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The death of blackness

'Blackness, no less than whiteness, is an invention: they have both been fabricated from the same historical materials.'

In 1947, Kenneth Bancroft Clark (1914–2005) – the first African American professor at the City College of New York – and his wife Mamie Phipps Clark (1917–83) conducted a psychological experiment with 253 black children, who were asked to choose between four dolls, two black, two white. It was as if the children were psychologically indentured: two-thirds of them preferred white dolls. The Clarks concluded that black children had internalized – that is, accepted, or incorporated into their mindset – the hatred white society directed at all black people. That hatred surfaced dramatically when, in the same year as the experiment, Jackie Robinson became the first African American to sign for a major league baseball club: animosity and resentment came from both fans and Robinson's teammates. (The original study is recounted in Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto*. Kiri Davis' 2006 film *A Girl Like Me* re-creates the experiment.)

The Clarks' study unmasked a feature of American society that was unsettling yet intelligible: being white was a good thing; even those who weren't white agreed. "As early as the 1920s, Josephine Baker rubbed fresh lemons into her face for thirty minutes each morning in order to lighten her skin," reports Ben Arogundade in his *Black Beauty* (p. 167). Many other performers either side of civil rights felt obliged to blanch their facial skin in order either to enhance their appeal to white audiences, or just to find work. Their deeds were driven by expedience more than internalized hatred.

Entertainers as diverse as Nat King Cole, Little Richard and Tina Turner wore heavily tinted makeup in their successful attempts to appeal to mainstream audiences. Even so, it came as a surprise when, in 2011, Beyoncé appeared in Los Angeles at the Grammys looking almost as pale as Gwyneth Paltrow. The buzz started: could the extravagantly glamorous wife of the world's leading hip-hop artist, known for her opulent lifestyle, ranked by *Forbes* as the ninth most powerful woman in the world, with annual earnings \$35 million, actually be lightening her skin?

It wasn't the first time Beyoncé's skin tone had been questioned: in 2008, L'Oreal was accused of "whitewashing" her by digitally lightening her facial skin for an advertising campaign. L'Oreal denied it, though research by Julia M. Bristor et al. uncovered: "The advertising industry has historically capitalized

on a 'hierarchy of skin color' that often exists among African-Americans" (p. 55). Lighter skin equates to social superiority.

Beyoncé was far from the only contemporary black celebrity to find her skin color under scrutiny. Rihanna, Lil' Kim, and even baseball player Sammy Sosa, were thought to have used skin lighteners, perhaps confirming Evelyn Nakano Glenn's contention: "The yearning for lightness evident in the widespread and growing use of bleaching around the globe can rightfully be seen as ... the internalization of 'white is right' values by people of color, especially women" (p. 298). This is not the same conclusion reached by the Clarks' study; but it is uncomfortably close, considering the six decades that separated them.

Writing in 2008, Nakano Glenn called skin color "a form of symbolic capital that affects, if not determines, one's life chances" (p. 282). She was not alone: a 2005 study by T. Joel Wade and Sara Bielitz, which drew on the earlier Clarks' study, agreed: "Skin color can be considered a commodity" (p. 219). They meant that whites' perceptions of blacks' qualities and capabilities are influenced by the tone of their skin. "Attractiveness" was not affected, but "skin color affects the perceived intelligence of African Americans" (p. 232).

The implication is that, where intelligence is a criterion for advancement, being lighter is an advantage. So why do celebrities, who are already well-advanced and whose success is not usually dependent on intelligence, or at least not intelligence alone, apparently strive to become lighter even though they won't be seen as any more attractive as a result?

This question needs two kinds of answer. Sika Alaine Dagbovie supplies the first when she argues that America, even now, is conflicted "over whether to control blackness on the one hand or encourage racial harmony on the other, or perhaps to abandon race altogether." Dagbovie is skeptical about recent developments: "Like the cliché 'some of my friends are black,' which attempts to prove a supposed lack of racism, the multiracial craze only superficially embraces the dark 'Other'" (p. 232).

On Dagbovie's account, some black celebrities' popularity is "connected to their 'otherness,'" as she puts it. America, along with many other parts of the world, celebrates cultural diversity, but Dagbovie interprets this as "exploiting difference." Her argument implies that the success of most black celebrities is predicated on their reluctance to address racial issues. Everything I have presented in this book so far supports this. Black celebrities are content in their "exploitation" just as long as the rewards are proportionate. Recall that, in the year of the Clarks' study, Hattie McDaniel took the role of a maid in the CBS radio show *Beulah* and helped boost the weekly audience to over ten million; she was paid \$1,000 per week – almost twenty times the national average.

While Dagbovie doesn't address the issue of skin lightening, her argument suggests that black celebrities mostly de-emphasize rather than accentuate their blackness. It could be passive acquiescence, or it could be rational adjustment, depending on your perspective. Either way, it's career-driven and quite different

from the internalized race hatred that impelled the children in the Clarks' experiment to choose white dolls. Or is it?

The second kind of answer to why so many black people, including celebrities, "yearn for lightness" (to use Nakano Glenn's terminology) involves drawing away from the present to make sense of the historical spell cast by whiteness. Ben Pitcher maintains that the spell has been broken: "Obama guarantees the ontological transformation in U.S. culture set out in the last sentence of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*: 'This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again'" (p. 357). He meant that the nature of America's very being would be changed by the election of a black president. A review of history and an evaluation of the present will test this claim.

Let me start with a premise: there is nothing natural about being white. Not in the sense we understand it today. Whiteness has origins in the second half of the seventeenth century when English, Irish, Scottish and other European settlers in America began to see themselves not as individuals or members of national groups, but as parts of a race. Most occupied a status not greatly above that of black bondsmen; that is, slaves. Lerone Bennett reveals this neglected actuality: "The colonial population consisted largely of a great mass of white and black bondsmen, who occupied roughly the same economic category and were treated with equal contempt by the lords of the plantations" (p. 62).

The English historian Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–92) notoriously mused on what a great land America would be, "if only every Irishman would kill a negro, and be hanged for it." The wishful thinking reflects the contempt in which Irish were held by the English, who colonized Ireland in the sixteenth century, and regarded the Irish as incapable of being civilized.

History is frequently a collision of accident and design. As the anti-slavery movement gathered momentum, its insistence that slaves were sentient human beings and deserved appropriate treatment prompted slaveholders to defend themselves. Slaves were like livestock, the "lords of the plantations" argued, but without anticipating the force of the Quaker-led movement. The need for a sharper, more clearly defined barrier of delineation became more pressing as campaigners grew in confidence. The title of Theodore Allen's 1994 book *The Invention of the White Race* conveys the action that followed.

White skin was imbued with new significance – as a means of control. Europeans, some indentured, were endowed with unprecedented civil and social privileges in acknowledgment of their loyalty to the colonial landowners. Poor whites welcomed the new affinity with their social superiors; it gave them a status above that of black slaves. "You could be an ex-slave but you could not be ex-black," remarks Patrick Wolfe (p. 69). Over time, the newly amalgamated whites "came to define themselves by what they were not: slaves and blacks," writes Peter Kolchin (p. 155).

Whiteness invoked ideas and feelings of superiority; the white race that possessed that vaunted quality maintained it over subsequent centuries.

Maintained it to the point where “whiteness in this society is not so much a color as a condition,” as George Lipsitz puts it. “It is a structured advantage that channels unfair gains and unjust enrichments to whites while imposing unearned and unjust obstacles in the way of Blacks” (p. 3).

Lipsitz’s diagnosis of whiteness as a condition is accurate, but insufficient. What he doesn’t reveal is that it has become a *normal* condition, as Toni Bruce recognizes: “In the USA, whiteness is normalized as that which does not stand out” (p. 862). Jennifer Esposito extends this: “Because whiteness is normalized, anyone who falls outside of whiteness (hence miscegenation or the ‘one-drop rule’) becomes different or other” (p. 524). Excusing her odd use of “hence” and the lower case in Other, Esposito makes her point.

Whiteness is germane to everything I’ve written about so far: without an understanding of its historical meaning and prevalence, we can’t even reflect on the book’s title. Think about it: would anyone write a book on *white* celebrities? Do we ever talk about white sports stars, or white actors, or white anything? The very fact that we use the adjective *black* in these and other contexts alerts us not to its uncommonness, and certainly not to its irrelevance, but to its abiding significance. No book that purports to analyse the social impact of black celebrities can dispense with the property that makes them *black* celebrities.

“The blackness that marks us off for permanent subordination and various forms of abuse is also what gives us a sense of identity, community, and history,” writes David Lionel Smith, detecting an apparent incongruity (p. 182). Blackness and the resolution of racism are not just incompatible but irreconcilable: remove the subjection and exploitation by whites, and the reasons for black identity or even blackness disappear. Blackness, no less than whiteness, is an invention: they have both been fabricated from the same historical materials.

The concept of a postracial society is illogical. It suggests a time after race, when the concept has disappeared, left behind in the vapor trail of history. Just because we no longer talk, at least not publicly, in terms of race, does not stop us referring to blacks and whites *as if* they were races. Some readers will object. Of course we can, they’ll insist: we can take pride in our identity and our culture as black people without allowing any semblance of inferiority or subservience into the narrative. Perhaps so, but they need reminding: blackness was imposed on slaves to distinguish them from a miscellaneous mix of Europeans and Americans, all of whom were considered superior.

“We have invented race as an instrument for identifying and interacting with people,” confirms Jonathan K. Stubbs, attaching to this the important qualification: “Humans are separated into groups arranged in a social pecking order” (p. 115). In other words, race was and is not just an instrument for organizing perceptions of different groups of people; it is a hierarchy on which people base their evaluations. As soon as race enters the thought-process, an

imaginary ranking or pecking-order shows up. Stubbs could have added that race has proved a serviceable tool for whites wishing to explain, justify or somehow legitimize their superiority over other groups, especially blacks.

There has been any number of successful people who either described themselves or were recognized by others as black, and who seemed to have navigated their way over or around every obstacle. Not only have they been successful, they are demonstrably, prominently and undeniably successful. It's impossible to miss them: they are on our screens, magazines, newspapers; in our imaginations. Black celebrities are visible representations of a new American Dream, one in which anybody, not just whites, can make it to the top. And not just in sports or showbusiness either: "African-American children now know that it is possible to become President," writes Joelyn Katherine Foy (p. 51).

So, why should we even discuss whether race is still a factor? Even when the old conception of race as a category of people sharing distinct physical characteristics has been repeatedly discredited, people persist in keeping the word in their vocabularies, and, indeed, in the minds. As long as they do, race remains central to American thinking. And the reason race remains central is because you, reader, can probably name less than twenty recognizably successful black people, among 41 million or more African Americans who make up 12.9 percent of the total population. You will know about Beyoncé, Oprah, Denzel Washington and many of the other celebrities mentioned in this book. You will probably know about Trayvon Martin, the African American teenager whose death in 2012 occasioned a bitter struggle for justice. So now I will offer a little information on people about whom you will know little or nothing.

"In contradiction to Obama's meteoric ascent, many black Americans are not overcoming but are being overcome," concludes Robert Perkinson (p. 77). His comment implies that, despite the momentous changes initiated by civil rights, African Americans are being defeated, leaving deep social inequalities. Long after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that helped break segregated education, "black children are still almost twice as likely as their white peers to become dropouts," report Marian Wright Edelman and James M. Jones (p. 134).

African American children underachieve with a law-like consistency, leading Edelman and Jones to reason: "Many high schools have become prep schools for jail." Failed examinations and expulsions "create an underclass of children who are ready-made for prison cells rather than dorm rooms" (p. 134). Tracey D. Snipe confirms: "There are more Black males in prison (840,000) than in college (635,000)" (p. 30). In the 1950s, before civil rights, African Americans were imprisoned at roughly four times the rate of whites. "Today, they go to jail and prison at eight times the rates of whites, a development unexplainable by changing crime patterns," Perkinson records (p. 77).

Actually, there is an explanation. Michelle Alexander has offered it: the War on Drugs, initiated during the Ronald Reagan presidency (1981–89), served

as “a distraction from more important crimes like murder, rape, and robbery” and pushed up conviction rates. Black men were relatively easy targets; so much so that, as Alexander remarks, “the enemy in the War on Drugs can be identified by race” (p. 101).

The trend isn’t quite as gendered as Alexander suggests. “More [black women] are now behind bars than at any time,” observes Hutchinson in his “Hardest hit by the prison.” “[They] are seven times more likely to be imprisoned than white women.” More than 80 percent of women prisoners have children.

Sentencing is also apparently affected by race. Among the many studies on this, that of Mark Peffley and Jon Hurwitz is especially interesting. Though mainly interested in how thoughts and opinions on capital punishment vary by ethnic background, the authors note: “There is now a virtual consensus that black assailants convicted of murdering whites are far more likely to face the death penalty than those convicted of murdering minorities” (p. 997).

Racial profiling – using ethnic affiliation as grounds for suspicion – by law enforcement officials had been practiced widely before and after civil rights, though the Rodney King case of 1991 and the subsequent riots in the following year promised to quash this. More recent research presents evidence not only that it continues, but that it has acquired new expeditors. Bill Fletcher Jr. elucidates: “Even black officers can and will racially profile African Americans, pointing to some peculiar ways that even members of an oppressed group can come to demonize their own” (p. 5).

Spatial segregation was legally enforced for much of America’s history and, while civil rights made an impact, segregation continues to the present day. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of research projects over the past decade alone have certified how, in the words of Nancy Denton, “laws passed to prevent segregation in public housing and federally assisted private construction have been ignored or modified” (p. 135).

Neighborhoods where there is a clustering of African Americans have, in many cases, become what Robert L. Wagmiller Jr. calls “jobless ghettos,” which, in turn, have impacts on “traditional family formation,” the prevalence of poverty, the number of “mainstream role models,” and the fiscal state of community institutions, such as churches, schools, stores, etc. (p. 539). Wagmiller collects demographic materials to conclude that the jobless ghettos are characterized by isolation, concentration and a “culture of despair.”

The cumulative effect of these and related factors lead Linda Burnham to conclude that, even today: “The black poverty rate still hovers between 20 and 25 percent and remains more than twice that of whites” (p. 45). Focusing specifically on black children, Jack L. Nelson et al. report: “Between one quarter and one third of children of color live in poverty; only 10 per cent of white children do” (p. 245).

Overt discrimination in employment is outdated, though Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi discloses a somewhat surprising pattern in his 2005 report: “60%

of all White-owned businesses in the United States did not employ [ethnic] minorities” (p. 5). Eighty-five percent of American businesses are owned by whites.

Less visibly: “African American workers with the same levels of education and experience as white workers, on an average, find themselves in substantially more dangerous occupations. Examples: steel industry – top of the coke ovens, where workers are exposed to many cancer-causing agents.” Jennifer Schoenfish-Keita and Glenn S. Johnson go on to provide a catalog of hazardous jobs in which blacks are over-represented (p. 272). Black workers are twice as likely to be permanently or partially disabled due to a job-related injury or illness.

Even in areas where there is no tangible trace of prejudice, direct or indirect, there are patterns of disadvantage, as Cynthia M. Frisby discerns: “Although the incidence rate of breast cancer is lower for African American women than it is for white women, research shows that African American women, as a whole, have a higher mortality rate and a lower 5-year survival rate when compared to White women” (p. 103). Black women do not receive treatment early enough.

With a troubling symmetry, “African American men are at elevated risk for prostate cancer,” according to a research team led by Kathryn L. Taylor: the incidence rate of the disease is about 60 percent higher in black males than in white males, and the mortality rate is about twice as high (p. 591). Again, early treatment is the problem; black men are not encouraged to undergo prostate cancer screening. The life expectancy for black men is six years less than that of white men, while for black women it is five years less than white women.

Rogers M. Smith and Desmond S. King have assembled copious data to present a summary of a postracial America that appears anything but postracial. The authors acknowledge that the gap between blacks and whites has narrowed significantly over the past few decades. But: “The familiar, painful litany of the United States’ continuing and severe racial gaps in material well-being encompasses virtually every dimension of life, from economic well-being to health to housing to education to the criminal justice system” (p. 26).

These patterns of inequality are unlikely to be addressed in any ethnically specific program or policy, at least not under Obama or any prospective president on the political horizon. Julianne Malveaux explains in her “What about economic justice?”: “The invocation of race is so likely to provoke unremitting hostility that many have looked for ‘race neutral’ remedies to solve a set of issues that clearly have race at their base” (p. 21).

And here we reach our *Catch-22*: a set of circumstances from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting and, in this case, dependent conditions. For those unfamiliar with Joseph Heller’s 1961 novel, the main character is Yossarian, a bombardier in the US Army Air Force, who feigns madness in order to avoid dangerous combat missions, but whose very wish to avoid them is taken as evidence of his sanity.

Writers such as Malveaux have theorized that America's history of structured *de jure* inequality based on race has left a legacy that can't be removed by race-neutral remedies; that is, the kind of programs that make no particular allowance for ethnic background, color, or purported racial origin. Inequality produced by race needs to be addressed by race. Like Yossarian, she seeks a resolution by using the very subterfuge that will prove the existence of the thing she wants to deny. This is not a criticism of Malveaux. Far from it: she has identified that race has proved a cruelly effectual instrument when used malevolently. The question now is whether it can ever be used benevolently?

The demons that drive people to tyrannize and repress others are the subject for another book. Yet, the wrongness of racism, once recognized, was not so easy to put right. Centuries of racist thinking were not washed away like footprints in sand with the arrival of civil rights. Why not? "Americans view race through a prism of culture," is John Hartigan's answer. No American alive is a racist. In fact, they live in fear of being described as such. Yet the paradox is, as we know from the summaries of previous pages, that race continues to matter and its effects are felt, as Hartigan points out, "widely and deeply."

People have been either defending themselves against accusations of racism or boasting their anti-racist credentials for decades, of course. But only recently have they been able to point to evidence that simultaneously supports them and indicts the culture of which they are both part and product. America resolutely refuses to consider the possibility that racism is still a factor. It is as much part of history as Wounded Knee, Japanese internment, and the Ku Klux Klan, they might argue. Hartigan believes this is part of the difficulty: "How do we get Americans to acknowledge and assess the pervasive racial aspects of our public culture if the one thing they know they cannot be is 'racist'?" (p. 16).

Hartigan's argument is that race has long been an organizing principle in American culture. For most of its history it has been a method of what he calls "determining belonging," by which I presume he means identifying the right personal or social qualities to be a member of a particular group. In order to do this, there must be a way of contrasting the right qualities from the wrong ones. Blacks have, historically, not belonged; their function was to remind whites what they were not. Whites could not have regarded themselves as a group, a race, without another group with which to contrast themselves.

The people who were, in the seventeenth century, excluded from the white race have entertained, amused, charmed, engrossed, inspired admiration, and earned extravagant praise. They have served up all manner of dazzling performances primarily for the delectation of whites. Should we expect the latest generation of entertainers, sports stars and all-round celebrities to do or be anything more? Meghan S. Sanders and James M. Sullivan's 2010 research steers us towards an answer.

They predicate their findings thus: “Racism has transformed into a new form of racism called symbolic racism” (p. 202). This involves four beliefs: blacks no longer face discrimination; their lack of progress is due to their unwillingness to work hard enough; they demand too much, too soon; they get more than they deserve. The study by Peffley and Hurwitz cited earlier complements this preference for individual makeup over social circumstances: “Whites ... are much more likely to view black criminality as being dispositionally caused, believing the reason blacks are more likely to be arrested and imprisoned than whites is that blacks commit more crimes” (p. 1,007). (“Dispositionally caused,” I dare say, means brought about by people’s inherent qualities of mind and character.)

None of this seems new or surprising. But the sources of symbolic racism, say Sanders and Sullivan, are the media: whites respond not to black people, but to representations of black people. Sanders and Sullivan’s research shows: “There is a difference of perception for African American groups and African American individuals.” They mean that whites see black individuals differently from blacks as a group; they might like, admire and respect certain individuals – actors, athletes, musicians, for example – but fail to generalize the qualities of which they approve to black people as a whole.

When individuals whom whites may admire are represented in the media negatively, as were for example Mike Tyson, Michael Vick and Wesley Snipes, whites regard their cases as “more similar and representative of the group.” On the other hand “positive individuals,” as Sanders and Sullivan call them, are considered untypical and unrepresentative of African Americans as a group. Several of the figures we have considered in previous chapters, including Halle Berry and Will Smith, are identified as African Americans who are viewed positively and liked but are not understood as representative of blacks. Stereotypes from history continue to infect contemporary thinking.

The researchers may well have explored the influence of *ressentiment*, this being a mental state first introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) to describe suppressed feelings of envy and hatred that can’t be acted on. While their study didn’t reveal this, it would be consistent to assume that whites have a grudging rather than unconditional admiration for someone such as music and film producer, rapper and all-round impresario P. Diddy, who has a net worth of \$475 million, or Serena Williams, who limped by on \$12 million per year in the dog days of a tennis career festooned with thirteen Grand Slam singles titles.

If Sanders and Sullivan’s experiment is as secure as it sounds, perhaps the presence of so many African American celebrities has had far less positive impact among the American population than it appears. Black celebrities probably occupy a place in the popular imagination analogous to that of showroom mannequins in a storefront: used for display purposes and not necessarily an accurate reflection of what’s inside the store.

The belief that black people's "lack of progress is due to their unwillingness to work hard enough" complements a point made by Lipsitz: "What was once done to them by white racists, this line of argument contends, Blacks are now doing to themselves" (p. 1). So: successful black people are exceptional and reap the bounties of an American meritocracy that rewards ability. But they are hardly representative of the majority of African Americans, who remain in charge of their own destinies and contrive to hinder their own progress even when all the obstructions of racism have been removed.

Esposito's inference broadens the picture. There is, she conjectures, an "image of black people in the white mind" and: "This black image is often informed by prominent 'exceptions' to the rule" (p. 532). While she doesn't include this corollary, I presume she wouldn't object if I add: white self-consciousness is informed by images of blacks, as a painter's subjects are brought into relief by the use of contrasts. I repeat Kolchin's point about whites in bygone time, who "came to define themselves by what they were not."

Esposito discerns how the idea of whiteness-as-normal "makes it convenient to blame people of color, as individuals, for problems that are inherently based on the group's social location" (p. 524). This chimes both with Sanders and Sullivan's findings and Malveaux's conundrum.

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In 1997, the historian Paul Spickard reflected that, since the 1960s, America had experienced: "A modest softening of the lines between the races." Apart from the word "race" to describe cultural groups, it seemed an unexceptional statement: more than three decades after civil rights, some abatement of the strife and divisions that marked America's prehistory would have been expected. Spickard then added: "This is not to suggest that race is becoming less important in American public life – on the contrary, it continues to shape people's life chances far more drastically than white conservative rhetoric would have us believe" (p. 153).

Dirk Philipsen elaborates: "The entire spectrum of life experiences by Americans not only are perceived, but also processed and acted upon in a way that is pervasively racialized" (p. 190). By racialized, I take it that Philipsen means treated in a way made comprehensible in terms of race. If this doesn't surprise us quite as it should, why is that? Perhaps because it resembles commonsense: a glance at the patterns of inequality I've outlined can be rendered intelligible in terms of a mutant racism that has adapted to changing environments and continues to exert a maleficent influence, or as an expression of blacks' inability or perhaps unwillingness to improve their material positions. The latter seems a more popular option.

Perhaps this has pushed many African Americans into a mood of resignation, if not fatalism. Earl Sheridan sums up their stance: "Racism is irrelevant not because it no longer exists, as the conservatives argue, but because it

is unbeatable" (p. 190). At times, it certainly appears so: its obduracy has apparently convinced black celebrities that the most productive way ahead is around it. This has prompted Julie Novkov to enquire: "Could a postracial state be something other than a state in which racial subordination was rendered politically unspeakable though still structurally present?" (p. 658).

The reader must decide whether this is preposterous or profound. Initially, I thought the former, but, on reflection I veer toward the latter: the situation Novkov conjectures is actually a decent summary of today; her speculation about whether it can ever be anything different makes us wonder whether, in a truly postracial society, we could conceptualize black people at all.

What about whites? Matthew W. Hughey reckons whiteness is now "less of a synonym for invisible normality" than it was just a few years ago (p. 1,291). When Bruce argues, "the instability of dominant discourses means that the boundaries of the 'normal' must be constantly marked," she implies there is more transience than we typically assume (p. 862). Hundreds of years of conceiving people as black leaves an impression of permanence. A genuine postracial culture would change this. As I've argued, the term black would be meaningless: postracial would mean dispatching blackness and whiteness to oblivion. This won't happen. More likely we will witness the kind of situation encouraged by Halle Berry, in which ethnicity becomes a matter of choice, people electing their ethnic identities. Note the use of plural identities: Berry's child may change hers as she grows, perhaps opting for several at one time, changing to suit different situations. It will be – probably already is – possible to have multiple ethnicities, all interchangeable and all utterly fluid. We live a "liquid life," as Zygmunt Bauman calls it; today's is "a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines" (p. 1).

For some, this lack of certainty must sound like a waking nightmare. Surely we can't change identities and switch ethnicities as we change our appearance with cosmetic surgery, replace limbs with prosthetics or restore vital functions with organ transplants from human donors? But I see the day when that will happen: I see it now. That's what is happening and, for this writer at least, it is no bad thing. If this means the death of blackness, then so be it. Baldwin was ahead of his time with his "white no longer" salutation in 1955. He would still be too early if he said it today. But tomorrow, he will be right: the death of blackness will bring with it the demise of whiteness and all the inequity, oppression, bigotry and manifold wrongdoing that malefactor has engendered.