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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time coming. It has been nearly 30 years since the initial publication of *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986), and 20 years since the appearance of the second edition (1994). Over the years, much has changed and much has remained the same in the overall patterns, structures, discourses, and individual/collective experiences of race and racism in the United States. Legally sanctioned forms of racial discrimination may have receded, but racial inequality and racial injustice have stubbornly persisted. In many ways racism has proliferated, adopted new disguises, and deepened. Continuity and change are also apparent in racial theory: how race and racism are recognized, defined, and narrated keeps changing too. Racial politics, both state-based and experiential, have shifted as new understandings of race and racism are applied in the public sphere and in everyday life. Given the continuing instability of the concept of race and the uncertainty and anxiety about its meaning, a reworking and restatement of the racial formation perspective was long overdue.

But what should be retained from the earlier editions of *Racial Formation*? What ideas required further elaboration, what should be revised, and what updating was needed in order to account for new and emergent issues of racial theory and politics? We deliberated deeply, read widely, and argued passionately with one another about these questions as we prepared this third edition of the book.

*Racial Formation* has been our intellectual “home” for decades. So we initially saw this revision as a “home remodeling” project. Our visions of what we wanted to do initially clashed. Scale was a big issue. One of us saw the project as a modest renovation. Imagining the chapters as rooms, he wanted simply to update each room, freshen the paint, rearrange the furniture, and bring in some new pieces to complement the revised décor. The other author wanted to knock down the walls, change the plumbing and electrical work, install new windows and insulation, and perhaps shore up the foundation.

The final product represents a synthesis of both our desires and plans. Because so much had changed over the two decades since the second edition of *Racial Formation*, a lot more than remodeling was required. The steady journey of the United States towards a majority nonwhite population, the ongoing evisceration of the political legacy of the early post-World War II civil rights movement, the initiation of the “war on terror” with its attendant Islamophobia, the rise of a mass immigrants rights movement, the formulation of race/class/gender “intersectionality” theories, and the election and reelection of a black president of the United States were some of the
many new racial conditions we had to address. While the house of *Racial Formation* was still standing, while its theoretical foundation was still intact, the home was very out-of-date and old-fashioned. The book needed reconstruction, although its basic design remained quite elegant.

In this new edition we have kept the book’s structure intact: it begins with a critique of existing racial theories, proceeds to offer our own new theory, and then applies our theory to recent political developments and prevailing U.S. racial dynamics. While we have maintained the original design of our home, we have radically revised and rewritten each chapter.

We believe that the original book’s core formulations have stood up quite well over the years. But much of its early content has not aged like fine wine. Many of the empirical materials and examples of racial politics referenced in the previous editions are now dated and have been removed. We have tried to provide current empirical reference-points as far as possible, knowing full well that these too will be superseded. Race is unstable, flexible, subject to constant conflict and reinvention. Rather than seeing the present moment—whatever moment that is—as distilling the *longue durée* of racial politics, we in the United States should recognize that we live in history. Especially in this country there is a desire for instant solutions for problems, even for deep-seated conflicts: just add boiling water, just heat and serve. If the bad news about living in a country where race is so deeply imbedded is that there are no quick fixes for structural racism, the good news is that we live in history. We built this society over historical time; we can rebuild it as well.

While our theory has been highly generative, it has drawn a good deal of criticism too. We are grateful for that; we have learned from our critics that parts of our analysis were cryptic and opaque, and that there were significant gaps in our coverage. Our discussion of the prevailing paradigms of racial theory in Part I required a substantial makeover to engage more recent literature and to sharpen analytic distinctions both within and among different paradigms.

The core theory of racial formation in Part II has elicited both praise and criticism. In this version of *Racial Formation*, we place the racial body—the phenomic/corporeal/“ocular” dimensions of racialization—much more front and center, without diminishing in any way our commitment to the social construction of race. The body was largely undertheorized in our earlier accounts.

We argue that race has been a master category, a kind of template for patterns of inequality, marginalization, and difference throughout U.S. history. This is a new claim for us. We are not suggesting that race has been primordial or primary, or that it has operated as some sort of “fundamental contradiction.” Rather we are emphasizing its ubiquity: its presence and importance. We are noting that no other social conflict—not class, not sex/gender, not colonialism or imperialism—can ever be understood independently of it.

Speaking of racial history, in the previous edition of our book, Part III ended at the dawn of the Clinton era. Obviously, much has transpired since the early 1990s.
The new Part III treats U.S. racial history up to 2013, extending into the Obama period. We have expanded our account of The Great Transformation, the rising phase of the political trajectory of race. We look anew at the civil rights movement and the black power movement (brown power, red power, and yellow power movements too). We focus greater attention on the radical threat these movements posed to the despotic regime of the United States, notably as they combined with “second-wave” feminism, the anti-imperial movement that began with opposition to the Vietnam war, and the dawning LGBT movement.

We have argued that the U.S. racial regime is fundamentally despotic; radical challenges to it occur only rarely. The post-World War II political trajectory of race that preoccupies this book was only the second such challenge in U.S. history; the first full-scale confrontation with racial despotism, of course, came a century earlier with the Civil War and Reconstruction. From the vantage-point of the 21st century we can see that the political trajectory of race that we study in this book consists of a vital and radical democratic interruption of U.S. racial despotism, followed by an extended racial reaction. The all-too-brief Great Transformation, we argue, set in motion permanent political and cultural shifts that 40 years of racial reaction have been required to control. And those radical challenges have still not been controlled. They remain disruptive, transformative, explosive.

The black movement inspired a tremendous democratic upsurge, not only in the United States but all around the world. Part III has been extended to treat at greater length the racial reaction that returned to power in about 1970. To make sense of these immense political effects, we focus intensively in Part III—and throughout the book—on the racial ideology of colorblindness: on its genealogy and ascendance to hegemonic status in the United States. Colorblindness is today the prevailing mode of racial “common sense.” We make a number of key claims about it; one of our key arguments is that colorblindness is a component, an enabler so to speak, of neoliberalism, the hegemonic economic project of our time. But we do not disparage colorblindness in every way. We not only criticize colorblind racial ideology severely, but also note its aspirational qualities and potential for rearticulation.

We made a lot of changes in this edition, but our overall purpose and vision remain the same. We want to provide an account of how concepts of race are created and transformed, how they become the focus of political conflict, and how they come to shape and permeate both identities and institutions. Without some notion of the socially constructed meaning of race, it is hard to grasp the way racial identity is assigned and assumed, or to perceive the deeply embedded racial dimensions of everyday experience. Similarly, without an awareness that the concept of race is subject to permanent political contestation, it is difficult to recognize the enduring role race plays in shaping social structure—in establishing and reproducing social inequalities, and in organizing political initiatives and state action across the entire U.S. body politic.

The concept of racial formation that we first advanced in the 1980s was a reaction to the dominant modes of theorizing about race in both mainstream social science and
left antiracist politics. In many ways the post-World War II social science disciplines still reproduced white supremacist assumptions. This led them to conceptualize race and racism as aberrant and anomalous in U.S. society, rather than as constitutive elements of the nation-state, foundational ideas about the nature of the American people, and lineaments of the limited democracy that operated in every U.S. institution, public and private. In prevailing social science research, race was conceptualized and operationalized in a fixed and static manner that failed to recognize the changing meaning of race over historical time and in varied social settings. Race was understood much too simply: as an independent variable that was correlated with other variables to assess the scope and degree of economic inequality, health disparities, residential segregation, or incarceration rates. Could one effectively analyze patterns of residential segregation, to take one example, without considering the racial categories that were utilized and encoded in research, in public documents, in legal decisions and how they changed over time and place? Didn’t one have to ask not only how race shaped segregation, but how segregation reciprocally shaped race? Didn’t one have to examine how segregation invested racial categories with content and meaning? Asking these questions led us to interrogate the race concept itself and to think about its socially constructed nature.

On the political left, we were critical of the assumptions that guided Marxist analyses of race in the 1970s and 1980s—both social-democratic and Marxist-Leninist, both sectarian and humanist. In Marxist approaches race was seen as epiphenomenal to class and class relations. Racism was understood as a form of “false consciousness,” an ideology and practice utilized by the capitalist class to sow discontent among workers, to create artificial divisions within the working class, and prevent the emergence of unified class-consciousness and organization. In such arguments, the independent role of race was never considered. Also on the left, we were critical of nationalist positions of various types: notably pan-/diasporic accounts and internal colonialism theories. Such approaches tended to ignore or homogenize variations within racially-identified groups and categories, to disparage the racial hybridity that is so widespread in the United States, and to import their political programs (many Marxists did this too) from elsewhere, notably the anti-imperial movements of the global South and East.

Parting with both mainstream social science and left political theorizing about race, we tried to imagine it as a fundamental principle of social organization—one that deeply structured polity, economy, culture, and society in the United States. Central to this was to see race as a legitimate and autonomous social concept that needed to be critically engaged in its own right. Then and now, we emphasize the fundamental instability of the race concept. Race, we claim, operates in the space of intersections, at the crossroads where social structure and experience meet. It is socially constructed and historically fluid. It is continually being made and remade in everyday life. Race is continually in formation.
Our concept of racial formation also developed in relationship to political struggles. Both of us were engaged and transformed by struggles of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s: the black power movement and other movements of color, the “second-wave” feminist movement and queer movement, the anti-war movement, the insurgent labor movement, the student movement, and the struggles for ethnic studies on university campuses. These new social movements expanded and deepened the very meaning of politics in the United States. What we term “the politicization of the social” was articulated in these political spaces and times. Though it is sometimes disparaged as “identity politics,” we affirm that designation and support that current. We recognize that, messy and processual as this politicization of the social is, it goes much deeper than the mainstream notion of politics as who gets what, when, and how. It is not outside the social structures of violence, injustice, inequality, and stigmatization; indeed it is deeply and more self-consciously imbedded within those structures. The politicization of the social, developed and led by the black movement in the post-World War II United States, is the application to current conditions of the radical pragmatism developed by Dewey, Du Bois, and C.L.R. James, and in our time by Cornel West, Judith Butler, Kimberle’ Crenshaw, and others. Drawing upon categories of difference and marginalization, this emergent politics represents a shift toward the radical democracy we so desperately need today.

Our concept of racial formation has also been forged in struggle with each other. We wouldn’t have it any other way. The work before you is the product of the intense discussion and argument, endless rewriting, and compromise that a deep and loving collaboration requires. After more than 30 years of working together, we are so aware of each other’s idiosyncrasies that we can often complete each other’s sentences. Ours is an enduring, productive, and at times challenging relationship. We continue to enjoy the rare privilege of working together, of questioning each other and ourselves as deeply as we know how to do in the process of arduous intellectual labor. Over the years, we have more and more learned to respect, trust, depend on, and love one another. We are very grateful for our friendship, and appreciate the chance to acknowledge it here.

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