

The No-Drop Rule

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Critical Response

II

The No-Drop Rule

Walter Benn Michaels

In the final section of my essay “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity” (*Critical Inquiry* 18 [Summer 1992]: 655–85), I criticize the idea of antiessentialist accounts of identity, which is to say that I criticize in particular the idea of cultural identity as a replacement for racial identity. My central point is that for the idea of cultural identity to do any work beyond describing the beliefs people actually hold and the things they actually do, it must resort to some version of the essentialism it begins by repudiating. Thus, for example, the idea that people can lose their culture depends upon there being a connection between people and their culture that runs deeper than their actual beliefs and practices, which is why, when they stop doing one thing and start doing another, they can be described as having lost rather than changed their culture. This commitment to the idea that certain beliefs and practices constitute your real culture, whether or not you actually believe or practice them, marks the invention of culture as a project (you can now *recover* your culture, you can *struggle to preserve* your culture, you can *betray* your culture, and so on), and it marks also the return to the essentialism that antiessentialists mean to oppose. For insofar as your culture no longer consists in the things you actually do and believe, it requires some link between you and your culture that transcends practice. That link, I argue, has, in the United States, characteristically been provided by race. Thus, I conclude, cultural identity is actually a form of racial identity.

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Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin in their essay "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity" (*Critical Inquiry* 19 [Summer 1993]: 693–725; hereafter abbreviated "D") and Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield in their essay "White Philosophy" (pp. 737–57), criticize this argument. They offer counterexamples to my notion that in order to make possible the kinds of projects mentioned above (preserving your culture, and so on) identity claims must be essentialist, and they deny that the only coherent alternative to essentialism is pure description. They also offer, respectively, a socioreligious reading of my argument (the Boyarins identify it as a form of the "radical individualism" that can be described as a "characteristically Protestant theme" ["D," p. 704])¹ and a sociopolitical reading of it (according to Gordon and Newfield, my argument is an example of "liberal racism" in its "postpluralist" phase [pp. 737, 753]).² Finally, Gordon and Newfield identify my argu-

1. Gordon and Newfield repeat this criticism and link it to my supposed refusal to acknowledge that "what we do or who we are is always imposed and chosen within determinate social relations" (p. 743 n. 9). But my argument that only what people actually do and believe determines their identity is indifferent to the question of how many people share certain beliefs or practices and to the question of how they acquired those beliefs and practices. My point is only that their cultural identity cannot be determined by anything other than those beliefs and practices, however widely they are shared and however they were acquired.

2. Their idea here is that the question "'But why does it matter who we are?'" is a Rodney King-style plea for all of us to just "get along," to "ignore the conflicts and coercions, the innumerable interdependent historical circumstances that make us who we are" (p. 742). A critique of Gordon and Newfield's piety about "history" (it "make[s] us who we are") is beyond the scope of the current essay, but the idea that criticizing antiessentialist racism is a way of ignoring conflict and coercion merits some notice. How, exactly, does the refusal to deploy cultural identity as an explanation of the difference between someone living on welfare and, say, a middle-class English professor count as a way of *ignoring* conflict? The truth is just the opposite; it is the redescription of economic differences as racial that makes them tolerable. The current university commitment to curing middle-class white students of racial prejudice is exemplary in this regard since as long as we preach respect for the culture of others as the cardinal virtue, we will be able to regard economic inequality with our customary equanimity. Which is only to say that it's the pluralist discourse of race, not its critique, that makes getting along the great desideratum. (And which is also why Gordon and Newfield's complaint about pluralism—that it's a "milder, more sophisticated" form of "white supremacism" [p. 742]—is just that it isn't pluralist enough.)

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ment with a form of thinking that they call “white philosophy” and that they associate (pejoratively) with “reason” and “logic.” This is what they call “reproducing the existence of a ‘color line’” (p. 744)—although they think that I’m the one who has done the reproducing. In any event, what their responses make clear is that the commitment to antiessentialist identitarianism is undiminished and that the question of whether and where to draw the color line remains crucial.

The Boyarins believe that Jewish identity constitutes a counterexample to my argument, and they instance male Jewish circumcision as “a particularly sharp disruption” of my effort to define identity in terms of “‘one’s actual practices and experiences,’” remarking that the fact of being circumcised “can reassert itself, and often enough does, as a demand (almost a compulsion) to reconnect, relearn, reabsorb, and reinvent the doing of Jewish things” (“D,” p. 705). But, setting aside the bizarre use of “re” (if, because you’ve been circumcised, you go to Hebrew school and learn “Jewish things,” in what sense are you *re*learning them?) and setting aside also the even more bizarre idea that it’s *circumcision* that compels you toward “Jewish things” (think of the millions of circumcised men not so compelled, that is, not Jewish), what’s truly remarkable here is the idea that being circumcised should be presented as the mark of identity that transcends “‘one’s actual practices and experiences.’” Indeed, the Boyarins themselves appear to realize that circumcision obviously doesn’t do this; they describe it as “a mark that transcends one’s actual practices and (at least remembered) experiences” (“D,” p. 705). But while I do argue (in “Race into Culture” and elsewhere) that you can’t remember or forget experiences you didn’t have, I don’t, of course, argue that you can’t remember or forget experiences you *did* have. Indeed, insofar as Jewish identity is crucially dependent upon circumcision, it is crucially dependent precisely upon one’s actual experience.

This is why the Boyarins’ suggestion that it is “not quite as obvious” as I claim that “a New York Jew cannot become a Mashpee Indian” and their insistence that “a Mashpee Indian can become a Jew” makes my point rather than theirs (“D,” p. 705). The Mashpee Indian who became a Jew would do so by altering his or her actual practices and experiences, by getting circumcised, by observing the Jewish holidays, by learning (not relearning or remembering) “Jewish things.” His or her Jewish identity would depend *entirely* on his or her actual practices and beliefs, and the minute the Mashpee stopped practicing and believing Jewish things he or she would cease to be a Jew. But insofar as being a Mashpee is different, under U.S. law, from being a Jew, it’s because being a Mashpee does *not* depend simply on believing and doing Mashpee things. Tribal status cannot, in other words, be earned by conversion, and in describing the convert as “the ideal type of the Jew” the Boyarins commit themselves to a model of identity that reiterates rather than refutes the primacy of ac-

tual practices and experiences ("D," p. 705).³ Indeed, insofar as conversion is equivalent to assimilation (they both involve exchanging one set of beliefs and practices for another), the Boyarins' hymn to the former simply repeats my paean to the latter.⁴

For Gordon and Newfield, it is not the Jew but the Mashpee Indians, as discussed by James Clifford, who provide a counterexample to my analysis. In a footnote, I criticized Clifford's claim to be offering an ac-

3. My point here is not, however, that the Boyarins simply give the same account of identity that I do and just fail to realize it. For their discussion of cultural and linguistic transmission does suggest the possibility in their view of a certain discrepancy between at least the language children actually speak and the language that will count as theirs. "What about a thirteen-year-old child whom we have allowed until now to concentrate on learning the language/culture of the dominant group?" they ask. "Is it racist to send him or her to a school to learn 'our' language?" ("D," p. 704). Obviously, it isn't wrong to want one's child to learn a new language, but, of course, teaching a child a new language is not the issue. The issue is whether "our" language should count as the child's, whether a culture in which the child has not (according to the terms of the example) been instructed should count as his or hers. If my parents can speak Hebrew as well as English, but I am raised (until thirteen) speaking only English, in what sense is the Hebrew language mine? It will, of course, *become* mine if I learn it, but to say that the motive for learning a language is to make the language mine is obviously different from saying that the motive for learning it is that it already is mine.

The point of my criticism of cultural identity was that the concept of culture could not coherently provide us with such motives, could not, that is, provide a link that would enable us to describe languages we don't speak as in some sense ours. If I grow up speaking Hebrew and always regard it as my native language and my children grow up speaking English and always regard it as their native language, they will no more have lost their cultural identity than I will have lost mine; our identities will just be different. Indeed, if I myself eventually stop speaking Hebrew altogether and speak only English, I will still not have lost my cultural identity, for why should what I used to do (speak Hebrew) determine my identity in a way that what I now do (speak English) does not? The point here is not that nothing has been lost or even that nothing of value has been lost; my ability to speak Hebrew has been lost, and insofar as that ability was valuable, I have lost something of value. But I have not lost my culture; I have not lost my identity. Indeed, if everyone who spoke Hebrew stopped doing so and everyone who practiced "Jewish things" also stopped doing so, *no one* would lose his or her cultural identity. Cultural identity can't be lost.

4. This bears also on their reminder—with respect to my criticism of "compulsory assimilation"—that "power operates in many ways other than the exercise of actual compulsion" ("D," p. 705). Insofar as this is true, it is true for conversion as well, but I leave it to others to decide when conviction becomes compulsion and note here only that "the ideal type of the Jew" has presumably been convinced rather than compelled and thus that, at least according to the Boyarins, the difference between the two survives. It may be worth noting, however, that if we were to accept the idea that *all* cultural practices were the results of something like compulsion, then the projects of cultural survival defended by the Boyarins and Gordon and Newfield would become utterly incomprehensible. These projects depend upon the idea that some beliefs and practices are linked to our identity in such a way as to make them ours even if we don't believe and practice them. But if *all* our beliefs and practices are the products of compulsion, why should some seem more ours than others? Why wouldn't the compulsory replacement of one set by another simply count as the replacement of an old tyranny by a new tyranny?

count of Mashpee identity that did not rely on what he calls the “organicism” criterion of cultural “continuity.” Pointing out that participation in “traditional” Mashpee practices had been “intermittent,” Clifford denied that Mashpee culture had, in the usual sense, “survived” but insisted that, nevertheless, Mashpee identity had not been “lost,” since “any part of a tradition” that can be “remembered, even generations later,” cannot be understood as “lost.”⁵ What’s wrong with this account, I argued, is that in recasting the historical past as the remembered past and so redescribing the person who does Mashpee things for the first time (the Boyarins’ convert) as a person who remembers the Mashpee things he used to do, it restores the “continuity” Clifford claims to repudiate and restores it at a level deeper than culture. For the invocation of memory makes the person who now does Mashpee things, “even generations later,” the same as the person who used to do them, generations before. According to Gordon and Newfield, however, “Mashpee memory” (as Clifford describes it) “is not deeper than culture but is culture, the historical narrative of a society” (p. 750). My effort to link Clifford’s account of Mashpee identity to what Gordon and Newfield call “interior identity” rather than “*knowledge of history*” is rejected by them with the assertion that the Mashpee are “indifferen[t] to this kind of depth” (pp. 749, 750 n. 16). When “asked in court about the source of their Mashpee identity,” Gordon and Newfield write, the Mashpee “say they are Mashpee because other people have always thought they were, because they think they are, because they say they are.” When asked, “How do you know you’re an Indian?” the Mashpee makes no appeal to “interior identity” (which is to say, to the essentialist categories I describe); instead she replies, “My mother told me” (p. 750 n. 16).

But why should we understand this question—“How do you know you’re an Indian?”—as a question about the “source” of Indian identity? For, after all, the epistemological question of how you know you’re a Mashpee is not the same as the ontological question of what it takes to make you a Mashpee, which is only to say that there’s a difference between the source of your identity and the source of your knowledge of your identity.⁶ And, although Gordon and Newfield may be confused on

5. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 341, 342; hereafter abbreviated *PC*.

6. It’s interesting that Gordon and Newfield continually double their cultural geneticism with an epistemological geneticism, insisting that what they call “reasons of philosophy” be subordinated to the “interests” those reasons are judged to “reflect,” and suggesting that my reasons in particular “reflect the perspective of historically [a nice touch] white interests” (p. 751). If there were any merit to this geneticism, it would, in my view, work against the defense of racial identity since racial identity was, in the U.S., invented by whites and enforced upon blacks. But, of course, there isn’t any merit to it. The commitment to disinterestedness—which is to say, the commitment to the idea that the validity of our beliefs depends upon the conditions in which we come to hold them—is simply reproduced here as the commitment to interest—which is to say that Gordon and Newfield have missed the point of

this point, the Mashpee clearly aren't: when asked the ontological question, "What does it take to be a member of the Mashpee tribe?" their medicine man replies, "Tracing ancestry back to your great-grandfather or great-grandmother" (*PC*, p. 292). You may *know* you're a Mashpee because your mother tells you you are, but you *are* a Mashpee because you have Mashpee ancestors. So if converted Jews cannot exemplify an antiessentialism that goes beyond the description of actual beliefs and practices because their identity as Jews is *entirely determined* by their actual beliefs and practices, then the Mashpee cannot exemplify an antiessentialism that goes beyond the description of actual beliefs and practices because there is *nothing antiessentialist* about the way they determine their identity. My original point in discussing Clifford was to show that his account of a Mashpee identity that stayed the same despite numerous changes in Mashpee beliefs and practices could only be defended by the appeal to what another interested anthropologist called "a traceable heritage to aboriginal ancestors" (*PC*, p. 321). And while almost everyone involved in the trial agreed that insistence on "'some fairly high degree of blood quantum'" (*PC*, p. 326) would be unfair, the history of race in the United States has conclusively proven that—for the purposes of racial classification—only one drop is needed.

Gordon and Newfield acknowledge that there are some "inconsistencies" in Clifford's discussion of Mashpee identity, but they insist nevertheless that everything he says "does in fact lead away from both racial and narrowly cultural identity toward some conjuncture like historical socioculture" (p. 750). And it is, of course, perfectly true that everything Clifford says is *meant* to lead away from race and toward "some conjuncture like historical socioculture," which seems to be enough for Gordon and Newfield. Making good on their suggestion that, with respect to identity, "remembering a grievance" counts more than exposing a "logical inconsistency" (p. 755), they reject the idea that people could be mistaken about the direction of their own thought; indeed, they seem unhappy with the idea of mistakes altogether, associating my claim that the defenders of antiessentialist accounts of racial identity are mistaken about their antiessentialism with "white philosophy"'s valorization of "contemporary standards of valid reasoning" (p. 755) and with "liberal racism"'s interest in "conceptual errors" (p. 737).⁷ Thus the fact that "many commentators

the critique of objectivity and that they continue to think that the truth of people's views should be determined by reference to a causal account of how they came to hold them.

7. Gordon and Newfield assert that the Mashpee are somehow indifferent to "conceptual errors," but the closest they come to demonstrating this claim is with quotations like the one reproduced above in which a young woman says she knows she's an Indian because her mother told her, and as we've already seen, the only conceptual error here is Gordon and Newfield's. In any event, it's hard to see why the defense of identity claims should involve any less logic than the critique of them, and harder still to accept the kind of primitivism implied by Gordon and Newfield's racialization of "logic."

on identity politics” have repudiated racial essentialism but “have retained the use of *social* identities” is itself a liability for my argument because, presumably, one can say of these commentators what, as it turns out, one cannot say of the Mashpee, that they really have given up on essentialism (p. 744). At least according to Gordon and Newfield, these “scholars of color,” if asked what it takes to be a scholar of color, would not reply, “Tracing ancestry back to your great-grandfather or great-grandmother.” So what does it take to make a scholar a scholar of color? How does race without biology work in the United States today?

That the commitment to race without biology, to what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call “race as a social concept,”⁸ is widespread cannot be questioned. Writers like Omi and Winant are hostile to the explanation of behavior by appeal to a biology of race and criticize more generally efforts to give the concept of race a “scientific meaning” (*RF*, p. 68), but they decline to abandon the concept of race as such. On the contrary, regarding race as “a pre-eminently *social* phenomenon” (*RF*, p. 90), they celebrate what they call “the forging of new collective racial identities during the 1950s and 1960s,” arguing that “the racial subjectivity and self-awareness which [were] developed” have taken “permanent hold” in American society (*RF*, p. 91). And this commitment to racial identity without biology certainly does extend beyond the writings of social scientists like Omi and Winant or Gordon and Newfield and clearly has become what Gordon and Newfield say it is, “one of the most important principles by which U.S. social relations are organized” (p. 740). In a widely noticed racial identity case in Louisiana, for example, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, remarking (like Gordon, Newfield, and others) that “the very concept of the racial classification of individuals . . . is scientifically insupportable,”⁹ ruled that Susie Phipps, “who had always thought she was white, had lived as white, and had twice married as white,”¹⁰ was not in fact white because her parents, who had provided the racial information on her birth certificate, had thought of themselves and of her as “colored.” “Individual racial designations are purely social and cultural perceptions” (*JD*, p. 372), the court said; the relevant question, then, was not whether those perceptions correctly registered some scientific fact (since the court denied there was any relevant scientific fact) but whether they had been “correctly recorded” at the time the birth certificate was issued. Since in the court’s judgment they had been, Phipps and her fellow appellants remained “colored.”

8. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York, 1986), p. 60; hereafter abbreviated *RF*.

9. *Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana, through the Department of Health and Human Resources, Office of Vital Statistics and Registrar of Vital Statistics*, 479 So. 2d 372 (1985); hereafter abbreviated *JD*.

10. F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?* (University Park, Pa., 1991), p. 10; hereafter abbreviated *W*.

Because Phipps was by credible evidence at least one-thirty-second black, commentators like Omi and Winant cite this case as an example of racial biologism and F. James Davis in his important book *Who Is Black?* describes the Phipps case as confirming the legality of the one-drop rule.¹¹ This rule had, of course, a biological meaning. In older racist texts like Robert Lee Durham's *The Call of the South* (1908), the justification for counting as black anyone with a traceable amount of black blood is the conviction that this trace will at some point manifest itself, as when the savagery of his African grandfather emerges in the quadroon Hayward Graham and he rapes his white wife: "With a shriek of terror she wildly tries to push him from her: but the demon of the blood of Guinea Gumbo is pitiless, and against the fury of it, as of the storm, she fights and cries—in vain."¹² The idea, then, is that black blood makes a difference to the intrinsic identity of the person, and even if this difference is ordinarily invisible (even if the person characteristically looks and acts even more white than Hayward Graham who is "unobtrusively but unmistakably a negro"),¹³ at some point his blackness will show itself. The reasoning, in other words, depends on a commitment to the biology of race. But it turns out that the designation of people who neither look nor act black as nonetheless black does not necessarily depend on the idea that their blackness might actually show itself or might even be the sort of thing that could in principle show itself, which is to say that it's a mistake to see that biological account of race confirmed in the Phipps decision. On the contrary, the court, as I have noted, firmly insists that "racial designations are purely social and cultural perceptions." Phipps is "colored" not because of her traceable amount of black blood but because her parents said she was.¹⁴

The rule the court enforces here is the rule that Gordon and Newfield imagine for the young Mashpee woman, Vicky Costa: "Q.: How do you know you're an Indian? A.: My mother told me" (*PC*, p. 301). "The witness," Gordon and Newfield remark, "knows she is an Indian because

11. Noting that both the Louisiana Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court refused to review the decision of the court of appeals, Davis argues that "the highest court in the United States saw no reason to disturb the application of the one-drop rule" (*W*, p. 11). Although, as will become clear below, I do not entirely agree with Davis's interpretation of *Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana* (which is how the Phipps case was filed), I have learned a great deal from his history of the one-drop rule and from his comparison of racial practices in the United States to racial practices elsewhere.

12. Robert Lee Durham, *The Call of the South* (Boston, 1908), p. 290.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

14. When the Phipps case went to trial, a 1970 statute declaring that anyone with "one thirty-second or less Negro blood" could not be counted as black was still in effect. But by the time the case reached the court of appeal, that statute had been repealed and the court, since it based its own decision on "social and cultural perceptions," declared that it was, in any event, "not relevant." The statute that replaced it, according to Davis, explicitly gives "parents the right to designate the race of newborns" (*W*, p. 10).

she trusts her mother” (p. 750 n. 16). The court requires that Phipps, like Costa, trust her mother. And, in the spirit of Gordon and Newfield, what this produces is not a one-drop rule but a no-drop rule, the legal equivalent of the social scientist’s “*social* phenomenon.” It solves the problem of the scientific establishment of racial identity by denying that racial identity is anything more than a question of “social perception.” But, of course, this solution is accompanied by a problem. If racial identity is no longer understood to have anything to do with “blood,” what are we to imagine that Phipps’s parents were thinking when they thought of themselves and of her as black? If their criteria for racial identity were the same as the state’s criteria, they weren’t thinking that she had some proportion of black blood; according to the court, “purely social and cultural perceptions,” not blood, determine racial identity. But they could not be thinking of her as someone who was *perceived* by them as being black; that is, they could not think that their perception of her as black was what made her black because to think that would be to beg the question why they perceived her as black in the first place. The perception of blackness, in other words, may be enough to make someone black in the eyes of the state, but it isn’t enough to explain what blackness is. (And, of course, her behavior couldn’t do this either since, as a newborn, she presumably didn’t talk in an imaginably black dialect or exhibit any of the forms of behavior that might conceivably be associated with the cultural behavior of blacks.) What, then, is the perception of blackness a perception of?

The standard interpretation of this case is, as we have seen, that it restored the one-drop rule; since everybody agreed that Phipps did have *some* black ancestry, she counted as black. But, despite this ancestry, if her parents had perceived themselves and her as white, she would—even acknowledging this very small proportion of black blood—have counted as white. Louisiana law, in other words, as articulated by the majority in this decision, insists on the “subjective nature of racial perceptions” and takes no account of the ancestry. Perhaps one could argue that Louisiana doesn’t go far enough in discounting ancestry; after all, why should her *parents’* perception of her racial identity be determining? Gordon and Newfield point out that “the Indian Reorganization Act of 1972 appeared to abandon the ‘blood quantum’ standard of Indian identity in favor of ‘self-identification,’ only to be evaded by the Reagan Administration’s attempt to ‘enforce degree-of-blood requirements’” (p. 746 n. 12). Maybe the injustice in the Phipps case is that the wrong social perceptions were enforced; Phipps should be white because even though her parents perceived themselves and her as black, she perceived herself as white. It is, as Omi and Winant say, her “racial self-awareness” that should be respected. But, of course, this doesn’t solve the problem posed by the parental perception of her as black; it just relocates it: what’s her perception

of whiteness a perception of?¹⁵ When Phipps looks back on the little baby that her parents perceived as black, what makes her perceive it as white?

The truth is that Louisiana law, acknowledging no biological basis for the determination of racial identity and therefore refusing to establish a biological standard for the law, has decided instead to establish not biology but people's mistaken accounts of biology as the legal standard. In other words, the fact that Phipps had at least one black ancestor could not make her black under the law, but the fact that her one black ancestor made her parents perceive her as black *did* make her black under the law. The biological determination that the state itself regards as "scientifically unsupportable" nonetheless counts as determining as long as the determination isn't made by the state. Refusing itself to apply the one-drop rule, the state chose instead to enforce Phipps's parents' application of the one-drop rule. What it means, then, to accept the idea of racial identity as a function of "purely social and cultural perceptions" instead of as biology is to accept the idea of racial identity as the codification of people's mistakes *about* biology. In a way, then, Davis is right to assert that some version of the one-drop rule is being enforced under current Louisiana law, but what is being enforced is not the claim that one drop of black blood makes a person black; what's being enforced is the claim that the *perception* that one drop of black blood makes a person black makes a person black. Everything the court says, as Gordon and Newfield might put it, leads away from race and "toward some conjuncture like historical socioculture." And everything in "historical socioculture" leads right back to race.

According to Louisiana law, Phipps was passing, pretending to be white when she was, in fact, black. Both the law and the very idea of passing require that there be some fact of racial identity, a requirement that was easily met as long as there could be some appeal to science but that the repudiation of scientific racism has made more difficult. The requisite fact must now be social or cultural rather than biological. Thus, in a recent and powerfully written essay called "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Adrian Piper denies that there is any "set of shared physical characteristics" that "joins" her "to other blacks" because, she says, "there is none that all blacks share."¹⁶ What makes blacks black is rather "the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification" ("PW," pp. 30–31). This is the Louisiana standard: if you're per-

15. The problem with self-identification from the standpoint of racial essentialism is that you can't trust people to tell the truth; the problem with self-identification from the standpoint of racial *anti*essentialism is that you have no idea what criteria might help you to determine the truth and so no reason to believe that there is any truth.

16. Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition*, no. 58 (1992):30; hereafter abbreviated "PW."

ceived as black, you are black. But Piper's account of her own experience makes the incoherence of this standard even more obvious than it is in the Phipps case. For Piper describes herself as so light skinned that she is constantly (both by people whom she identifies as black and by people whom she identifies as white) being treated as if she were white. She is thus made to feel that she is passing for white, and since passing for white seems to her "a really, authentically shameful thing to do" ("PW," p. 10), she is led into strenuous efforts to identify herself as black. (The irony that produces her title is that these efforts lead her to be accused—again by both whites and blacks—of passing for black.) But what consequences must these efforts have for her nonbiological definition of racial identity? The point of that definition is that being black means being identified by a white racist society as black. On what grounds, then, can someone who is *not* identified by that society as black be said to be black?

Piper makes this dilemma even clearer by going on to remark that she has "white friends who fit the prevailing stereotype of a black person" and thus have "experiences" "similar" to the ones that make blacks black ("PW," p. 31). If they really do have such experiences, what can she mean by calling these friends "white"? That they can be white even if they are treated as black; that she can be black even if she is treated as white—these facts are tributes to, not critiques of, racial essentialism. The very idea of passing—whether it takes the form of looking like you belong to a different race or of acting like you belong to a different race—requires an understanding of race as something separate from the way you look and the way you act. If race really were nothing but culture, that is, if race really were nothing but a distinctive array of beliefs and practices, then, of course, there could be no passing, since to believe and practice what the members of any race believed and practiced would, by definition, make you a member of that race. If race really were culture, people could change their racial identity, siblings could belong to different races, people who were as genetically unlike each other as it's possible for two humans to be could nonetheless belong to the same race. None of these things is possible in the U.S. today. And, were they to become possible, we would think not that we had finally succeeded in developing an antiesentialist account of race but that we had given up the idea of race altogether.

On rehearing, the Louisiana court took the opportunity to remind the appellants that we can't afford to give up the idea of race, that the accumulation of "racial data" is "essential" for "planning and monitoring public health programs, affirmative action and other anti-discrimination measures" (*JD*, p. 374). Or, as Gordon and Newfield put it, race "is one of the most important principles by which U.S. social relations are organized" (p. 740). My point in this response has not been simply to argue that these claims are wrong for, at least in one sense, they are obviously right: U.S. social relations have been and continue to be organized in

part by race. My point has been to assert that this organization is the consequence of a mistake, and that antiessentialist defenses of race amount to nothing more than new ways of making the mistake. As absurd as the one-drop rule of Jim Crow is, the no-drop rule of antiessentialism is even more absurd. Omi and Winant cite two “temptations” that they believe must be resisted in thinking about race: the first is the temptation “to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete and objective”; the second is “to see it as a mere illusion” (*RF*, p. 68).¹⁷ Their point, of course, is that in seeing race as a social construction we can avoid both temptations. But if, as I have argued, to see race as a social construction is inevitably (even if unwillingly and unknowingly) to essentialize it, then race really is either an essence or an illusion. The two “temptations” are the only choices we have.

17. From the standpoint of antiessentialism, in other words, what’s wrong with the idea of race is that it’s essentially essentialist or, to put the point a little more precisely, what’s wrong with it is that there can be no coherent antiessentialist account of race. It may be worth wondering, however, why this should count as a problem. Those who believe that individual racial identity is a biological reality don’t need an antiessential account of race; those who don’t believe individual racial identity is a biological reality don’t need one either, unless, of course, their commitment to the category of race is so complete that they understand themselves to be required to maintain it at all costs. And this does seem to be the point of the whole debate over racial essentialism, the point, that is, of insisting that the problem with the biology of individual racial identity is that it’s *essentialist* rather than *false*. Transforming the question of whether or not there is such a thing as individual racial identity into the question of whether or not race is an “essence” and thus deploying race as the grounds of the question rather than as its object, this debate reinvigorates and relegitimizes race as a category of analysis. If, then, racial antiessentialism is a mistake, it is, at least, a mistake with a purpose, and if race is, as Gordon and Newfield say, “one of the most important principles by which U.S. social relations are organized,” then racial antiessentialism turns out to be one of the ways in which U.S. intellectuals can make their own modest contributions to the maintenance of that most important principle.