

Race Still Matters

The Reality of African American Lives
and the Myth of Postracial Society

Edited by Yuya Kiuchi

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Reverse Racism

A Discursive History

Tad Suiter

Introduction

In 1975, for the seventh episode of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, the guest host was Richard Pryor. Pryor was the first Black host, the short list of prior hosts having included George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, and Candice Bergen. In perhaps the most memorable sketch of the night, Pryor is interviewed for a job as a janitor. On the other side of the table sat Chevy Chase. There was one last test in the interview, Chase told Pryor: a simple word association exercise. The exam begins simply enough—"Dog" elicits the response "Tree," to "Rain," Pryor responds "Snow," and so on. The interview quickly takes a turn, however:

Chase: Negro.

Pryor: Whitey.

Chase: Tarbaby.

Pryor: [Pryor looks dumbfounded. Surely he misheard.] . . .

What'd you say?

Chase: Tarbaby.

Pryor: Ofay.

Chase: Colored.

Pryor: [Increasingly angry.] Redneck.

Chase: Junglebunny.

Pryor: Peckerwood!

Chase: Burrhead.

Pryor: *Cracker!*

Chase: Spearchucker.

Pryor: *White trash!*

Chase: *Jungle Bunny!*

Pryor: *Honky!*

Chase: *Spade.*

Pryor: *Honky!*

1 Chase: Nigger.

2 Pryor: [Immediately.] Dead *honky!*

3
4 By the end of this interaction, Pryor is visibly livid, his face twitching.
5 Chase's character, on the other hand, quickly ends the word associa-
6 tion. He attempts to dial back, offering Pryor a job, but Pryor is just too
7 angry, shouting, "Your mama!" at the offer. Finally, Chase sputters out,
8 "\$15,000, Mr. Wilson. You'll be the highest-paid janitor in America. Just,
9 don't . . . don't hurt me, please. . . ." Pryor, still angry, nods. "Okay."¹

10 In some ways, this sketch gives lie to the very notion of "reverse
11 racism." Chase's character represents a systemic impediment to Pryor's
12 employment. Pryor's anger is reactive, his rage coming not necessarily
13 from any prior prejudice, but to the racism of the word association
14 test. One might imagine Chase's character's fear at the end of the
15 sketch being attributed to Pryor's "reverse racism"—after all, he was
16 just doing his job, administering the word-association test. Pryor is
17 the one that took it badly, made it personal—Pryor is the one who had
18 an emotional, negative reaction. But that argument would only hold
19 water if we accepted the notion that he was completely oblivious to the
20 (comically exaggerated) racism represented by the test. Moreover, such
21 a reading would draw a false moral equivalence between the insults,
22 one that is divorced from any historical reading. Pryor grows more
23 and more angry as Chase slowly ups the level of racism. In perhaps the
24 funniest moment of the sketch, Pryor simply runs out of words: the
25 only response he has to "Spade" is "Honkey honkey!" There are only
26 so many terms of contempt for white people, the sketch suggests, and
27 these are fewer and far less loaded than the terms of contempt white
28 people use for Blacks.

29 One might hope that the racial politics of America today are more
30 advanced, more evolved than those of a late-night comedy show over
31 thirty years ago. But unfortunately, there are signs that the opposite
32 may be true. In 2013, during the murder trial of George Zimmerman
33 for the shooting of the unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin, CNN aired
34 a special on "The N-Word," where at one point, the chyron underneath
35 the panel of discussants read "N-WORD VS 'CRACKER': WHICH IS
36 WORSE?"² It should go without saying that it is a sad day when this
37 question even needs to be asked.³

38 In the years since the late seventies, the dialogue on race in America
39 has fallen victim to a pernicious myth of "reverse racism." It is often
40 deployed as a term to silence or derail discussions of racism, or as a
41 "dog-whistle" term, by which one can communicate discomfort with
42

other races gaining any sort of advantage not likewise afforded to whites, under a veil of “color-blindness.” This chapter aims to elucidate why this phrase is not productive, how it can do real damage to our discussions about race, and why people should stop using the phrase altogether.

This chapter is also strongly informed by the belief that words and phrases have histories, that their meanings shift over time. It is informed by Sam Wineburg’s imperative in “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts” that we must see the concepts represented by a word or phrase “not as transcendent truths soaring above time and place, but as patterns of thought that take root in particular historical moments, develop and grow, and bear traces of their former selves but emerge as new forms with successive generations. . . .”⁴ In other words, it is important to understand the *history* of the idea of “reverse racism,” to look at how it is deployed in discourse over time, rather than to simply accept or reject the term out of hand.

While much history has been written that uses race and racism as integral to the narrative of history, relatively little has been written on the history of “racism”—which is to say, there is still much research to be conducted on how the *term* racism is deployed and understood over the years. Many readers may be surprised at how short the history of “racism” is; according to Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, the phrase began to be widely used first in Europe, in French critiques of German nationalism in the twenties and thirties. The rise of Nazi racial systems, along with a mounting body of science that disproved that ideology, brought more people to speak out against it. Especially after the Second World War, when people were truly confronted with the horrors of Hitler’s “final solution” to what he described as the “Jewish question,” they needed a term to label, and thus distance themselves from, this racial ideology. The term they adopted was *racism*.⁵

Indeed, looking at Readex’s database of Historical African American Newspapers, one sees *racism* gaining far greater currency right around 1938—and people are quick to recognize the similarities of European racism abroad and American racism at home: a column in the *Kansas City Plaindealer* from 1938 quotes the (white) Catholic priest, Father John LaFarge, as saying, “European Racism brings to its American congener a new and glittering apparatus—in reality much of it the same old machinery furbished up and nickled over—to place at our disposal. But American anti-Negro Racism is not just a poor relative. It offers its virulent European cousin an ideological, not just a pragmatic, foothold on this side of the Atlantic. . . .”⁶ *Racism* may have been borrowed from

1 the French *racisme* to describe a European ideology, but it quickly took
 2 hold in America to describe both European racism and its American
 3 analog—a phenomenon that had been described previously with terms
 4 such as *prejudice* and *race hatred*—because the phenomena were so
 5 inherently similar.

6 In order to look at the history of the phrase *reverse racism*, it is
 7 necessary to start with a representative corpus of text to be analyzed.
 8 I decided to focus on mainstream newspapers, as they tend to be a
 9 good indicator of public sentiment, as well as being neither too radical
 10 nor too reactionary—newspapers tend to court the center, even the
 11 ones with some ideological bias. To this end, I gathered articles from
 12 Proquest Historical Newspapers and LexisNexis Academic.⁷ After
 13 eliminating duplicates, false positives generated by optical character
 14 recognition, and articles that do not substantively deal with “reverse
 15 racism,” I was left with a corpus of over 270 articles—not enough to
 16 constitute a good statistical sampling, perhaps, but enough to track
 17 attitudes, issues, and themes over time. I then put them into DEVON-
 18 think Pro, a database program that allowed me to run optical character
 19 recognition to make the articles all searchable, as well as having a
 20 tagging feature that allowed me to code each article according to a
 21 somewhat idiosyncratic and subjective system, in order to be able to
 22 group articles by topic, rhetorical approach, and so on.

23 The first thing one notices, looking at this corpus, is the many
 24 different ways that the term *reverse racism* has been deployed
 25 throughout its short history. One quickly comes to recognize four
 26 distinct phases of how the term was used. Initially, in the early 1960s,
 27 *reverse racism* was used, almost exclusively by Blacks, in discussions of
 28 the problems of group Black identity and issues like bloc voting.⁸ This
 29 meaning persisted, but by the mid- to late 1960s it had become infected
 30 with ideas of Black Power and racial uprisings. By the 1970s, the phrase
 31 had been co-opted by white discussions of affirmative action. Finally,
 32 in the 1980s, *reverse racism* settles into the contemporary meaning,
 33 serving increasingly as a “dog-whistle” term to interpolate white listener’s
 34 frustrations at an imagined decline in white status.

36 Jackie Robinson and Pan-Africanism: 37 Early Examples of “Reverse Racism”

38 One of the things that inspired this essay was the discovery that one
 39 of the earliest people to use the phrase *reverse racism* in the main-
 40 stream press—and certainly the first person to use the phrase who was
 41 a household name—was Jackie Robinson, best remembered as the player
 42

who broke the color barrier in modern professional baseball in 1947. It was shocking to see a phrase like *reverse racism* coming out of such a prominent Black figure—it led me to question what the term meant in the context in which Robinson used it, and how that meaning might be different from the meaning typically understood today.

By 1962, Robinson was retired, but was still viewed as an elder statesman of both his race and his sport by journalists. When the New York State Democratic Party nominated the Black Manhattan Borough President Edward Dudley for attorney general, it was the first time a Black candidate had been endorsed for a statewide office by either of the major parties. Likely because of his status as a fellow breaker of color lines, people were interested in Robinson’s opinion on the matter, and perhaps also because of his Republican politics—he had supported Nixon two years earlier.⁹

Robinson came out in favor of white Republican Louis Lefkowitz over Dudley. Quoted in a brief piece in the October 18, 1962 *New York Times*, Robinson asserted that “To vote for a Negro only because he is a Negro would be reverse racism.”¹⁰ Two days later, this argument was expanded in an editorial in the *Chicago Defender*, where he made a fairly nuanced argument about bloc voting by the Black community:

... Do you vote for a Negro for political office simply because he belongs to your race—or do you evaluate his candidacy in terms of his background, experience and qualifications compared with those of his opponent?

... Do you turn your back on a white candidate for re-election who has built a reputation for being one of the most dedicated, militant public servants in the nation and who has steadily batted 1,000 per cent on the civil rights issue? Do you turn your back on him because he is a white man and you are a Negro who would like to see another Negro move up to a high office?

... Our answer to the first question! To vote for a Negro only because he is a Negro would be reverse racism. It would give the lie to all we have believed in and stood for; that the Negro must have equal opportunities in our American society, but no special privilege based only on his color.

Our answer to the second question! Personally, we could not turn our back on a crusading, sincere man like Louis Lefkowitz who has fought valiantly for human rights and social justice for many years; who has broken down barrier after barrier in business, sports, labor, and every other conceivable area. We could not say, in good conscience, that we

1 must desert this man with his sterling record—because his opponent is a
 2 Negro. This would be unjust, racially bigoted—and in light of his proven
 3 and demonstrated conscientiousness and competence—impractical.¹¹

4 While Robinson’s language here might seem to mirror contemporary
 5 discourse around “reverse racism,” especially the part about how “the
 6 Negro must have equal opportunities in our American society, but no
 7 special privilege based only on his color,” he is actually looking to a
 8 deeper issue, about Black identity and the role of skin color in electoral
 9 politics. Robinson is discussing whether or not black skin is enough to
 10 warrant support of a candidate, while backing off from a condemnation
 11 of bloc voting in general. To Robinson, Lefkowitz represents an experi-
 12 enced candidate who, despite his race, has been an important supporter
 13 of civil rights and other causes important to the Black voters. He later
 14 expresses concern that Dudley might be too beholden to the New York
 15 Democratic machine, which had passed over fifteen opportunities to
 16 name a Black candidate to a judgeship in the last year.

17 Robinson questions which candidate the Black community should
 18 support but not the right of the Black community to vote as a bloc—
 19 which is perhaps best illustrated by the offense he takes at Dudley’s use
 20 of class to try to detract from Robinson’s endorsement of Lefkowitz:
 21

22 We think the Borough President is a fine man and a high class person.
 23 We were saddened to note that he is quoted in a recent newspaper
 24 interview as commenting that “all Negroes who make \$50,000 a year
 25 and own homes in Connecticut with swimming pools, should vote
 26 Republican.”

27 Mr. Dudley has never been to our home, seen our paycheck nor
 28 taken a dip in a swimming pool which we do not own. Nevertheless,
 29 there is no question in our mind as to whether he was talking about
 30 us.

31 To assume that we have no right to be interested in the election in
 32 New York because we live in Connecticut, is to assume we were wrong
 33 to accept Dr. Martin Luther King’s invitation to come to Birmingham
 34 to address the SCLC Convention or to go to Albany, Ga., to help cut
 35 with voter registration and then become involved in aiding in the
 36 rebuilding of bombed Negro churches.¹²
 37

38 Dudley seems to have rejected the authority of Robinson’s endorse-
 39 ment based on geography—Robinson does not live in New York—and
 40 on class—Robinson is wealthy, and more likely to support the Repub-
 41 licans on those grounds. He has framed the issues of the election in
 42 such a way that Robinson is excluded. Robinson rejects such exclusion,

however, and presents his bona fides as a member of—and as an activist within—the Black community. Race trumps class, in other words, in Robinson’s assessment. Suggesting otherwise, to Robinson, is a disingenuous distraction from the fact that some Black voters may not be sold on Dudley.

While some Blacks agreed with Jackie Robinson that bloc voting for Black candidates constituted “reverse racism,” others disagreed. *Defender* columnist Lillian Calhoun rejected this description in a 1965 article:

A friend chided us for implying Negroes should vote as Negroes in reporting that Republican Bill Robinson lost by almost 17,000 votes in the 2nd ward. Reverse racism, she called it. Maybe so, if Negroes were well represented in all councils of government, had a fair share of industry, top jobs, etc. But, as another friend said, politics is the Negro’s only weapon. We have little money in a nation of great wealth; few positions of influence in the local or national power structure. All we have is that vote—and we ought to cast it with some intelligence. Does anybody think, leaving race aside, that Vince Garrity, a charming radio personality, will be a better sanitary trustee than Robinson would have been?¹³

Calhoun’s belief that “Negroes should vote as Negroes” comes from a belief in a need for Black voices in politics. The election for the Sanitary Trust position in the Second Ward that year pitted a white Democrat with little experience—though he did have the advantages of minor celebrity and being part of a very efficient Democratic machine—against a Black Republican who had been executive secretary of the Second Ward Organization for twelve years. Robinson had also served as supervisor of precinct captains for the ward, and had run for Alderman in 1963.¹⁴ Chicago’s Second Ward at the time was shifting demographically: forces of gentrification and urban renewal were forcing out some of the poor and working-class Black families that had previously made up the majority of residents.¹⁵ If it was important to have Black faces in government representing the Black community—and Calhoun clearly believed it was—and whites were voting as a bloc for white candidates, then it becomes an imperative for the Black community to vote as a bloc as well, rather than splitting the vote, which would mean a win for the white candidate every time.

In both of these examples, the key question of “reverse racism” is whether Blacks engaging in a politics that is in part driven by skin color affinity—for Blacks to vote *as Blacks for Blacks*—reproduces in some way

1 an endemic white racism. Bloc voting for Black candidates was not the
 2 only issue that brought up the question of “reverse racism” within the
 3 Black community in the early 1960s, however. More broadly, the entire
 4 formation around the phrase at this time seems to be ultimately a ques-
 5 tion of racially defined coalitions in general—whether there was a place
 6 for Black identity within a civil rights movement that was struggling for
 7 increasing integration.

8 An instructive example of how this notion of “reverse racism” was
 9 produced around questions of Black solidarity and Black affinity can
 10 be found in a 1962 article by Joseph C. Kennedy in the *New York Times*.
 11 Kennedy, a social psychologist by training, spent a year in the West
 12 African nations of Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia, studying attitudes
 13 and social mores. Kennedy, a Black American himself, noted that less
 14 -educated West Africans would describe him as “white” or “European.”
 15 Not having been indoctrinated into the complexities of American
 16 racial politics, he was a racial Other, despite his skin color. While this
 17 “skin-color confusion,” as Kennedy describes it, is fascinating in its
 18 implications for the social construction of race, Kennedy is more taken
 19 with how he is received by more educated Africans: as an “American
 20 Negro,” he was a “brother”:

21
 22 Within the secondary schools this bond of warmth was quite evident.
 23 On numerous occasions, after interviewing, I would address the
 24 student body. Often the headmaster would introduce me by saying,
 25 “He is an American Negro; do you know what that means?” The
 26 students would reply, “His parents came from Africa; he is one of
 27 us.”¹⁶

28
 29 Kennedy notes that these more educated Africans were often very
 30 excited to meet an “American Negro,” and had many questions about
 31 the status of Blacks in America, as well as about why more Blacks did
 32 not come back to Africa to teach and engage in aid. Toward the end
 33 of the article, Kennedy brings up the question of “reverse racism” in
 34 order to reject it:

35
 36 . . . This relationship, as with all relationships among people, is
 37 learned—born of the knowledge of the common suffering of all black
 38 men who originated in Africa. It is this knowledge which creates the
 39 skin-color affinity and bond of warmth that draws the African and
 40 the American Negro together.

41 That this skin-color affinity exists should not be confused with
 42

“reverse racism.” It is not, for the white visitor is treated well in Africa also. Nor should it be thought that a special relationship based on skin-color identity is a desirable and final one. Someday the color of a man’s skin will not matter.¹⁷

Kennedy’s language here is telling. He is loath to naturalize or essentialize the relationship between the two groups, preferring to historicize it as between a common past of exploitation and suffering and a triumphalist future where race will not be a factor. Nonetheless, there is a link, a deep one, and acknowledging this link is not to admit to a “reverse racism”—Africans are not racist against whites, whites will receive good treatment in Africa as well.

They will simply not have the special connection to African elites that an “American Negro” would. It is also worth noting that Kennedy’s rhetoric is careful not to reject the notion of “reverse racism” wholesale. He is simply asserting that racial common-feeling between Blacks in Africa and America is not rooted in reverse racism. Affinity and coalition around skin color are based on historic factors, to Kennedy, and are therefore not problematic. Ultimately, the history of racism will be overcome—the movement will be successful—and in that future, such affinities will no longer be important. In 1962, however, Kennedy clearly felt this day was still quite distant.

Black Power and Racial Uprisings: The Shifting Meaning of “Reverse Racism”

In 1965 and 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized “Black Panther” tickets of all-Black candidates for the 1966 midterm elections in several majority-Black Alabama counties. This effort—in many ways the beginning of the mainstreaming of the Black Power Movement—would later be recounted by SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael in a chapter of his 1967 classic *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*.¹⁸ To a modern reader, the core message of the Black Power according to SNCC might not seem quite as revolutionary or problematic as it once did: Carmichael described it as “. . . a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community . . . black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea . . . that black people are able to do things themselves.”¹⁹

But this campaign was deeply controversial within the civil rights movement. A *Chicago Defender* article published on April 25, 1966,

1 quoted Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Confer-
 2 ence (SCLC), the civil rights organization headed by Martin Luther King
 3 Jr., speaking out against this approach in no uncertain terms:

4
 5 The move was called “reverse racism” by Hosea Williams, Southern
 6 program director for King’s Southern Christian Leadership conference.

7 He described the effort to exclude all whites from public office as
 8 being as bad as the ancient Dixie custom of doing the same thing to
 9 all Negroes. It isn’t integration, he indicated and it isn’t likely—in the
 10 long run—to help cure the nation’s number one headache.

11 Williams said Dr. King had tried to talk SNCC out of following its
 12 “all-Negro” campaign in the forthcoming May 3 primary election—but
 13 without success.²⁰

14
 15 While previous discussions or debates around the notion of “reverse
 16 racism” could take on an almost academic tone, Williams’s evocation
 17 of the phrase seemed graver—it represented a perceived threat to the
 18 very heart of the movement. In July of that year, this concern was voiced
 19 by Dr. King himself, saying that he was concerned that the civil rights
 20 movement was “very, very close” to a split over the issue of Black Power:

21
 22 My problem with SNCC . . . is not their militancy—I think you can be
 23 militantly nonviolent. It’s what I see as a pattern of violence emerging
 24 and their use of the cry, “black power,” which, whether they mean it
 25 or not, falls on the ear as racism in reverse.

26 But I try to understand . . . The Negro is in dire need of a sense of
 27 dignity and a sense of pride, and I think black power is an attempt
 28 to develop pride. And there’s no doubt about the need for power—he
 29 can’t get into the mainstream of society without it.

30 But the use of the phrase black power gives the feeling that
 31 Negroes can go it alone and that he doesn’t need anybody but himself.
 32 We have to keep remembering that we are only 10 or 11 per cent of
 33 the population.²¹

34
 35 In one sense, the definition of *reverse racism* had not changed too much:
 36 it still was being used to discuss the appropriateness of building coalitions
 37 of racial affinity while the civil rights movement was seeking
 38 integration, equality, and to overcome racial difference. The pitch and
 39 timbre of the discussion, however, had shifted dramatically. Rather than
 40 a debate within the Black community about the relative merits of this
 41 or that decision, this was something with the potential to rend or even
 42 end the civil rights movement.

This is not to imply that King was necessarily overreacting or playing politics simply because SNCC was advocating for a different sort of change. There was a real worry that events like the Watts Uprising in August 1965 were directly related to rhetoric like that of Black Power advocate Malcolm X in February of the same year, stating that “We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.”²² And indeed, the Watts uprising was but the first in a long series of riots and uprisings within Black communities in the late 1960s. While it would be hyperbolic in the extreme to argue that the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement was directly responsible for the racial uprisings of the era, it is also undeniable that it was a step away from the practiced, disciplined nonviolence advocated by the SCLC, and it is understandable why such a move might be divisive or worrisome. King’s interview, coincidentally, took place a matter of days before a week of rioting broke out in Cleveland’s Hough neighborhood.²³

The tone of discussions of “reverse racism” had shifted in 1966, as discussion evoking the phrase came to center around a nexus of race riots, Black Power, and antiwhite racial antipathy within the Black community, a pattern that lasted into the early 1970s. The NAACP’s Clarence Mitchell gave speeches against “reverse racism” and divisiveness in the civil rights movement.²⁴ The Urban League’s Whitney Young said that “The overwhelming majority of black people . . . welcome whites who want to work with the black community, and they aren’t letting legitimate racial pride and militancy be perverted into a reverse racism.”²⁵ Charles Evers, brother of Medgar Evers, counseled against reverse racism in a 1971 speech: “We’ve had enough of racism. We’ve had enough of hatred. We’ve had enough of fighting. We must get along together. I don’t believe in destroying black people and I don’t believe in destroying white people. . . . Black folk, with all they have done to us, let’s not hate. . . . If we become the haters they have been we are just as wrong.”²⁶

Perhaps most importantly, whites started talking about “reverse racism.” What had previously been an in-group conversation took on new weight coming from the outside. Senator Jacob Javits, a liberal Republican with a strong record on civil rights, addressed an audience in Harlem in 1966 where he urged the community to reject the “reverse racism and the iconoclastic demagoguery” of Black Power leaders. Javits claimed that the white community was “frightened” by growing militancy, and that this fear created a “white backlash” that led to the move

1 against the Civil Rights Bill of 1966: “I think many of you would agree
2 with me . . . that it was the sudden violence, the call to reverse racism
3 and the iconoclastic demagoguery of a few which have threatened and
4 frightened the white community almost to the point where right and
5 reason became secondary to visions about self-preservation.”²⁷

6 From a white perspective, the line between the Black Power Move-
7 ment and the pacifistic multiracial coalition of Martin Luther King
8 could be hazy, and almost seem to disappear. Covering the debate over
9 the above-mentioned Civil Rights Bill, the *Chicago Defender* reported
10 on “an angry, shouting speech that drew applause, [where] Rep. John B
11 Anderson, R-Ill., denounced all violence, including the ‘reverse racism’
12 of black power and Dr. King’s ‘horrible’ call . . . for urban Negroes to
13 take up civil disobedience on a massive scale.”²⁸ This is a particularly
14 good example of how the race of the speaker can inflect the use of a
15 term, even when the issues at stake—“reverse racism,” Black Power,
16 racial uprisings—are the same. Over the late sixties and early seventies,
17 there are more and more uses of “reverse racism” by white reporters as
18 unsourced allegations against Black militants and those who subscribe
19 to the ethos of Black Power. The term *reverse racism*, in other words,
20 becomes part of the white lexicon of race at this time. And as we will
21 see, the more widely adopted the term is by whites, the less frequently
22 it comes to be used by Blacks.

23 24 **Education and Jobs: “Reverse Racism” in the 1970s**

25 From around 1972 onward there are almost no examples of Blacks using
26 the term *reverse racism*, except to dispel claims made by others. There
27 are exceptions, of course, such as the conservative political commen-
28 tator Armstrong Williams or Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas,²⁹
29 and as I will discuss later, it is not irrelevant that these few Blacks
30 who still do engage with the term are conservative Republicans. But
31 if Black Americans were shying away from the phrase, more and more
32 whites were using it. The period between 1971 and 1978 is the period
33 of the highest use of the term yet, and the primary issues addressed
34 were centered on affirmative action policies in hiring and education.
35 It is reductive to assign a single specific reason for the movement of
36 the majority of Black Americans from the phrase *reverse racism*. But I
37 would suggest that three primary factors seem to be at work: the main-
38 streaming of Black Power discourse, a related shift toward a definition
39 of racism centered on institutional and systemic racism, and finally, the
40 fact that what had been a discussion from within the Black community
41 had become an accusation leveled against Blacks by whites.
42

While it had been divisive in the late sixties, Black Power rhetoric had come to be more accepted, and many within the mainstream civil rights movement were incorporating elements of Black Power discourse. In the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, leaders like Black Panther Huey Newton and "Black Power pluralist" Shirley Chisholm came to represent a new generation of Black leadership. Hosea Williams, the SCLC representative who in 1966 had described SNCC's endorsement of an all-Black ticket as "reverse racism" and "ridiculous," had come around to accepting the Black Power Movement by 1970, and inviting them into the SCLC fold. At a five-day "March against Repression" that year, Williams was quoted as saying:

Black power has nothing to do with violence . . . Black power is when black people respect themselves. Black Power is when black men stop allowing themselves to be duped into filling the jailhouses while white men fill the colleges . . . Black power . . . is when we refuse to fight thousands of miles away from home for freedoms over there that we can't enjoy over here. How is America going to sell democracy abroad when she has never bought it herself?³⁰

After a decade of successive civil rights legislation, much progress had been made in the way of eliminating the most onerous forms of de jure discrimination. However, America was still a nation with a strong racial hierarchy, and there were deep institutional problems that still needed to be addressed. Black Power rhetoric presented a powerful tool with which to theorize, explain, and attack these inequalities. In *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton, drawing on the postcolonial theory of Franz Fanon and others, describe racism as "the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of *subordinating* a racial group and maintaining control over that group," specifically—in America—the subordination by whites of Blacks and other minorities. They outline two kinds of racism: individual and institutional. Individual racism is understood as overt acts by individuals who are products of racial animus. Institutional racism, on the other hand, "relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-Black attitudes and practices." While Civil Rights Legislation had done much to limit certain forms of overt, individual racism, it could do little against the institutional racism that still pervaded the United States.³¹

It is worth noting that this observation was not necessarily anything new. As far back as Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, which describes the "Negro problem" as a "complex" of different problems, Black intellectuals have wrestled with issues of the various forms that racism can

1 take, and the complexities of institutional racism.⁵² However, as many
2 of the key issues facing the Black community by 1970 were these issues
3 of institutional racism, the popular definition of racism within the Black
4 community can be seen to shift at this time to a definition that brings
5 institutional and systemic problems to the fore.

6 Finally, where discussion of “reverse racism” had started *within* the
7 Black community, it had, by this time, become a charge leveled *at* the
8 Black community, from a position of power: from white folks. And it
9 was being used to make accusations of unfairness against Affirmative
10 Action programs that were key to Black advancement toward parity in
11 employment and education. A good illustration of this can be seen in
12 the case of white aspiring medical student Allan Bakke.

13 In 1969, the University of California Medical School at Davis began a
14 special admissions program for minority students. Before this program
15 was put in place, less than 1 percent of UC-Davis Medical Students
16 were racial minorities, despite California’s minority population making
17 up around a quarter of the population at the time. Sixteen out of a
18 hundred admissions were, under this program, set aside for minority
19 students. Under this program and others like it, Black representation
20 in medical schools had risen from 2.7 percent in 1968 to 7.5 percent
21 by 1974. This was considered especially important to the Black and
22 minority population, as minority doctors were considered more likely
23 to return to their communities and practice—more Black doctors meant
24 a healthier Black community. In 1973 and 1974, Bakke applied to UC
25 Davis and was rejected. He was also rejected from ten other schools.
26 Nevertheless, when he learned that some “less-qualified” students had
27 been admitted into those sixteen set-aside slots, he decided to sue the
28 school. The school then countersued, requesting a finding on such race-
29 based admissions programs.⁵³

30 A similar case had come up recently, when Marco DeFunis sued
31 the University of Washington Law School for discrimination when he
32 was not admitted to that program. However, that case was eventually
33 thrown out of court as moot, as DeFunis was actually admitted on
34 appeal.⁵⁴ UC Davis, on the other hand, was looking for a test case.
35 And while the court of law found that affirmative action programs
36 of this sort were legal, in the court of white public opinion, many
37 were incensed. A letter to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune* wrote,
38 “In 30 short years the civil rights movement has come from opposing
39 segregation and discrimination to supporting reverse racism.
40 People who champion real equality will support Allan Bakke and
41 his crusade against ever increasing reverse discrimination in this
42

nation.”³⁵ Republican commentator and former Nixon speechwriter Pat Buchanan warned that cases such as this and affirmative action programs in general would turn working-class white voters “To the only politician they ever felt really had their interest at heart. To George C. Wallace. His success was always the most precise measure of the failure of the major parties to heed the voice of the forgotten man.”³⁶

Buchanan’s former position as a Nixon speechwriter was not coincidental, neither was his evocation of George Wallace, best known for his call for “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Nixon ran on a “law and order” platform in 1968 that was designed, in part, to appeal to Southern white voters who would have earlier voted for a Democrat—by appealing to white fears around racial uprisings, Nixon could speak to these voters without being overt. In 1968, higher taxes and inflation caused by the war in Vietnam had caused the economy to begin to slow down—a prelude to the “stagflation” (little to no job growth combined with inflation) that would be endemic in the 1970s. The poor—especially the Black poor, who had most benefited from the wealth redistribution under Johnson’s “Great Society” programs—were a natural scapegoat, and Nixon courted that anger. Nixon did this by conflating race and disorder.³⁷ With an eye to his reelection in 1972, Nixon had actually sent Postmaster General Winton Blount to meet with the segregationist Wallace, encouraging him to make an unsuccessful gubernatorial bid in 1970, and freeing up the segregationist South for himself in the 1972 presidential election.³⁸

In this context, and in light of Buchanan’s career generally, it becomes clear that by “the voice of the forgotten man,” Buchanan was actually evoking a “forgotten” white privilege. And other press mentions of “reverse racism” seem to confirm this connection: reverse racism is used strategically in opposition to topics as disparate as desegregation busing programs,³⁹ to a hiring program for Black police officers in Virginia,⁴⁰ to hires of women and minorities at NASA.⁴¹ In each case, the authors are defending white privilege. It may seem valid, superficially—ideally, nondiscrimination should mean that nobody, even whites, are discriminated against. But such an argument makes a false moral equivalency between very different historical situations. As Stanley Fish has argued:

Only if racism is thought of as something that occurs principally in the mind, a falling-away from proper notions of universal equality, can the desire of a victimized and terrorized people to band together

1 be declared morally identical to the actions of their would-be execu-
 2 tioners. Only when the actions of the two groups are detached
 3 from the historical conditions of their emergence and given a purely
 4 abstract description can they be made interchangeable.⁴²

5
 6 That is, to claim that affirmative action represents “reverse racism,”
 7 one must make a claim that the injustice of not getting a particular
 8 job or not getting into a particular school is somehow morally equiv-
 9 alent to the over 350 years of enslavement, brutality, Jim Crow, rape,
 10 and lynching, for which such policies are trying to serve as some sort
 11 of corrective. To claim equivalency shows a deep lack of empathy and
 12 compassion.

13 Nevertheless, the claim is made, and continues to be made.

15 “Reverse Racism” in an Era of Color-Blind Racism

16
 17 The patterns around the use of the phrase *reverse racism* become much
 18 less clear looking during the last thirty-five years or so, even though
 19 it is deployed more than ever before. Rather than being fixed around a
 20 particular nexus of issues, like Black Power and racial uprisings in the
 21 late 1960s, or affirmative action in the 1970s, the term has taken on
 22 a sort of a catchall meaning. It is used at various times in regard to a
 23 host of different topics. This is because the term has been unmoored
 24 from any real fixed meaning, and instead has come to be deployed as
 25 a “dog whistle” used to interpolate a white audience dissatisfied with
 26 the changing relationship status quo.

27 Discussing how Ronald Reagan adopted and adapted Nixon’s
 28 Southern Strategy in 1980, Lee Atwater, in a moment of what can only
 29 be described as audacious honesty, explained Reagan’s approach thusly:

30
 31 Atwater: As to the whole Southern strategy that Harry S. Dent,
 32 Sr. and others put together in 1968, opposition to the Voting
 33 Rights Act would have been a central part of keeping the South.
 34 Now [the new Southern Strategy of Ronald Reagan] doesn’t
 35 have to do that. All you have to do to keep the South is for
 36 Reagan to run in place on the issues he’s campaigned on since
 37 1964 and that’s fiscal conservatism, balancing the budget, cut
 38 taxes, you know, the whole cluster.

39 Questioner: But the fact is, isn’t it, that Reagan does get to
 40 the Wallace voter and to the racist side of the Wallace voter
 41 by doing away with legal services, by cutting down on food
 42 stamps?

Atwater: You start out in 1954 by saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger”—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now [that] you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, “We want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.”⁴³

The Republican Party, and the American right general, has come to count on the votes of a certain racist contingent that it cannot directly call out to for fear of retribution or perceived racism on the part of the party as a whole. For this reason, it has adopted a series of these “dog-whistle” terms that have become increasingly more and more abstract over the years—in Atwater’s example, from “nigger” to “bussing” or “state’s rights” to “fiscal conservatism.” In so doing, they have found a way to continue to court a key demographic, especially in the South and among the rural working class, without being perceived as overtly racist. Reagan talked about cutting welfare or entitlement programs, and this audience understood that he was talking about Blacks, even though many whites benefit from such programs. This is not in any way to imply that all Republicans are racist. However, racism plays to a certain contingent within the Republican base, a somewhat tenuous coalition of moral conservatives, neoliberals, and rural, working-class whites. By interpolating racial feeling among a certain segment of the white population, without seeming so overtly racist as to alienate others within this coalition, they have managed to win five out of nine presidential elections since 1979, all but two presidencies in that time.

It is worth pointing out here that, while it is often deployed strategically by conservatives, the discourse of “reverse racism” is by no means limited to Republicans. The phrase is invoked by whites of every political affiliation, privately and publicly. Bill Clinton certainly evoked the spirit of the phrase, if not the exact wording, with what has come to be known as his “Sister Souljah moment.” The hip-hop artist Sister Souljah, in response to the Los Angeles Uprisings, had been quoted as saying,

1 I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a
 2 week and kill white people? . . . White people, this Government and
 3 that Mayor were well aware of the fact that black people were dying
 4 every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. So if you're a gang
 5 member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill
 6 a white person?⁴⁴

7
 8 Sister Souljah spoke to Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, who then
 9 hosted Clinton the following night. Clinton spoke out against Souljah,
 10 angering Jackson and many others in the room. Roger Wilkins summed
 11 up the backlash quite well:

12
 13 I do not defend Sister Souljah's comments . . . It is wrong for anyone
 14 to justify violence. But Clinton didn't know what had gone on at that
 15 Rainbow meeting. And he didn't ask Jesse Jackson, didn't give him
 16 any warning of what he was going to do.

17 At the panel the night before, Jackson stood up to Sister Souljah,
 18 insisting that you can and must work within the system. And she
 19 finally agreed with him . . .

20 In that context Clinton's speech was arrogant, and it was cheap. He
 21 came there to show suburban whites that he can stand up to blacks.
 22 It was contrived.⁴⁵

23
 24 The myth of "reverse racism" is potent, and it can be quite an effective
 25 dog-whistle. But given the Democratic Party's reliance on the
 26 Black vote since the civil rights era, it is a dog whistle that is often
 27 best avoided by Democrats, where Republicans can use it with relative
 28 impunity. Despite this, it is deeply pervasive regardless of political
 29 affiliation.

30 While the phrase *reverse racism* has, in the years between 1980 and
 31 2013, become unmoored from the sorts of topical threads that had
 32 previously defined different uses of the term, it is hardly random: the
 33 phrase comes into the national dialog at times of economic uncertainty.
 34 Just as the stagflation of the 1970s had encouraged whites to scapegoat
 35 poor minorities, hard times economically correlate strongly with inci-
 36 dences of the phrase in the press. The economic doldrums of the George
 37 Herbert Walker Bush administration—a period characterized by wildly
 38 fluctuating stock values, climbing unemployment, and expensive fuel
 39 prices, coincides with a strong spike in use of the phrase.⁴⁶ Likewise,
 40 the phrase has been used more than ever in the years after the global
 41 recession hit in 2008.

If one looks a bit more closely at the present-day situation, one quickly comes to see that the rise in interest in “reverse racism” correlates quite strongly with economic factors and a perceived decrease in the power of white privilege. A 2011 study showed that many white people believe “more progress has been made toward equality than do Blacks, but Whites also now believe that this progress is linked to a new inequality—at their expense”—that is, that racism is essentially a “zero-sum game,” and that racism against whites is on the rise.⁴⁷ It seems likely that this is related to the falling of real income over the last thirty years. From 1973 to 2011, median hourly wages (adjusted for inflation) grew only 10 percent, while worker productivity increased by 80 percent. This has been especially hard on the working class, for whom union membership has declined by approximately 75 percent since the 1960s.⁴⁸ White workers have good reason to feel less stable, more exploited, and poorer in real terms. It makes sense to question what worth supposed white privilege has in such an environment.

But white privilege is still very much a factor: despite all this, a study of 1,700 households shows that the gap in median net worth between white and Black households has almost tripled: from \$85,070 in 1984 to \$236,000 in 2009.⁴⁹ Yet this is lost on many whites. De facto racial segregation, while it has declined in recent years, has done so quite slowly. Meanwhile, income segregation has increased. According to a 2013 report by the Russell Sage Foundation,

... racial segregation coupled with income segregation means that low-income black and Hispanic families will tend to cluster in communities that are disadvantaged along a number of dimensions, such as average educational attainment, family structure, and unemployment. In contrast, low-income white families, although affected by income segregation as well, tend to live in neighborhoods with higher average incomes than even middle-class black and Hispanic families.⁵⁰

Working-class and lower-middle-class white people are hurting financially, and are unlikely to think about their own privilege because they are injured by class and racial segregation from the segment of the population that is struggling far more. If they are in contact with Blacks or Latinos, they are likely to be in contact with only those who are in the same relative economic situation. Black and Latino families, on the other hand, are far more likely to be in contact with families

1 within their own racial or ethnic group who are doing far worse. All
 2 of this creates a situation where working-class whites are distinctly
 3 unaware of their own racial privilege, and likely to be resentful of other
 4 groups they view as being in competition for scarce resources, even if
 5 the perceived scarcity of those resources is completely out of line with
 6 the lived reality for the racially Othered.

7 Many of those who invoke the notion of “reverse racism” would
 8 not even describe themselves as racist. Far from it. Rather, they often
 9 describe themselves as anything but—many evoke the memory of
 10 Martin Luther King, even while saying things that seem rather overtly
 11 racist. The irony of this evocation, made frequently in the articles I
 12 have analyzed from the 1990s and 2000s, should be clear to those who
 13 remember Dr. King being described as a reverse racist himself by John
 14 Anderson in the last year of his life for advocating for further civil
 15 disobedience.

16 Yet it makes sense in a certain context. The most popular quote
 17 brought up in these articles is from the March on Washington for Jobs
 18 and Freedom: “I have a dream that my four little children will one
 19 day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their
 20 skin but by the content of their character.”⁵¹ This quote has become a
 21 rallying cry for people who are decrying the “reverse racism” of Blacks
 22 against whites because the discourse is extremely flexible: the same
 23 logic that Lee Atwater used in describing the Reagan approach to the
 24 Southern Strategy can also be applied here. This sort of neoliberal
 25 abstracted approach to race attempts to place the blame for issues
 26 within minority communities on issues of “content of character”—on
 27 moral failings within the community—rather than “color of skin.” Thus,
 28 even while castigating or even demonizing the black community, they
 29 advocate for equality and a color-blind society.

30 Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva coined the term *color-blind racism*
 31 to describe the ideology by which “most whites maintain a color-
 32 blind sense of self and, at the same time . . . reinforce views that help
 33 reproduce the current racial order.”⁵² Color-blind racism rejects the
 34 argument of biological inferiority of the Jim Crow era for a new, liberal,
 35 market-driven morality:

36
 37 . . . instead of proclaiming God placed minorities in the world in a
 38 servile position, it suggests they are behind because they do not
 39 work hard enough; instead of viewing interracial marriage as wrong
 40 on a straight racial basis, it regards it as “problematic” because of
 41 concerns over the children, location, or the extra burden it places
 42 on couples.⁵³

In this way, whites are able to distance themselves from being called (or having to view themselves as) a “racist”—a term that we have all learned to reject—without having to confront how their attitudes still support and buttress white privilege at the expense of Blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, it is a central tenant of color-blind racism that overt racism is aberrant, a thing of the past, or of minds stuck in the past. Yet one recent study that had students keep diaries of racial events for a semester found that, despite near universal agreement among the students that overt racism was no longer a major issue, their journals indicated that overtly racist incidents happened three times more often than “liberal” or color-blind examples.⁵⁴ While students were likely more able to identify (and more comfortable calling out) instances of overt racism, this is still quite telling. The idea that overt racism is in the past seems to be more a product of ideology than any sort of objective fact. In fact, the belief is often held despite ample factual evidence to the contrary. The notion of color blindness is at best still an aspirational one in America, and should be discussed as such, rather than as a part of an imagined new postracial order.

The myth of “reverse racism” is today very much a part of color-blind racism, and it points to what is perhaps the most dangerous thing about color-blind ideology—the facility with which this rhetoric can lead to sincere self-deception. In order to have a serious, real conversation about racial inequality in America, it is important that all parties, whatever their color, are able to come to the table in a spirit of honest self-appraisal. Race is but one of many factors, including class, gender, and sexuality that form a complex matrix of privilege and oppressions that we all have to live life negotiating. White people may be disenfranchised for many reasons—class, gender, sexual preference, disability—but they are not systemically disenfranchised because of their race. Racial animus toward whites may exist, but it can only be understood by an analysis that situates such antipathy within a context of systemic racism and white supremacy.

Color-blind racism and notions of “reverse racism” are problematic because one can honestly believe oneself to be color blind, or to be victimized by “reverse racism,” even in the face of vast evidence to the contrary. White folks try to be color blind, many in complete sincerity, but in so doing, they obfuscate the reality of racial privilege. And by so doing, these well-meaning people are rendered incapable of having a discussion that takes into account white privilege, and the ways that the decisions and choices they make uphold institutional white supremacy. It is time to do away with the phrase *reverse racism*, as under the phrase’s current formulation, it cannot have any positive or useful

1 meaning. We must all commit ourselves to a notion of radical honesty
 2 about these issues if we want to do something about them. Until we can
 3 do that, without fear of occasionally having our own racism, or other
 4 prejudices, held up for us—there can be no real, meaningful change.

6 Notes

7 1. *Saturday Night Live*, “Richard Pryor/Gil Scott-Heron” (NBC, December
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16 4. Sam Wineburg, “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,” *Phi
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18 5. Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, *Racism: Second Edition*, Key Ideas
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20 6. Floyd J Calvin, “Calvin’s Digest,” *Plaindealer*, December 16, 1938.

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 24 (1849–1987); *Chicago Defender* (1910–1975); *Christian Science Monitor*
 25 (1908–1997); *Los Angeles Times* (1881–1987); *New York Times* (1851–2007);
 26 *Wall Street Journal* (1889–1993); *Washington Post* (1877–1994). Likewise,
 27 LexisNexis Academic includes mostly papers post-1980 from: *New York
 28 Times*, *St. Louis Post–Dispatch*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Pittsburgh Post–Gazette*,
 29 *USA Today*, *Atlanta Journal–Constitution*, *Berkshire Eagle*, *New York Sun*,
 30 *Dayton Daily News*, *Tampa Tribune*, and the *Virginian-Pilot*.

31 8. I am deliberately putting aside two of the earliest uses, which seem
 32 to be anomalous, to try to get to a point where there begins to be a
 33 consensus of meaning around the term. In a February 5, 1950 article in
 34 the *Washington Post*, the term is used to describe the attitudes of a young
 35 wife of a U.S. District Court judge, who seems to be parodied or pilloried
 36 for asserting the cultural superiority of the North while living in the Jim
 37 Crow South. Essentially, this instance describes as “reverse racism” the
 38 defamation of whites living within and benefiting from a culture of racial
 39 apartheid—while there are some similarities to current deployments of
 40 the term, the fact that there are no other instances of the phrase being
 41 used for eight years suggests to me an individual use, rather than a widely
 42 adopted meaning. Likewise, a November 9, 1958 article in the *New York*

Times quotes Philippine Ambassador Carlos Romulo as using the term to describe Asian and Pacific Island countries' poor assessment of U.S. racial policies. Like the 1950 article, this meaning does not seem to be very widely adopted at the time.

9. "Jackie Robinson Tells Why He Favors Nixon: Former Baseball Player Says He Likes Republican for Stand on Civil Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1960.

10. "Jackie Robinson Favors Lefkowitz over Dudley," *New York Times*, October 18, 1962.

11. Jackie Robinson, "N.Y. Demo Choice Poses Race Queries," *Chicago Defender*, October 20, 1962.

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