advance, the predictive acumen of the actuarial tables that point to victory ahead in the domestic wars on crime and drugs. Neither objective nor transparent, numbers can be made to say and do anything—particularly when the scale of a CEO bonus, or a teacher's salary, or a officer's promotion is made to depend on them. The temptation to manipulate the figures, however, stems not only from financial reward widely assumed in the neoliberal era to be the real motor of history, but also the concerted effort to resuscitate a waning sense of status and privilege formally accrued to whites. In each instance of recent or ongoing catastrophe—from the mortgage meltdown, to the collapse of financials, to the closure of failed schools, to states with no money for basic social services, to the ever-broadening drug and gun trade—it has been communities of color that have suffered the repercussions first, before the devastation spread outward and up the socioeconomic scale.

I do not mean, however, to suggest that as the pain spreads, all suffer equally; black and brown victims found themselves routinely blamed for their own unemployment, impoverishment, and homelessness. Culpability not assigned to corporate corruption abetted by political corruption, to large-scale downsizing or the flight of jobs, to collapsing social services or persistent racial exclusion is routinely redirected to individual failing and character flaw racially assigned—laziness or lack of work ethic, moral turpitude, sexual lassitude, drug dependence, and other forms of deviant behavior that betray contempt for mainstream American (white) values. Not only are poor men and women of color denied crucial forms of support and assistance, intensifying their existential grief, but also the public policy result of such pervasive and purposive regimes of misrepresentation has been the ongoing criminalization of social problems that plague poor and minority populations. According to a report released by the Pew Center in March 2009, one in every thirty-one U.S. adults resides in the corrections system; broken down racially, the numbers are: one in 11 is African American; one in 27 is Latino and one in 45 is white. This should not be surprising in a nation that has made closing “failed” schools (i.e., schools in poor, typically minority districts) and opening jails the signature of its domestic policy, where in fact states “even determine how many prison cells to build based on 4th grade reading scores and graduation

rates.”¹⁵ The decision to invest in prison construction over—and at the expense of—already cash strapped schools reveals the degree to which investor returns on a hot growth industry like corrections far outweigh the social returns of an educated and engaged public. In an economy and society refashioned by a highly rationalized neoliberal logic, openness and freedom now characterize the movement of markets, not citizens.

What the culturalization of domestic and international conflict and the privatization of racist expression and exclusion share with equally reductive neoliberal market instrumentalities is an abiding commitment to scuttle modes of intellectual inquiry and analysis that foreground questions of structure, power, inequality, and history. The premise of this book is that consequences of the new racism for the academy as a site that once aspired to independent thought and critique have been particularly devastating. The institutional “repression of racial reference,” or the rendering of race as “unspeakable” in public by reducing it to a past problem now resolved and best forgotten, has combined with an unquestioning faith in the neutrality of free market economics, short-circuiting not just our understanding of our past and our present, our political institutions, our national identity, and our international standing.¹⁶ Most devastatingly, the commitment to colorblindness has also impaired our very capacity to think, to reason, to weigh and even be persuaded by evidence, to recognize error, to be reflective, and to judge. Yet, my argument is not that colorblind racism is “irrational,” or even “unreasonable”; it is rather to claim that its adherents participate in radically reductive forms of rationality that make reason and reflection less likely and more difficult, where not impossible.

Of course my more conservative interlocutors would insist that humanistic inquiry over the last few decades has been unhealthily obsessed with race, or more specifically the mantra “raceclassgender” in ways that are only destructive and divisive—necessitating the very calls for colorblindness and race-neutrality in scholarly research, pedagogy, and (perhaps most viscerally) admissions policy in the first place. Yet even as the so-called campus “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s waned, national tragedy struck and revitalized the long-standing conservative critique of the academy. From the foot soldiers who waged war against forms of “political correctness” promulgated by campus “thought police” and intoler-