Race and Social Memory

The fact is "black" has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found.

Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves"

Power drained out of the best-selling books of social forecasting in the 1980s, just as it flowed out of the new economic models and the formulas of presidential speech making. The theme of limitlessness that ran through the social thought of the age swelled with yearning for escape and transcendence: for fresh starts, unfettered choices, and new historic ages. On some terrains of American life, however, legacies of power pressed crudely upon the present. Less than a month after John Naisbitt's Megatrends was published, in December 1982, Miami's hypersegregated Overtown district exploded into two days of looting and rioting after a local African-American youth was shot dead by an edgy Latino police officer. The summer before the sequel Megatrends 2000 reached the bookstores, in August 1989, a young African-American man was beaten and killed by a gang of Italian-American youths in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, when he crossed into the racially "wrong" neighborhood to answer a car-for-sale advertisement. If power was hard to pin down among the social theorists of the age, if it threatened to evaporate altogether in the high optimism of the bookstore paperbacks, it was a sharp and tangible presence all along the jagged boundaries made by race.

Race making and domination had been tightly joined for centuries of North American history. The Indian peoples expelled by war and disease from the land; the African peoples captured and transported across an ocean, and from whose labor the great staple crops of tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton were extracted; the contracted Chinese and Japanese laborers
brought to do much of the hard, dirty work of mining and railroad construction in the nineteenth century; the stoop laborers from Mexico and the Philippines who followed the farm crops—all of them were incorporated into powerful systems of racial thought and practice. The most elaborately developed of these was the system of black-white domination and exclusions constructed in the South in the wake of the Civil War. Its effects reached into virtually every cranny of social experience: it set the rules of marriage and sexual encounters for both blacks and whites, it opened and closed lines of possible work, it stamped its mark on every aspect of associational life. It sorted Americans out into separate and explicitly unequal categories of citizenship. To be born into a society marked by race was to be born into a system saturated with power.1

The meanings of those racial marks, to be sure, were continuously up for grabs. The “color line” had always been a line of contest as well as a line of domination, along which every piece of what it meant to be white, or black, or Indian, or Asian was in a state of perpetual struggle and negotiation. Officially the categories of race had shifted markedly over the centuries: expanding out at the turn of the twentieth century into dozens of racial classifications—forty-five by the U.S. Immigration Commission’s count of 1911—narrowing again dramatically in the post–1945 era into what David Hollinger calls the racial “pentagon” of modern times.2 Within each of the racially demarcated populations were sharp internal differences and struggles shaped by class, religion, gender, and status. At the boundaries of whiteness there was always more seepage than official racial ideologies ever let on, despite the notions of blood and biology that were employed to guard the racial borders. And yet, despite all these contests and instabilities, to bear the marks of race was to be inescapably enmeshed in power. The marks of race collectivized. They bound one’s individuality up with that of others, with or against one’s will. Even in a society that boasted of its individualism, race making made every self social.

In the same processes, the marks of race inscribed the self with histories and memories. “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read,” the African-American novelist James Baldwin had written in the mid-1960s with America’s “iron curtain” of color on his mind. “And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we
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carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.\textsuperscript{33} In the ways that others read one's skin and features, the past reached with a powerful grasp into the present. Histories of mastership or enslavement were invoked, lines of blood imagined, claims of kin and solidarity pressed, deep cultural traditions invented that overrode the self and entangled it inextricably in collective memories. The social marks of race stood, in that sense, in profound opposition to the notion that one might, through the magic of hope or a quotation from Thomas Paine, begin the world anew. Even in their unfairness and injustice, they made visible the inescapable histories into which every self is born.

The marks of race welded selves together, stamping them as privileged or as alien; they made them, willingly or unwillingly, into bearers of memory and history. One might have imagined that, carrying so much, the terms of race would have remained static under the social and historical weight pressing down on them. In fact, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, they were anything but immobile.

Racial languages in modern America were multiple, not binary. Asian-American, Native-American, Chicano, and Latino movements sprang out of the same social and political terrain as the African-American civil rights movement, each with its own powerful claims to rights, race, and memories. But it was the language of black and white that, to a great extent, set the models and the pace. The heroic moment of the black freedom struggle had passed by the time the age began. The outwardly united front of civil rights groups in the early 1960s was barely a memory a decade later. The last concerted attempt to forge a common black political agenda, the convention that met in Gary, Indiana, in 1972, broke up in bitter dissonance. The drive for school desegregation, launched in the Brown decision in 1954, stalled, frustrated by white flight and continued white resistance as well as by the Supreme Court's retreat in Milhiken v. Bradley in 1974 from the possibility that it would require suburban school districts to help remedy racial imbalances in the city school districts that abutted them.\textsuperscript{4} And yet despite the setbacks and discord, the deeper forces of consciousness and aspiration that had fueled the black freedom movement were anything but exhausted.

Their sign in the last quarter of the century was a new racial assertive-
ness: a claiming of collective African-American pride and place across a broad spectrum of American cultural, intellectual, and political life. Most immediately striking was the mobilization of black voters in urban politics. Between 1973 and 1984, mass voter registration drives and race-conscious voting put first-time black mayors into office in Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, New Orleans, Birmingham, Alabama, and more than a hundred smaller cities. Ethnic political mobilization had been a familiar part of American urban politics, but though it had been Irish, or WASP, or Italian, it had never, to this extent, been black. Nor had the construction of ethnic political machines and patronage systems ever before been seized, with the same sense of group solidarity, by blacks. In one of the most hard fought and visible racial-political contests of the mid-1970s, Atlanta’s mayor Maynard Jackson won “parity” for racial minority contractors in the construction of the multi-million dollar airport for which the city’s business elite had long been pressing. In Richmond, Virginia, in 1983, a newly assertive black city council majority mandated that 30 percent of the city’s contracts be set aside for racial minority bidders.5

The rhetoric of racial “parity” held a central place in Jesse Jackson’s speech making in the 1970s as well. Later, in his presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988, Jackson was to subordinate talk of race solidarity and racial claims to the rainbow coalition language of “a great quilt of unity,” pieced together from “many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread.” The movement launched by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King was ready now to “leave our racial battlegrounds [and] come to common economic ground.” Jackson told the Democratic National Convention in 1984.6 But at Operation PUSH in the 1970s, Jackson had talked tirelessly of the gap between whites and African Americans in speeches stuffed with a virtual encyclopedia of data on the nation’s racial disparities in its law schools, its doctors’ ranks, its car dealerships, the attention of its news media, the ranks of its corporate managers and business owners. What blacks wanted now, Jackson insisted, was “our fair share”—“parity” for our votes, “reparations,” “reciprocity,” and “repair” for 250 years of slavery and 100 years of apartheid.7

In intellectual and popular culture, African Americans’ new assertiveness of voice and visibility was just as striking—not only for their individ-
ual talents but for the experiences, claims, injuries, and pride of race. By the early 1980s, the works of Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and others had brought a powerful new black feminist presence into American literature that was already crowding some long-familiar white authors off school and college required-reading lists. There was a special sound coming into expression. Morrison wrote in 1974, publicizing a volume that bore the simple, eloquently charged title The Black Book. It was “a sound made up of all the elements that [have] distinguished black life (its peculiar brand of irony, oppression, versatility, madness, joy, strength, shame, honor, triumph, grace, and stillness).”

Alongside the creative writers like Morrison, a new network of prominent African-American intellectuals gained footing in the universities and outlets through publishing houses. Born in the explosive campus uprisings of the late 1960s, African-American Studies programs gained a permanent place in university life, setting the model for the ethnic studies and panracial programs that quickly followed: Asian-American Studies, Chicano Studies, and American Indian Studies. On some campuses, African-American Studies programs emerged as advocates of a distinctly “Afrocentric” way of understanding experience, divested of the burdens of Eurocentrism and restored to an African theoretical base.

A particularly visible by-product of the new assertiveness in black intellectual life was the astonishing publication success of Martin Bernal’s Black Athena in the United States in the 1980s. Bernal, an autodidact and gadfly by temperament, was an expert in modern Chinese politics. On the impact of African influences on classical Greek culture, the theme he pursued so relentlessly in Black Athena, he was almost entirely self-taught. His massively detailed effort to show that Hellenic civilization had drawn heavily on North African and Near Eastern borrowings—and that it had taken the determined erasures of race-conscious European classicists in the nineteenth century to obscure the formative non-European and nonwhite roots of Western civilization—could find only an obscure publisher in London. But reprinted in the United States in 1987, Black Athena was immediately drawn into a storm of claims and counterclaims over the intellectual powers and heritage of blackness.

In the popular media the new African-American presence was even more striking than in the universities. Modern African-American programming first came to network television with Sanford & Son in 1972, a
spinoff from the producers of *All in the Family*, saturated with that show's angry reverberations from the civil rights upheaval. By 1984, the year that Oprah Winfrey opened on local Chicago television and the *The Cosby Show* (the most widely watched television series of the 1980s) was launched, the racial landscape of television was altogether changed. From Motown to Michael Jackson's megasuccesses of the mid-1980s to the emergence of rap, the popular music industry was transformed into a showcase of black talent. In sports, the barriers to black athletic participation that had tacitly limited the number of black athletes that professional teams would field, or shunted black athletes away from the most responsible team positions, or kept black athletes out of competition altogether at some of the most prominent Southern colleges and universities, all fell by the boards. Some of the new African-American media stars played roles already set out for them by their white predecessors, in the way that Bill Cosby effortlessly inhabited the situation comedy. Others, like the new slam-dunking basketball players and the hip-hop artists, remade their games entirely.\(^{12}\)

Critics were quick to point out the limits of the new black presence in public life. African-American voters gained majorities in city politics just as their economies imploded and their manufacturing jobs sank into terminal decline; it was not surprising that, despite their populist voting majorities, the new black city mayors found themselves heavily dependent on strategic alliances with the big-city business elites.\(^{13}\) The new black intellectuals' role, a great deal of which was consumed in explaining "blackness" to white reading publics, defining, interpreting, and, at times, apologizing for black culture, was one no other intellectuals were asked to occupy.\(^{14}\) Many of the African-American Studies programs struggled to hold students after the enthusiasm of their founding moment waned; as late as 1990, Cornel West could lament that without a major black intellectual journal or newspaper, the institutional infrastructure for black intellectual discourse and dialogue was "nearly nonexistent."\(^{15}\) Despite the cracking of so many of the old entry barriers, despite the "firsts" racked up (first black Miss America, first black astronaut, first black CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation, first black governor since Reconstruction, first black-owned television network), the marks and legacies of race were not erased.

In fact, the dominant phenomenon was just the opposite. In myriad, sometimes contradictory ways, African Americans took the language of...
race—with all its stigmas, its social disadvantages, its pains and injuries—and reshaped it as a point of pride. Not at the highpoint of Garveyism in the 1910s or the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, or even the black arts movement of the 1960s, had this jujitsu reversal of the language of racial domination commanded so large a stage. If there was an emblematic text for the phenomenon, it was Alex Haley’s Roots: a megaselling book and recipient of a special Pulitzer Prize in 1977, which was quickly made into the single most watched television special of its decade. Haley had been the voice behind The Autobiography of Malcolm X, shaper of the powerfully affecting story of the transformation of a street-wise numbers runner into a modern American prophet. Now Haley turned his narrative talent to his own family story, tracing it further and further back from a small-town Tennessee blacksmithing business to a great-grandfather who had raised fighting chickens for a hard-drinking slave master and bought and then stolen himslef free. From there the story ran back still further to “Chicken” George’s grandfather, Kunta Kinte, taken by force from Africa, who had resisted slavery so fiercely that his Virginia pursuers had finally cut half his foot off. In the end, through the African words that Kunta Kinte had passed on to his family, Haley found his way back to the village in Gambia where that grandfather had been a young man before the slave traders had stolen him.16

Fittingly for a story that was as consciously about a collective people as it was about Haley’s private genealogical quest, Roots was a patchwork, made out of pieces of anthropological scholarship incorporated whole, potted textbook histories, appropriated pieces of other writers’ novels, folk memory, research, errors, and epiphanies. Compared with the portraits of the African-American past that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison were to construct in The Color Purple and Beloved, Haley told his version of African Americans’ family story in simpler moral colors: as a story of generations of pride, unquenched desire for freedom, and heroic struggle to hold on to the attenuated threads of memory through the horrors of the middle passage and the brutalities of enslavement.

As it unfolded through Roots’ long narrative, race was social and historical. It flowed back in time and out through networks of kin and kind in long, braided skeins of experience and memory. Race was real; it was a family tale that, even in its most harrowing experiences, held its own pride and dignity, its own claims on the self. The hunger for memory
among *Roots*’ black audience and reviewers said as much. “*Roots* is a study
of continuities, of consequences, of how a people perpetuates themselves
. . . It suggests, with great power, how each of us, however unconsciously,
can’t but be the vehicle of the history which has produced us,” James
Baldwin wrote. It “captures the essence of an African people,” other re-
viewers exclaimed. It was a new family bible for black Americans. It had
“given our proud heritage back to us.”17

Polls of African Americans in the 1970s and 1980s are not very reliable,
but the data they offer suggest that the sense of black racial solidarity that
Haley had tapped (as the new black mayors, the athletes, the popular cul-
ture stars, and the Black Athena hypothesis were to do) was more than
surface deep. In a poll of 1984, when the first Jesse Jackson presidential
campaign was at its height, 94 percent of African Americans surveyed
told pollsters that they felt close to black people in this country.18 Earlier,
in 1980, *Black Enterprise* had asked its upward-striving, middle-class, and
professional readers if they felt a moral obligation to help blacks who
were educationally or economically disadvantaged; 91 percent said yes.
“Do you think your fate is linked to that of black people?” Two-thirds of
blacks polled in the 1980s and early 1990s said yes; the more education
the respondents had, the more likely they were to answer yes.19

Consciousness of race was not antithetical to a vivid consciousness of
one’s claims as a citizen; nor was it a retreat from the integrationist social
policies of the civil rights movement’s heroic years, as it was sometimes
misread to signify. In overwhelming numbers African Americans told
pollsters that they wanted black and white children to go to the same
schools; that white-only neighborhood restrictions were unjust; that ob-
jections to racial intermarriage were wrong; that it was more important
to be “American” than to be black. But did black people form “a nation
within a nation” as Haley’s family story had shown, as the new assertive-
ness in culture and politics suggested, and as the overwhelming black
vote for Jesse Jackson witnessed (three-quarters in the 1984 primaries,
over ninety percent in 1988)? The question was first asked by opinion
pollsters in 1993–1994, a little more than a year before a call from the Na-
tion of Islam brought almost a million black men to an immense rally in
Washington, D.C. Half the African Americans polled said yes.20

Experiences of subordination and injury permeated these poll re-
sponses. These were the negative reference against which the new racial
assertiveness was formed, the anvil of pain and humiliation felt in a society that was everywhere saturated with consciousness of race. Almost three-quarters of the black elite tapped by the Black Enterprise poll in 1980 were sure that, though racism had altered its forms, it was just as prevalent in American society as it had been a decade earlier. They felt it in the decisions of lending institutions, in the treatment meted out by the police, and in the feelings of whites. “Do you believe that you can protect yourself from racism?” Seventy-one percent said no. The more education black respondents had, the polls showed, the more critical they were of the enduring force of racism and the more fragile they sensed the era’s social gains to be. Did they think blacks would achieve equality within their own lifetimes? Two-thirds said they would not in a poll in 1993–1994. A quarter doubted that black Americans ever would. A tiny remnant, 5 percent, said that racial equality had already been achieved.21

Answers like these were not only the results of the day-to-day injuries imposed by the social marks of race in American society; they were not only testimonies to the power of the racial stereotypes that remained, just below the surface, available for employment, as the notorious Willie Horton ad employed in the George H. W. Bush presidential campaign in 1988 made clear. They were also indicative of the tinder box of tensions that characterized race relations in the age. The contagious summer urban rioting of the late 1960s was now a thing of the past. The new urban riots were more sporadic, set off by a trigger incident whose news raced through the communities: the power blackout in New York City in 1977 and the looting that erupted in its wake; the decision that set Miami’s Liberty City district afame in 1980; when the court set free four police officers who had beaten a local black man to death; the angry racial confrontations in New York City’s neighborhoods where blacks and whites pressed hard on each other’s turf; and scores of similar, less widely publicized incidents. Over time, the riots changed their racial character. In the rioting that tore through Los Angeles in 1992 after the acquittal of the police who had chased and beaten a black speeding motorist, Rodney King, as many Latinos as blacks were arrested. More than a third of the burned-out stores had Asian-American owners. But the video images at the epicenter of the Rodney King riot were all too familiar: a powerful black man beaten to the ground as he struggled vainly to his feet, just as black slaves had been whipped when they, too, had tried to run, in a frenzied
play of fear and domination that touched deep nerves in the American racial past. Race consciousness was forged and reinforced in the context of these experiences, retold in story and rumor, broadcast relentlessly in the media.22

Built as it was out of these complex amalgams of pride and vulnerability, out of a sense of racial dignity and, at the same time, an acute recognition of how quickly one could be tarred by the behavior of others, it was not surprising that black Americans’ talk of race should have been shot through with currents of moral regeneration. Jesse Jackson’s “your mind is a pearl” rhetoric at PUSH was saturated with appeals to self-discipline, will-power, resistance, and hope: “You must not allow the master to control your thoughts through decadent values—salaries, liquor, drugs, debt, insensitivity, cynicism, escapism, fear, hate, finance superstition, radio, TV, or newspapers.” “No one should negotiate their dreams.” Jackson preached. In a radical spin on the motif that was to become central to the Reagan symbolic system.23 The message of moral regeneration ran powerfully through the Nation of Islam, resurgent in the late 1970s with its message of moral discipline, its celebration of black self-help and racial capitalism, and its own product line of consumables marketed under the POWER label. The cluster of eloquent black conservative writers who came into prominence in the early 1990s—Shelby Steele, Glenn Loury, Stephen Carter, and others—preached yet another moral message.24

Attempting to create moral solidarities, the programs for moral regeneration sliced into the solidarities of race in ways that were often painfully divisive. Black nationalists, who looked to “purified” and supportive womanhood as a mark of race regeneration, clashed angrily with black feminists seeking to purge black society of rampant patriarchy. The new black conservatives competed strenuously for authority and attention with black intellectuals on the left. Whether the beginning point of social analysis was the structure of a racist society or (to the contrary) the moral disorganization of the black urban poor, whether the post-1960s safety net of welfare provisions had been a gain or a catastrophic moral failure, when and in whose hearing it was appropriate to talk about the collapsing rates of marriage among poor black Americans and the political economy of crack in the inner cities—all this was heatedly contested in a replay of the titanic intellectual battles of the first years of the twentieth century. Booker T. Washington’s program of step-by-step self-help,
W. E. B. Du Bois’s demand for legal and political justice, Marcus Garvey’s race nationalism, and the black feminism of Ida B. Wells swirled through black America in new guises.

These contentions came famously to a head in the hearings to confirm Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court Justice in 1991 when the account of sexual harassment leveled at Thomas by fellow conservative Anita Hill before the Senate Judiciary Committee sharply divided African-American commentators. A minority sided with Hill. Others charged that her willingness to try to take down a black man in public was a form of race “treason,” or cautioned against putting sexism on the same plane as racism. Still others feared they were being used as pawns in someone else’s game: Thomas by Republican party conservatives, Hill by white feminists, and the fray itself by the media through the racial and gender stereotypes to which the hearings played. But the deeper thread that ran through black commentary on the Thomas nomination—obscuring the gulf between Thomas’s Republican party politics and the Democratic party loyalties of the vast majority of black voters, and papering over the stark contrast between Thomas’s record at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and that of the NAACP lawyer-turned-Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, whom Thomas was replacing—was the hope that having been “subjected to the ‘Black Experience,’” Thomas could not back out of its effects. Race and history would prevail. In the end, “you can’t escape the trials of Blackness,” the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Joseph Lowery asserted.25

As the voices of Thomas’s critics and defenders collided in the pulpits, the media, and the neighborhoods, the unified, family racial narrative that Roots embodied receded. And yet the conviction that there was a “black experience” endured. Jackson’s slogan, “there is no one to save us for us but us,” expressed the race’s aspirations. Hip-hop’s angry cynicism was defended as the authentic voice of inner-city black despair. Louis Farrakhan’s speeches, Spike Lee’s Malcolm X, the campus-based Afrocentrists, the continuers of the black arts tradition, the nco–Booker T. Washingtons, Clarence Thomas’s own self-defense—all shouted out, in one way or another, to a black “nation.” Maya Angelou had done the same in urging African Americans to rally around the Thomas nomination. In this “terrifying and murderous season” when “the African American community whirls in eddies of debate, demolition, disagreement,
accusation and calumny,” she wrote, we need “to haunt the halls of history and listen anew to the ancestor’s wisdom.” We need to hope that because Thomas had himself been nearly suffocated “by the acrid odor of racial discrimination,” and because he was smart enough and young enough and “black enough,” he would remember. In that task, she urged, Thomas, like black Americans before him, needed their solidarity. Even Stephen Carter wrote that racial “solidarity continues to tug, deep inside me, gently insistently, lovingly, and a little desperately, like something afraid of being left behind. But I cannot leave it behind, and would not if I could. . . . Race is a claim. A choice. A decision.” Above all, a claim.26

It was into this context in 1978, two years after the publication of Roots, that William Julius Wilson’s book The Declining Significance of Race, with its deliberately provocative title, cut into the debate. That a work by a relatively unheralded African-American sociologist that was weighted as heavily as this toward social theory should have set off one of the sharpest sociological controversies of the 1970s is not simply explained. Wilson’s interest was in assessing which of two competing sociological explanations for the sustained subordination of blacks in America was more compelling: the argument that racial oppression was the instrument of those who dominated the means of production, as it had been during the centuries of plantation slavery; or the argument that the driving force of racial oppression was the effort of white workers to buffer themselves against downward wage pressures by maintaining a dual, racialized labor market, as Wilson thought had been the case in the period of early industrialization. It was Wilson’s last, add-on reflections about the contemporary scene that set off the controversy. In contrast to both these earlier systems, in which virtually all blacks had borne the weight of economic subordination, the nation had now moved into a third phase, he argued, in which the experience of well-educated, middle-class black Americans had become, for the first time, sharply differentiated from that of the unskilled black poor. “As the black middle class rides on the wave of political and economic changes, benefiting from the growth of employment opportunities and the application of affirmative-action programs in the growing corporate and Government sectors of the economy,” Wilson wrote, “the black underclass falls behind the larger society in every con-
ceivable respect.” With manufacturing jobs fleeing the cities, devaluing the skills that had once enabled working-class blacks to get by, the single most powerful social determinant of blacks’ life chances in America had ceased to be race: now it was class.27

Wilson’s critics objected that he had radically underestimated the enduring force of racism all through American society; that he had misunderstood the fragility of the economic gains of the new black middle class; that his exclusive focus on job chances was meaningless as long as racial exclusion dominated the social patterns of housing and schooling; that in his reach for a book-selling title, he had confused the changing significance of race with its decline; that he had given white readers, and the op-ed page popularizers who quickly seized on his title phrase, an excuse to think that the sins of racism were now a thing of the past from which they could be morally released. That “a pitifully few number of blacks are permitted to compete with whites for higher-status positions” was no sign that the force of race was weakening, the social psychologist Kenneth Clark, whose work on racial stigmas had played a central role in the Brown decision, wrote in the New York Times. The Association of Black Sociologists, in an unprecedented move against another black sociologist, objected publicly to the award of a book prize to The Declining Significance of Race and to its “misrepresentation of the black experience.”28

Part of what rubbed these nerves so raw was Wilson’s suggestion that affirmative action measures—though he did not propose abolishing them—were symbolic gestures that did not seriously address the deeper, structural issues of job flight, skill devaluation, and poverty, where the urgent issues of economic subordination lay. The Supreme Court had just taken its first step backward from affirmative action measures in its Bakke decision that June. In a Black Enterprise poll of its readers in 1980, 94 percent of those who responded thought that affirmative action was not only needed now but would also still be necessary in ten years.29 That conservative commentators quickly picked up on Wilson’s claims as fuel for the anti-affirmative action cause only exacerbated the tensions that his argument generated.

Wilson’s use of the term “underclass” to describe the unskilled, poorly educated, and increasingly unemployed black poor was another point of controversy. The term was to take off in the early 1980s in policy debates and social reporting, entangled in the escalating crack economy of the
1980s, the persistent welfare rolls, and the moral conservatives’ growing concern with the fate of the family. Wilson came back to the term “underclass” even more pointedly in 1987 in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a widely read empirical study of endemic joblessness, hyperghettoization, and marriageless families in the poorest black neighborhoods from which the black working and middle classes had fled. Part of Wilson’s difficulty in entering a subject that had boiled with controversy since Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report in 1965 on the rising proportion of black urban families headed by single mothers and the “tangle of pathology” that went with it was Wilson’s failure to make his own policy and politics clear. “I am not yet prepared to publicly proclaim what I privately think,” Wilson told one of the many conferences convened to debate *The Declining Significance of Race* in 1978. “I am just not prepared to do it. I’m struggling with it. I don’t know how long I will continue to hedge, but right now I am not prepared to do it. What I am prepared to do is to suggest programs such as full employment which provide the band-aids and don’t really get at the basic fundamental cure, a holding pattern, hoping that there will be some sort of evolution toward more fundamental changes in society that will deal with the concrete problems gripping the poor.”

He was a social democrat, he insisted, and, in a debate in which cultural issues were so prominent, a materialist. The remedies that mattered, Wilson insisted, addressed the structures of labor markets. In an essay of 1989, he finally took pains to distinguish his reading of the social dislocations of the black underclass from “culture of poverty” analyses. The latter focused on a self-perpetuating way of life and a deviant structure of values. In fact, Wilson countered, the values of the very poor did not differ radically from the values of others. What shaped life in the urban hyperghetto was the poverty of its resources: the depletion of its associational life and “social capital,” restricted opportunities, social isolation, concentration effects, and economic marginalization. But in pressing liberal social scientists to take the underclass phenomenon seriously, he himself had used Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” phrase. As others noted, whether one blamed the crisis of black urban poverty on an economy that made it attractive to invest jobs anywhere but in the increasingly black-dominated shells of the old manufacturing cities, or on the culture and values of the poor, neither explanation for black disad-
vantages carried the emotional clout for white policy makers that guilt over racism had borne.

In the end, it was the title of *The Declining Significance of Race* that mattered most. On the one hand, it suggested the demise of racism in American society at large—an assertion that Wilson himself was later partially to retract in a vivid account of Chicago employers' crudely expressed racial hiring practices. On the other hand, it suggested that the solidarities of race that black Americans felt, or could be called upon to feel amid all their other loyalties, were a sentimental illusion. The claims of racial voice and authenticity, the special black "sound" that Toni Morrison had celebrated, were, by implication, false as well. As the black class structure was reshaped in the late twentieth century, Wilson wrote, it had become "increasingly difficult to speak of a single or uniform black experience." 33 African Americans had said as much to themselves for as long as Africans had been present in the Americas. As with all the other racial solidarities—white, Asian, "Hispanic," Indian—the term covered over chasms of internal difference. There was nothing in Wilson's challenge to the idea of "the black experience" that Du Bois had not said in his essay on the race's "talented tenth" or that St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton had not shown in the sharp line they drew between the "respectables" and others in their portrait of 1940s black Chicago. 34 Nothing, that is, except the particularly freighted contexts in which *The Declining Significance of Race* appeared, in which, beyond the black minority, the languages and politics of race were shifting with so much uncertainty.

For most white Americans as the age began, race was just as powerful a social reality as it was for Alex Haley. This was especially true of those who thought of themselves as conservatives in the wake of Brown's desegregation mandate and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. As the older racial order began to fall apart, the first response of most conservative white Americans was to insist on the foundational realities of race. Massive white resistance against school integration, whether in Little Rock or in Boston, was premised on a vivid fear of crossracial contamination and anger at the erosion of the privileges of whiteness. 35 "White power" was a slogan of the fringes. But in the backlash against the call for black power, working-class ethnic pride movements proliferated in the
late 1960s and early 1970s, mobilizing the claims of the European immigrants’ descendants in a language that, except for the substitution of the term “ethnicity” for “race,” was all but indistinguishable from that of black cultural nationalism.

Michael Novak’s *Rise of the Unmelted Ethnics*, one of the most heatedly debated books of 1972, was the most important intellectual manifesto of the white ethnic-consciousness movement. Novak was among the prominent intellectuals who moved all the way from radical to conservative politics in the 1970s. He was still a man of the Catholic Left in 1972, stung by criticism of blue-collar Catholic voters for their susceptibility to racial demagoguery. *The Rise of the Unmelted Ethnics* was a plea for recognition that they, like African Americans, were victims of the contempt and scars of WASP cultural and racial animosity. They were not atomistic individualists, seized with ambition and obsessive desires for rationality and control (“Ice people,” the Afrocentrist Leonard Jeffries was to call them). The children of Central European immigrants, Novak insisted, were “network people” through whom flowed primary attachments to family, instincts, memory, and roots.36

If this was not precisely the language of race, it derived from a sense of family, blood, victimization, and common experience that was barely distinguishable from it. The Ethnic Millions Political Action Committee, organized to press for white ethnics’ fair share in politics and media attention, was Novak’s counterpart to Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH. *The Guns of Lattimer*, published in 1978 on the cusp of Novak’s turn to the political right, was his *Roots*: an attempt to tell the story of his Slavic immigrant people, who had found themselves plunged into a cauldron of racist anger, economic exploitation, and bloodshed in the Pennsylvania coal fields.37 If race was a thickly knotted braid of kin, bloodlines, and memory, of a consciousness of kind and a sense of common instincts and experience, all seared into place through the domination and contempt of others, then race consciousness ran deep and broadly through white as well as black American society in the 1970s.

As Americans tangled over the legacies of the civil rights movements—in arguments over schooling, voting rights, affirmative action, immigration, housing, policy, and welfare—these older convictions of race and kind were never far below the surface. Some were transposed into codes and linguistic substitutions that kept issues of race alive without naming
race directly. States’ rights, law and order, the rights of private property and free association; family breakdown, crime, poverty, neighborhood schools, and busing; the tyranny of government bureaucrats and liberal social engineers and the overreach of activist judges: into these code words conservative anger at the destabilization of the racial order flowed. To their users they were the crux of the issue; to their opponents they were the subterfuges of a “new racism” that would not admit its name.38

A related phenomenon was the translation of claims about biological race into assertions about cultures and “ways of life.” Dinesh D’Souza brought this culturalist turn to bear on black-white relations in his deliberately controversial book The End of Racism in 1995, in which he argued that the primary source of surviving American racism was not the prejudices of white Americans but the radical defects of “black culture” and “black pathologies.” For D’Souza, “group traits” were embedded in culture and behavior, not in genes, as the eugenicists and social Darwinists had mistakenly imagined. But that did not make group traits any less real, nor did it make odds-reading assumptions about behavior on the basis of a person’s observable race, D’Souza argued, any less reasonable and compelling.39 Even arguments of genetically rooted racial inferiority reared their head, most notoriously in Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein’s book The Bell Curve in 1994 with its asserted (and immediately contested) correlations of race and intelligence.40

But the most striking event was not the turn from biology to culture, nor the code words and half-concealed meanings that had surrounded talk of race in the United States since the Constitution’s framers had themselves resorted to it. It was the rapidity with which conservative intellectuals and policy makers who had once defended the historical and social necessity of racial distinctions moved to embrace as their own the language of equal individual chances that had once seemed so threatening. This reversal on the field of rhetoric was not an idle matter. “For twenty years, the most important battle in the civil rights field has been for the control of the language,” a Heritage Foundation report advised in 1984. Now in a combination of strategic maneuver and genuine conversion, conservatives proceeded to appropriate some of the keywords of those who had marched in the streets in the 1960s and redirect their political valences.

The “separate-but-equal” decision in Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 and the
regime of racial domination that it justified had been a mistake, conservative intellectuals increasingly argued. Its privileging of race and whiteness over the rights of individual citizens had been a stain on the nation’s experience. What conservatives wanted now was not a restoration of the pre-Brown social order with its memories, customs, institutions, and rules of racial place and etiquette. They did not want history restored, or even remembered. What conservatives wanted now, they insisted, was a common, equal playing field and judgment on the basis of individual merit alone. Liberals, they contended, were the new Plessyites. Their efforts to engineer racial outcomes in schools and workplaces, to bus, admit, and hire on an obsessive calculus of race all justified on public-good arguments as tenuous as Plessy’s, constituted the new racism. In the post-1960s turn of the tables, whites had become racism’s new victims: targets, as Robert Bork put it, of the “hard-core racists of reverse discrimination.”

A striking manifestation of these reversals was the way in which white conservative writers reached out to absorb the figure who had been their most visible antagonist in the racial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. King in life was a painful thorn in the side of American conservatives. They had denounced him as a Communist and a rabble-rouser and feared his leftist-liberal connections and his tactics of mass civil disobedience. They had disdained his oratory and dreaded its disruption of the racial harmonies they valued. But slowly in death, King began to be absorbed into the conservative pantheon. The King who was reformed in the process was the public orator, not the social movement tactician, the man who stood on the Lincoln Memorial steps in August 1963, not the man whose refusal to call off further demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, though he knew they would inflame the raw wounds of racism, had put him in jail that April. In an age saturated with dream motifs, King became a dreamer, “encased in platitudes and homilies” by both his heirs and his former antagonists, as the historian Clayborne Carson lamented.12

Out of King’s most famous speech—the March on Washington address in which King had condemned the “sweating heat of oppression” and poverty that had made the Negro “an exile in his own land” and praised the “marvelous new militancy” surging through black America—his conservative admirers drew a sentence: that one day his children would “not
be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”43 The conservatives’ King was stabilized and crystallized in that extracted phrase. With powerful moral confidence, they turned it against what they saw as the post-King course of the civil rights project: against busing for racial equalization, against affirmative action in college and professional school admissions, against the minority set-asides that black city governments were promoting, against consideration of race in voting-district apportionment, against counting, considering, or officially noting race at all.

A “color-blind” America became the conservative project’s goal. Taken from Justice John Marshall Harlan’s lonely dissent in Plessy (where it had sat somewhat incongruously beside Harlan’s own unqualified affirmation of the superiority of the white race), the term “color-blind” had had a far from straightforward history. It had held an important place in the NAACP’s campaign against racially segregated schools and race-specific bars to higher and professional education; “classifications based on race or color have no moral or legal validity in our society,” NAACP lawyers had argued in 1947.44 By the late 1960s, however, the NAACP was backing away from the phrase as opposing lawyers. In defense of the racial status quo, began to use the “color-blind” phrase to challenge desegregation plans that took account of race. Warren Burger, writing for a unanimous court in 1971, had held that to require school assignment plans to be “color blind” when placed “against a background of segregation would render illusory the promise of Brown v. Board of Education”:

Just as the race of students must be considered in determining whether a constitutional violation has occurred, so also must race be considered in formulating a remedy. To forbid, at this stage, all assignments made on the basis of race would deprive school authorities of the one tool absolutely essential to fulfillment of their constitutional obligation to eliminate dual school systems.45

Now, a decade later, the term “color blind” moved into the Reagan administration with its first appointees as a tool to reverse the Warren-Burger legacy. At the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, where critics charged that he proved singularly uninterested in pursuing racial discrimination issues, Clarence Pendleton announced that he was “working on a color blind society.” The Justice Department’s newly nominated civil
rights division head, William Bradford Reynolds, holding aloft a pocket copy of the Constitution at his Senate hearings, maintained that on every question touching on civil rights the Constitution was “color-blind.” “We want what I think Martin Luther King asked for,” Reagan told the press in 1986: “We want a colorblind society.”

“Color blind” was an aspiration, a lawyer’s tactical maneuver, a linguistic hijacking of the opposition’s rhetoric. Above all, it was a way of making the legacies of race disappear. In part, the new currency of the “color blind” phrase reflected a substantial shift in white racial mores in post-1960s America. Polls of white Americans showed a sharp falling off in expressions of overtly racist sentiments, even when the questions brushed on the once incendiary subject of interracial sex. Turning their backs on the slogan of massive resistance—“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”—Southern white political conservatives reached out for black staffers. Reagan’s “colorblind coalition” included a cadre of prominent African Americans. California’s Proposition 209, abolishing all preferences or discrimination by race in public employment, education, and contracting in 1996, was the project of a successful African-American businessman, Ward Connerly.

Still, the hinge on which the new language of race turned was affirmative action policy. If not for its prominence in the politics of the age, the reformulation of arguments around their new individualistic core would almost certainly have played out differently. Wherever schools and housing were on the front lines of controversy, claims of neighborhood, turf, custom, culture, and kind remained powerful and ubiquitous. Arguments over assistance to the poor were tightly linked to the new cultural racism that, though most welfare recipients were white, coded welfare reciprocity as black and morally deficient. But affirmative action, which moved into the center of public argument as the courts retreated from most new busing orders in the late 1970s and housing authorities retreated from proposals to extend public housing into the white suburbs, posed the question in different terms. When a disadvantaged minority group had been systematically barred from or marginalized in jobs or higher education, what extra benefit did one of their kind deserve before that injustice had been washed clean?

The policy had not been highly controversial at its outset in the early
1970s. Affirmative action to mandate that the workforce on federally funded construction projects reflect the racial composition of their localities had been a Nixon administration innovation of the late 1960s, introduced in no small part in hopes of driving a wedge between the construction industry’s lily-white labor unions and the Democratic party. Set-asides for minority-owned businesses in federal contracts moved easily through Congress in 1977. Through 1978, when consensus fell apart in *Bakke*, the U.S. Supreme Court had unanimously upheld the affirmative action cases that had come before it. But in the lower courts, in the law reviews, and in the heat of politics, affirmative action became the point on which the controversies of race and rights became most intensely clustered. The arguments for color-blindness rose out of that highly volatile intersection.47

As both sides of the affirmative action debate mobilized their arguments in the courts and the forums of public opinion, masses of assumptions moved past one another on tracks that often barely intersected.48 The word “quota” was a powerfully divisive term. It pecked away from the civil rights coalition some of the most prominent American Jewish organizations, which retained vivid memories of the ways in which quotas and proportions had been wielded to bar Jews from colleges and employment. Insertion of the term “quota” tipped white poll responses sharply from support to opposition to affirmative action.49 Debates erupted over affirmative action’s extent, its effectiveness, its psychological effects, its consequences for assimilation, its necessity, and its justice. Structuring the debate still more deeply, however, were contests over history, power, and selves.50

To defenders of affirmative action’s justice and necessity, history bore down massively and inescapably on the issue. Compensatory racial preferences in hiring or educational admissions were the price for the past. They were the present generation’s late payment of history’s unpaid costs. They were a form of reparations; a rebalancing of massive past injustices; a paltry but symbolically significant payback for centuries of domination. They were compensation for the decades in which preferences in hiring, college admissions, and city patronage machines had advantaged whites. Alternatively, they were a tax on the children of those whose wages had been artificially raised by whites-only employment rules. Whichever lines one followed, the arguments flowed out into
memory and history. If the injuries of the nation’s past could not some-
how be compensated, where was justice to be found?

For affirmative action’s opponents, to the contrary, it was axiomatic
that time carried no such heavy claim of guilt or consequence. The civil
rights revolution had been a victory, it was said. The page of history had
been turned; the nation’s story began anew. The compelling reason that
affirmative action should end, George Gilder wrote in 1980, was not be-
cause it was unconstitutional or unfair to poor white males (though he
was sure that it was both) but “because discrimination has already been
effectively abolished in this country.” “For all intents and purposes, the
civil rights struggle is over and is won,” the black conservative Walter E.
Williams seconded the theme. In the continuous present moment that
Reagan celebrated, every candidate for a job or professional school ad-
mission came to the bar afresh. Justice was not achieved by attention to
history; Justice was achieved by transcending the past.

If time was one fault line in these debates, a second was the presence of
power. For most defenders of the justice of affirmative action, the endur-
ance of racially organized power in the present was even more important
than the legacy of the past. Racism—judgment and domination on the
basis of race—still saturated American society. One saw it. Affirmative ac-
tion’s proponents argued, in the systemic behavior of the police, in the
statistical patterns in college admissions and employers’ hiring decisions,
in the credit decisions of lenders, in the overwhelming whiteness of the
nation’s elites. The cost of a black skin was built, like the ligaments of
power itself, into the structures of society. As Ellis Cose wrote in 1993,
“people do not have to be racist—or have any malicious intent—in order
to make decisions that unfairly harm members of another race. They sim-
ply have to do what comes naturally”: to follow the behaviors and rules
of thumb already built into the dominant institutions of society.

To hold out a few positions for black firefighters or medical school applicants, in a
social system already saturated with white power, barely began to tip the
scales of justice toward equality.

For opponents of affirmative action, however, the relevant question
was not domination but categorization. Racism’s injury, this line of argu-
ment contended, lay in its marks and stereotypes, its insults and misper-
ceptions. Each naming of race, in that sense, and every policy (whether
malign or benevolent) hinged on explicit naming of race, reinvigorated
race, added to the balkanization of the population, and sustained the force of prejudice. Frustrated by the “color-blind” phrase, Jesse Jackson exploded in a conversation with Charles Murray: “Nobody wants to be that way, man. We don’t need to be colorblind; we need to affirm the beauty of colors and the diversity of people. I do not have to see you as some color other than what you are to affirm your person.” For conservatives, however, power lay in the words and the categories. That was why, for many advocates of color-blindness, the Ku Klux Klan’s racial terrorizing and the racial affirmative action of a law school admissions committee stood on the same moral plane. “The new racism is like the old racism,” Clarence Pendleton insisted: “they want to treat blacks and other minorities differently because of race. This is as bad as the old racists.” In the conservative mirroring of left readings of power, power slipped out of structures and institutions and into words and discourse.52

Finally, the debate turned on the relative claims of groups and individuals. The premise of affirmative action was that the injustice which a class of persons had endured and continued to endure could be remedied, in part, by giving advantage to someone of the same class, even if she or he had not personally been the victim of that injustice. The injuries of racial domination had not been meted out one-by-one to individuals, affirmative action’s proponents insisted; they had been forced upon a people, a race, without regard to individual case or merit. The schoolchildren whose suits had gone forward in the school integration cases, Burke Marshall, the Kennedy-era civil rights division head, reminded William Bradford Reynolds in a debate at the Lincoln Institute, had sued not as individuals but as members of a racially subordinated class, challenging a system of “state-based racial oppression.” To claim that groups were irrelevant to justice was to lose sight of the injustice altogether. In the segregation era, Jesse Jackson argued, “blacks with good character couldn’t use the bathroom downtown. Blacks with Ph.D.’s couldn’t stop at the latrine. Race. Don’t run from that. That’s just real in this culture. . . . When you reduce our entire struggle to one guy’s manhood, it distorts the bigger picture.”53

For opponents of affirmative action, however, its injustice was precisely that it failed to treat each claimant as an unattached person. There were no “group rights,” critics insisted. To the hiring hall or the college admissions boards came only individuals, trailing no group affiliations or
historical legacies, or, if justice was to be done, no race. For those who had been personally injured by racially discriminatory actions, the courts were open for redress. But justice required "victim-specific" decisions: compensation to identifiable, individual persons who had been harmed by systems of racial classification. Like all eighteenth-century political documents, the Constitution and the statutes of the early republic had in fact been filled with group references: distinctions between free persons and slaves, natural and foreign-born, men and women, whites who were eligible for naturalization and others who were not. On the new constitutional plane, however, only individuals entered the law. The anxiety of affirmative action's proponents was their knowledge that the match between remedy and injustice, between the beneficiaries of compensation and the original victims of injustice, was makeshift and imperfect. The anxiety of affirmative action's opponents, as they sketched out a new world of individualized justice, freed of the weight of institutional considerations and the dead hand of time, was that the claims of history and memory might distract the course of the law.

Ultimately, as the affirmative action cases made their way through the gauntlet of the law reviews and the shifting judgments of the courts, the intellectual arguments ended up at the Supreme Court. In that forum, the plea that race be held to be an inadmissible category in the law did not ultimately prevail. Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justices Scalia and (in time) Thomas all actively pursued the "color-blind" line. Rehnquist argued that it was simply a plain-language reading of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that no one should be either advantaged or disadvantaged on any grounds by race. Scalia had openly mocked Justice Blackmun's assertion in Bakke that only by taking account of race could one move beyond racism. Perhaps Anglos like Blackmun and Powell had restorative claims to pay, Scalia charged, but for what guilt did his Italian-American people have to atone, who had arrived long after slavery was over? Clarence Thomas insisted in 1995 that "between laws designed to subjugate a race and those that distribute benefits on the basis of race in order to foster some current notion of equality" the one was "just as noxious" as the other. 54

The rest of the Court moved through the same territory more cautiously and hesitantly, with sharp swings of position and changing majority coalitions. "Distinguishing the rights of all citizens to be free from ra-
cial classifications from the rights of some citizens to be made whole” was a “perplexing” and troubling task, Justice Powell confessed in 1980.35 But from 1978 on, when it had split so sharply in Bakke that Powell’s voice alone carried the verdict, the Court moved toward progressively more narrow terrain, stripping race of more and more of its historical and institutional dimensions, contracting its social presence. Already in Bakke the Court majority had agreed that “societal discrimination” whose roots lay in social custom and practice, rather than in the deliberate action of a public or governmental body, was beyond the reach of any public body to remedy through explicit cognizance of race. Thus in Croson in 1989, overturning the Richmond city council’s provision for minority set-asides in city contracting, the Court held that the difficulties that blacks might have had in gaining business loans in Richmond, or in obtaining an adequate business education in its race-segregated schools, or in breaking through the whites-only barriers in the building trades were all irrelevant to the case. They were all beyond the power of the city to address by pursuing remedial race-conscious measures.36

The Court divided over whether there were ultimately any legitimate public purposes that might justify “benign” race-specific policies. It agreed (narrowly) that there were in Bakke in 1978 (in upholding the legitimacy of “diversity” in medical school admissions) and in Metro Broadcasting in 1990 (which did the same in broadcast licensing), only to sharply repudiate the language of “benign” racial considerations four years later.37 In the late 1970s the Court had allowed statistical evidence of minority under-representation to count as prima facie evidence of race or gender discrimination.38 By the late 1980s, it did not.39 Finally, under the shepherding of Justice O’Connor and the rubric of “strict scrutiny,” the Court in the early 1990s came to a more stable resting point. Government agencies could only use race-conscious measures to compensate for racially explicit injuries and disadvantages that they themselves had consciously caused; only through remedies that were narrowly tailored to the specific circumstances of the case; and only where other measures (which could not name race, though they might be conscious of it) would not suffice.

The liberals on the Court objected to the whittling down of justice to so narrow a compass. Already in Bakke Thurgood Marshall had filed a long, impassioned historical account of slavery and racial domination: “It is un-
necessary in twentieth-century America to have individual Negroes demonstrate that they have been victims of racial discrimination; the racism of our society has been so pervasive that none, regardless of wealth or position, has managed to escape its impact. . . . A whole people were marked as inferior by law. And that mark has endured."

To imagine otherwise was to assess race-conscious measures “in a vacuum”: to close one’s eyes to “social reality.”

In fact, outside the courts history’s legacies still counted. Conscious of the political and patronage advantages of minority set-asides, the Reagan administration did not abandon the practice, even as it lobbied against affirmative action before the courts. In the armed forces, the era’s administrations quietly sustained an affirmative action program that, by the 1990s, had remade the face of the Army officer corps. The Reagan administration’s proposals to stop tracking many veterans’ housing and assistance programs by race, which would at a stroke have made any evidence of institutional racism disappear, were remanded.

Corporations that had once been resistant to civil rights legislation found that there were gains to be had from diversity. Only in the late 1990s in referenda victories in California and Washington did “color-blind” race policies gain serious political traction.

And yet, well before those new-style “civil rights initiatives” were launched, the terms in which justice and race were being overtly debated had shifted from the historical and social considerations of the early 1970s to a new, more abstract terrain. Those who pressed the cases against affirmative action in the courts presented themselves not as white or male but as socially uncumbered individuals. The collective wages of whiteness, however weak or decisive they might be, were irrelevant. The “network” people of Michael Novak’s imagination, who lived and thought in webs of family and kin, were invisible in the law. The historical memories tapped by Roots or Beloved were irrelevant as well. The affirmative action cases recast the forums of justice as a choice between two socially detached individuals’ claims and merits. As the law recognized them, they
resembled more and more closely individual consumers in a market: bidders for a medical school education or for a city contract.

Even as they set aside as irrelevant to the law’s justice the layers of memory, power, and collective identity that had been, for better and worse, the shaping constituents of race in America, the courts did not make race disappear. But under the force of the arguments that affirmative action brought to the fore, a certain amnesia had occurred. The social and ontological status of race had shifted in ways no one would have predicted when the 1970s began.

Even more unexpected was that, among progressive African-American intellectuals, the ontological status of race should have become more troublesome and tenuous as well. What had been certain at the era’s beginning had become more contingent, fissured, imbued with choice. The destabilization of race on the academic left was barely visible in the mid-1980s, when a forum in *Critical Inquiry* on “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference” appeared with the term “race” put, unsettlingly, in quotation marks. But by the early 1990s, quotation marks were visible everywhere. Race, it was said more and more often, was socially constructed, strategic, and intersectional.

That race was socially made—not merely found in nature or experience but culturally and institutionally constructed—was not a new idea. Race was a “social and conventional” concept, the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal had written in his ground-breaking book *An American Dilemma* in the 1940s. Race was “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle,” Michael Omi and Howard Winant wrote in their account of American racial “formation” in 1986. Race was not biological and essential, as every historian knew who had encountered the multiplicity of ways in which racial classifications had been constructed in the sugar and slave economies of the West Indies, or splashed across the maps of Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans, or used to sort Europeans into racial categories (“Anglo-Saxons,” “Nordics,” “Slavs,” Jews, and others) before most of them graduated to “whiteness” in the twentieth century. Race was an arbitrary set of rules about descent, nature, and domination: a set of fictions that law and institutions attempted to stabilize and render self-evident.
Still, when in 1982 the historian Barbara Fields had argued that unlike class, which was material and historical, race was insubstantial and "in its very essence ideological," her assertion set off a cascade of controversy. The quotation marks that the African-American literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., put around race in the Critical Inquiry forum in 1985 were a fighting gesture to others. "Race" was a "fiction," a "metaphor," a "biological misnomer," Gates wrote in the preface. "Races, put simply, do not exist." In a painful exchange full of mutual misunderstandings, the younger critic Joyce A. Joyce accused Gates of dismissing centuries of black experience, of reducing black literature to a mere play of words, and, most angrily, of deserting his own "identity." To be a "Black critic begins with, but extends far beyond (or beneath) skin color," she wrote: It was a matter of pride, affection for the lives of Black people, commitment, and love.

To challenge the ontology of race was to risk challenging the ontology of black racial experience: the authenticity of living on one side, rather than the other, of the socially imposed lines of domination and power. It was to challenge the idea of an authentic black voice: not only the long black intellectual heritage that Martin Bernal would claim to have exhumed and the ways of feeling and knowing that others were bundling under the term "Afrocentrism," but also the special sound that Morrison was pouring into the magic realism of her own fictions, the family story Haley had pursued to its moment of epiphany in Africa, the understandings of obligation and kin that showed up in polls of African Americans. It was to challenge the template of race, class, and gender analysis that was just emerging in the history and sociology seminars. To challenge the reality of race was to unmask the arbitrariness of Euro-American racial science and of the marks and systems of power that had been erected on their pseudo-biological templates of race. But it was also to challenge a painfully, laboriously constructed thread of social memory and identity as well.

In the formation of the new "post-essentialist" writing on race, one set of intellectual strands went out to the poststructuralist turn in literary criticism. Gates himself had been an eager student of the new literary formalism and its emphasis on the arbitrary play of signifiers and the distance between word and thing. He had traveled to the University of Cambridge, he was later to write, with the aim of taking the masters' tools
of theory and using them to valorize the black texts that the masters themselves had barred from the canon. Gates’s first literary essays were formalistic readings of African-American literary texts, deliberately designed to deconstruct the assumption that they were naïve recordings of experience: to make them as complex and unfamiliar as Joyce or Eliot. The Critical Inquiry forums he was to edit on “race” and “identity” were to comprise a virtual salon of theory’s influentials: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Sander Gilman, Gayatri Spivak. Most of those who were to write of blackness’s instabilities and polymorphous character—Gates, bell hooks, Cornel West, and others—had had an immersion in the destabilizing currents of the new literary or critical legal theory.31

A second important source of the new tremors around the category of race was the influence of writers from the broader black diaspora. Africans arrived on the North American continent, by and large, as slaves, through a searing displacement into a white-dominated country. Blacks in late-twentieth-century England arrived through a double displacement: from Africa to the overwhelmingly black sugar islands of the West Indies, but from there to an England where the dominant lines of dissent ran down fissures of class rather than race. Out of these complex social and intellectual routes, figures like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham began to write of identities in the greater black diaspora as diverse, multilayered, and unstable. In a series of highly influential essays, Hall endeavored to work out “what I can only call ‘the end of innocence,’ or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.”32 “We are . . . ‘post’ any fixed or essentialist conception of identity,” he was writing by the early 1990s. “Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about.” Gilroy wrote of the history of the black Atlantic as “a course of lessons as too the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade.” It was a history of creolization, intermixture, and “inescapable hybridity”—the history of “rhizomorphic, routed, diasporic cultures.”33

Of all the forces that converged on the destabilization of black identity, however, the emergence of black women’s voices set off the deepest tremors. Those who first raised the need for black women to give name to their own experience had no intention of destabilizing the realities of
race. Their object was to clear a space for recognition of black women as a group separate from both white feminists (with their naive assumptions of the universality of their own white experiences) and black men (and the intense drive for gender domination that ran through parts of black masculine culture). Their politics, the framers of the Combahee River Collective statement urged in 1977, flowed “directly out of our identity”—out of the intersectionality of their lives as blacks and as women, as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s phrase would put it, as simultaneously the subjects of racism and patriarchy. Appeal to the “authentic experience” of black women ran hard through these emergent voices. But in the backlash that ensued—in the angry charges of masculacism, division, and race betrayal that erupted from sections of the black nationalist movement, in the heated family quarrel over the Clarence Thomas nomination, and in the crude misogyny which some of rap’s figures would pitch as the authentic voice of the black ghetto—some African-American women writers began to figure the tensions within the categories of race and gender as too deep and multi-form to be contained in the older languages of essence or even social intersection. “Was there ever a time when the collective body moved and spoke as one?” Lisa Kennedy asked. The very notion of identity was a kind of fiction, a potential trap set by others. Identity was inherently multiple and malleable. “We are not born with a ‘self’ but rather are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical ‘selves,’” the legal critic Angela Harris wrote in 1990. Consciousness is “not a final outcome or a biological given, but a process, a constant contradictory state of becoming”; its categories were “tentative, relational, and unstable.”

The proliferating challenges and question marks raised concerns throughout African-American intellectual circles. Many were impatient with the celebration of paradox, improvisation, and hybridity that flowed out of some of the elite African-American Studies programs. My consciousness is “unitary and holistic,” Afrocentrism’s architect, Molefi Kete Asante, rebuked the critical race studies’ claims, not fickle or uncertain. Houston Baker, who had been an early formalist colleague of Gates, ridiculed the notion that for most African Americans their blackness was to be found in the “whole lot of multiple, multiplying, ambiguous multiplicities in their head” rather than in the experience of a society where your race was essentially whatever the police who stopped you said it was.
Others worried whether it was wise to let the simpler language of race go at a time when black writers were just struggling to find their voice, when the black underclass was in danger of being written off as social-cultural outsiders, when racial justice was still a tinderbox issue on campuses and in society at large. Progressive black intellectuals, politically unwilling to walk away from black inner-city worlds where the iron determinants of race loomed in the mind as massive and unyielding as ever before, struggled to find language that would play to both sides of the racial realities. The speed with which the progressives’ social constructionist argument was mobilized against them in the briefs of conservative champions of the “color-blind society” added to the unease. “Any attempt to systematically classify human beings according to race will fall, because race is an arbitrary concept,” Linda Chavez put the postmodern conservative argument. Affirmative action’s race-based remedies were not merely unjust, she protested; they were built on categories that were essentially unreal. In this context, it meant one thing for white writers to give up an essential ideal of identity, bell hooks worried; it meant something altogether different to a subjected people whose identity and claims were still so fragile.78

Debates over essential identity rattled through all the other panracial communities. Asian American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and American Indian: they were all cobbled together out of strands of highly diverse historical experiences, held together essentially by the racial marginalization imposed on them by the Euro-American majority. On the ground and in the university ethnic studies programs the struggle to stabilize and marshal those identities against their own internal splintering processes was ongoing. The shifting racial categories of the U.S. census became a focal point of racial and ethnic lobbying: a place where collective claims of justice and identity might be made and at the same time a site of constant disaggregation. By the mid-1990s, a bill of rights for racially mixed people insisted that one had a basic human right to identify oneself in whatever categories one chose, to do so differently from one’s brothers and sisters and parents, if one wished, differently in different situations, and to change that identity over the course of one’s life.79 Racial identity was strategic and political. Against the racism of the dominant society, prominent figures such as the Asian-American Studies movement’s Lisa Lowe began to write of the need for a “strategic essentialism”: “a socially con-
structured unity... that we assume for political reasons.” We must begin to think of race “not as a noun but a verb,” the critical race theory writer Kendall Thomas echoed the point, “a contingent situated strategy.”

In the contentions over what that strategy should be, in the jockeying for voice and place, only a few were willing to discard the idea of racial authenticity altogether. The intense interest of progressive African-American intellectuals in African-American popular culture was one sign. To write on hip-hop culture was something of a rite of passage in the 1990s, in a way that jazz had never been for W. E. B. Du Bois. By the late 1980s, Henry Louis Gates himself had turned from the task of formalistic analysis of African-American literature to the task of following out its great unifying thread: the signifying tradition of doubling, revising, and riffing on the cultural materials around it that he now thought was its unbroken core. The signifying tradition, he urged, led from Harlem and Georgia to Africa and back again (as he was to say in his high-profile defense of 2 Live Crew from obscenity charges) in “an unbroken arc of metaphysical pre-suppositions and... pattern of figuration.” Race was “a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence,” a braid of memory made not in “blood” but in history and in culture. Gates cautioned against “the treacherous non sequitur that moves us from socially constructed to essentially unreal.” In acknowledging that “everything is socially constructed,” we should not “roll up history behind us like a carpet.”

And yet, there was no missing the fact that in the post-essentialist move it was the fluidity and multiplicity of the present that attracted the avant-garde voices of the early 1990s. “There is no such thing as having one identity or of there being one essential identity that fundamentally defines who we actually are,” the most closely watched of the new African-American intellectuals, Cornel West, wrote. “We are from the bottom to the top, as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva,” the critical race theorist Reginald McKnight put the post-essentialist mood in the early 1990s. “We are not a race, not a culture, not a society, not a subgroup, not a ‘breeding group,’ or a clique, not even simply an agglomeration of individuals.” Depending on the purposes, “we are at times a ‘We’ and a ‘Them,’ an ‘Us’ and ‘The Other.’”

Race mattered. As a claim and a mark of power, it remained deeply etched on early 1990s American society. Race was mobile, its signs capa-
ble of bewildering appropriations, crossovers, and choices. Rap, with its heavy load of angry, black, urban authenticity, caught on in the teen cultures of white suburbs. At white rallies in defense of the Confederate flag, observers spotted T-shirts on black power themes: “You Wear Your X and I’ll Wear Mine.” Younger black writers celebrated the in-between, “mulatto” character of black arts and music as the “New Black Aesthetic.” At the same time, the marks of race were also deeply static. The Rodney King riots, the sustained race-loyalties in voting, the endurance of race-marked inequalities and subordination, the starkly different sympathies of the black and white Americans who followed the O. J. Simpson trial, the continued pull of the idea of a black cultural nation, the power of racial-political entrepreneurs on both sides of the black-white division, all spoke to deep, sustained structures of history, power, and culture.

In all these ways, race did not in the least disappear. But despite the social weight bearing down upon its categories, they had nonetheless changed. The fissures within African-American society—always large—were more sharply configured than before. The efforts “of black intellectuals, artists, and leaders to impose provisional order on the perplexing and chaotic politics of racial identity,” as Michael Eric Dyson put it, intensified. Most striking was the way in which, through every facet of the arguments over race, the claims of the past had become more attenuated. Wilson’s claim for the declining significance of race was an argument not only about society but also about sharp historic discontinuity. In the “color-blind society” project, amnesia was a conscious strategy, undertaken in conviction that the present’s dues to the past had already been fully paid. The positioning of race in quotation marks both pointed to race’s social and historic origins and slipped consciousness of those sources into a certain marginality.

“Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past,” Stuart Hall wrote. But from Roots vividly imagined braid of memory and racial solidarity in the mid-1970s to the “post-essentialist” formulations of the early 1990s, the growth of more complex understandings of identity was also the retreat of history. A culture reshaped in the choices and present-moment preoccupations of a market-saturated society had transposed the frame of argument. In a liberation that was also the age’s deficit, a certain loss of memory had occurred.