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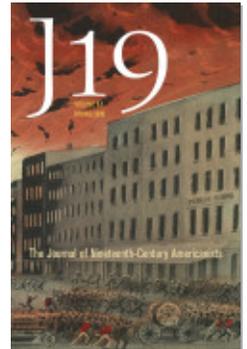
Introduction

Dana Luciano

J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 167-174 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2018.0011>



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FORUM:
Afterlives of 19th Century American
Racism

Introduction

Dana Luciano

Georgetown University

The point isn't the impossibility of escaping the stranglehold of the past, or that history is a succession of uninterrupted defeats, or that the virulence and tenacity of racism is inexorable. But rather that the perilous conditions of the present establish the link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*¹

Charles W. Chesnutt's short story "The Goophered Grapevine" (1887), the first in a series that would come to be known as the "conjure stories," centers on an enchanted vineyard, located on an antebellum plantation, which becomes a synecdoche for the slave system as a whole. The plantation's bondspeople are prevented by a "goopher," a spell, from eating the grapes, underscoring the forcible extraction of black labor; and when a newly arrived bondsman accidentally falls under the vine's spell, his mimicry of its cycles of growth and decay epitomizes the system's production of black bodies as themselves commodities, as profitable as the crops they are forced to produce. The story is told by Julius, a freedman who has remained on the land after the war, to John and Annie, Ohioans who have moved South in search of new opportunities, and who seek to buy the former plantation. Julius dissuades them, insisting that the grapevines remain dangerous; although the original vineyard, he says, was destroyed by a Yankee scheme just before the war, some of its old vines have come out again, and while Julius sees these for what they are, John and Annie will be unable to tell.²

In later conjure stories, John and Annie repeatedly prove Julius right; as he tells tale after tale about the slave system, they comprehend them partially at best. John, a pragmatist, is most interested in the economic negotiations surrounding Julius's storytelling in the postbellum present. Annie, in contrast, responds emotionally to what Julius's tales reveal about the antebellum past, exclaiming, at one point, "What a system it was . . . under which such things were possible!"³ Concentrating on different moments, Annie and John fail to grasp the temporal relation that the framed stories illuminate: a link between the antebellum past and the post-Reconstruction present that is neither sameness nor radical discontinuity. Like the vines, the present is a twisted outgrowth of the past: the "old" mingles with the "new" in complex ways, defying the logic of linear sequence.

The word "afterlife" usually indicates posthumous existence, the realm of the ghostly; it's used, in cultural studies, to index the lingering effects of traumatic events. Yet if "endings that are not over" are often spoken of in the language of haunting, as Avery Gordon contends, their effects are also palpably, painfully alive.⁴ The "afterlife of slavery," Saidiya Hartman observes, remains part of everyday living for African Americans, materializing in "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."⁵ These continuities suggest another sense of the word: afterlife as "later life," the period subsequent to a specified or defining event. In thinking through the "afterlives of nineteenth century *racism*," this forum responds to a dual temporal folding: thinking through slavery's afterlives in the present and also through the forms of racism that emerged in its nineteenth-century aftermath, which are once again making themselves felt in our own time. In the wake of the August 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed, eighteen-year-old African American man, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a surge of anti-racist activism nationwide under the sign #BlackLivesMatter has brought renewed attention to the "skewed life chances" Hartman identifies. Yet a number of contemporary commentators have also remarked on the resemblance between the rhetorics of white nationalism that resound in the present moment and those of the post-Reconstruction era.⁶ Both periods saw the election of "populist" white candidates to public office on platforms emphasizing racially inflected nostalgia for the grandeur of the "American" past, along with efforts to roll back voting rights for African Americans as well as to "shore up" the nations' borders by instantiating selective immigration bans (the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the proposed "Muslim

ban”). Both are also marked, as Autumn Womack’s contribution notes, by an increase in violence against African Americans and other people of color, as well as the mediated circulation of images thereof. And as Gordon Fraser argues here, both are distinguished by the affirmation of a particularly virulent form of white racism, one that understands itself as under attack in light of actual and perceived gains in the social position of African Americans. Hence the structural racism Hartman points to as slavery’s afterlives are compounded by forms of affective racism, the kind of white anger and paranoia first consolidated in the aftermath of Emancipation. Unraveling their ongoing, intertwined operation demands both a sense of this history of devaluation and exclusion and, crucially, an attunement to the way racism has made itself at home in American life—to the “psychic life of racism,” in Sharon Patricia Holland’s apt phrase.⁷

Initially conceived during the wave of protests surrounding the grand jury’s refusal to indict the Ferguson police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, published a year and a half into the first term of a president whose election was widely celebrated by white supremacist groups, this forum argues that the “perilous conditions” of our present demand a renewal of critical attention to *racism* and its modes of living-on, along with the historical particularities of “race.” The analysis of race, and of the ways in which it has been socially and historically constructed, has been enormously productive for nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship. Yet this project, initiated in the spirit of dismantling racism, may paradoxically be arriving at the point where it is causing us to lose our critical grip on racism. As Holland asserts, the observation that race is discursively constructed and historically contingent often gives rise to the wish to be done with race, to move “beyond” it. But this desire, Holland contends, fails to address how racism operates as “the emotional lifeblood of race . . . the ‘feeling’ that articulates and keeps the flawed logic of race in its place.”⁸ This forum acknowledges the persistence, as well as the persistent reinvention, of both of these social facts—racism and race—without collapsing them into one another.

This is why we choose to foreground the word “racism” despite the fact that it was not in use in the nineteenth century.⁹ The phrase “color prejudice,” employed, as Marlene L. Daut describes here, by the Haitian writer Demesvar Delorme to designate not individual bias but a socio-cultural (and resolutely national) practice, coterminous with the history of the United States, comes close to the modern sense of the word. But

insofar as the forum seeks to develop a history of the present, we choose to pursue these practices under the then-anachronistic sign of “racism” because of its relevance to the forms of racial unfreedom we live among today, and because of its ability to catalyze struggle against these: we are seeking structural and affective, not linguistic, continuities.

Our focus on racism, and our use of the word in singular form, suggests two further caveats. First: even when the essays in this forum explore racism against nonblack people of color, they affirm Holland’s contention that “the psychic life of racism can best be read in the context of the United States in the space where black and white intersect, where the outer limits of doing and being are exercised and felt by those who seek to negotiate their place at the ‘American’ table.”¹⁰ To say this is neither to deny the multiplicity of racisms analyzed by contemporary transnational scholarship nor to minimize how nonblack people of color experience racism. It is, rather, to affirm the stubborn tenacity of anti-black racism in the United States as it affects those experiences and formations. In our time, the forty-fifth president has appealed to multiple forms of racism, including anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim sentiment, by promising to secure US borders against racialized transnational “others”; yet his political career was founded and sustained by mobilizing anti-black racism through an aggressive campaign directed against his predecessor, Barack Obama, the first African American president. In the nineteenth century, anti-black sentiment also shaped racism against non-black people of color; for instance, arguments for Chinese exclusion paralleled those rendered against the emancipation of black slaves a generation earlier by asserting an “innate” inclination to servitude that would, under conditions of freedom, turn to criminality. The transnational reach of the domestic black/white color line’s structural effects is explored here by Christine Yao, who examines the aggressive racial “protectionism” extended to some Asian immigrants against the putative threat posed by black people, and by Kirsten Silva Gruesz, who notes the reproduction of the sentimental rhetoric developed in white appeals on behalf of fugitive slaves by contemporary campaigns on behalf of Mesoamerican immigrants.

This forum also does not enclose within the term “racism” the practices of dispossession, displacement, and violence directed at indigenous peoples of the Americas over the past five centuries. Though racializing (and racist) language and concepts were employed against indigenous peoples within and beyond the United States earlier, the legal status of Native Americans as members of a racialized and minoritized popula-

tion was not consolidated until the end of the nineteenth century. Yet while this history again points to the structuring effect of the black/white color line in this period, as it grounded then-current understandings of race, framing it in terms of racism obscures how the “flawed logics” of race have worked, in the case of Native Americans, to “[displace] other types of sociality, spatiality, and governance that are dependent on kinship” and concomitantly to render invisible the theft of Native lands, as Mark Rifkin observes.¹¹ Of course, as Holland’s phrase suggests, “race” is always, in some sense, a misdescription consolidated by racism. Yet if the word “racism” can serve as a point of critical illumination and oppositional action for people of color in the United States, for indigenous thinkers and activists, who are not necessarily “seek[ing] to negotiate their place at the ‘American’ table,” it may not.¹² Rather, as Jodi Byrd has pointed out within the pages of this journal, “[i]n indigenous studies, no matter in which century one locates the study, the notion of sovereignty, rather than race, has come to signify both site and consequence of indigeneity’s difference.”¹³

The essays in this forum move, in their focus, between overt manifestations of racist violence and those that insinuate themselves into everyday life. They address the racism of exclusion as well as that of inclusion, exploring the structures of feeling governing racism for white supremacists (Fraser) alongside those infusing the arguments posed by white liberals (Gruesz). They consider how domestic racism undergirds militarized imperial incursions beyond the United States’ borders (Daut) and how it attempts to colonize the feelings of minoritized populations as a means of folding them into the nation (Yao). And they attend to the experiences of those who survive racist attacks, as well as those murdered in them (Womack).

The forum opens by considering how affect constructs both American ideas of whiteness and the racism that keeps them going. Gordon Fraser, drawing connections between white supremacist writing from the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries—the memoirs of Thomas Dixon, author of *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), and the manifesto of Dylann Roof, murderer of nine African Americans in a church in Charleston in June 2015—articulates an understanding of racism as a “structure of feeling”: in these cases an aggrieved whiteness, buttressed by a sense of “partly thwarted domination” that it seeks to overcome by encouraging popular violence against African Americans that would, Dixon and Roof believed, eventually re-energize state-based white racial

despotism. Kirsten Silva Gruesz turns to a different mode of wounded whiteness—the structures of feeling surrounding white benevolence, which, under the guise of feeling for people of color, perpetuated forms of sentimental subjugation that developed in response to the spectacular figure of the fugitive slave. Tracing how these logics continue to undergird American conceptions of the “refugee,” Gruesz illuminates how the present-day “reformist vision of a ‘path to citizenship’” continues to promulgate a racialized understanding of the citizen that subjects those who fall outside its borders to exclusionary violence.

Although the persistent presence of both these modes of white racism confirms the necessity of exploring their historical antecedents and, as both Fraser and Gruesz seek to do, of thinking through ways of undoing their grip, we are also mindful of the extent to which focusing on archives of nineteenth-century racism alone might itself actualize some of its afterlives by privileging these voices above others. For that reason, the forum also addresses analyses of and resistance to racism by people of color, past and present. Marlene L. Daut focuses on Demesvar Delorme, a mid-nineteenth-century Haitian politician whose thinking prefigured that of later anti-racist and anti-colonial writers and activists, from Ramón Emeterio Betances to Aimé Césaire and from James Baldwin to #BlackLivesMatter. Haitian intellectuals offer crucial perspectives, as Daut shows, not only because the Haitian Revolution stands as “the first time people of African descent fought global white supremacy and won,” but also because the new nation foreswore all imperialist aims along with its abolition of slavery and racial segregation. Delorme, writing immediately after the US Civil War, predicted both that anti-black racism in the United States would continue regardless of the formal abolition of slavery and that this racism would continue to sponsor American expansionist and colonialist exploits.

Verifying Delorme’s contention that neither racism nor colonialism would disappear with slavery’s demise, Christine Yao’s essay extends Lisa Lowe’s analyses of the “intimacies of four continents”—the global networks of settlement, colonization and conquest, enslavement and exploitation—into the late nineteenth century, considering the newly republished work of the Asian North American writer Sui Sin Far (the pen name of Edith Maude Eaton) during the years she lived in colonially occupied Jamaica.¹⁴ There, she was subjected to white solicitations of intimacy, civility, and deference, structures of feeling which, Yao argues, recur in the “model minority” status ascribed to Asian Americans today. Refusing the colonialist racism of inclusion, Far’s defiant identification

with the “brown peoples of the earth” offers a model for contemporary anti-racist alliances such as #Asians4BlackLives.

The forum concludes with Autumn Womack’s analysis of a little-known case study from the turn-of-the-century anti-lynching archive: that of Lavinia Baker and her five living children, who, in 1898, survived the mob that claimed the lives of Lavinia’s husband, Frazier Baker, and their youngest child, Rachel. The Baker family garnered a significant amount of attention, eventually performing in their own anti-lynching show. Juxtaposing the image of the surviving Bakers to the more familiar images of black death that recur, historically, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lynching photographs and in contemporary video footage of black men and women killed by police, Womack argues for a revision and expansion of extant analytics of racist violence, which operate according to the “unspoken logic that racial violence is quantifiable, calculable, and amenable to documentation techniques”—that it can be seen and measured in terms of deaths and visible injuries. Thinking about the Bakers as part of what Womack terms “lynching’s afterlife” means learning how to think through the question of survival, how to make palpable “that which escapes and exceeds quantification and documentation.”

The difficulty of grasping the significance of the Bakers’ survival underscores Holland’s contention that, against spectacular instances of racism (such as lynching), the act of “siting and citing everyday racism is almost like stating a belief in the paranormal.”¹⁵ The essays in this forum engage in the work of locating nineteenth-century racism’s seemingly ghostly afterlives in forms as material, as traceable, as Chesnut’s vines. Only then, we argue, can we succeed in the task of uprooting them.

Notes

This forum was initially conceived as a panel at the 2016 meeting of the Modern Language Association, sponsored by the 19th Century American Literature division. Many thanks to the members of the division’s executive committee (Rodrigo Lazo, Ivy G. Wilson, Mark Rifkin, Meredith McGill, and Hsuan Hsu) for helping to put together this panel, and to those who attended the session for their thoughtful responses.

1. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 133.

2. Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Goopered Grapevine,” in *The Conjure Stories*, ed. Robert B. Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 3–14.

3. Chesnutt, “Po’ Sandy,” *The Conjure Stories* 21 (14–22).

4. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 139.

5. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

6. See, e.g., Brent Staples, “Donald Trump and Reconstruction-Era Politics,” *New York Times*, March 3, 2016, accessed June 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/opinion/donald-trump-and-reconstruction-era-politics.html>.

7. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133; Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

8. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 6.

9. Thanks to Brigitte Fielder for raising this issue during the 2016 MLA panel. The first citation of the term in the Oxford English Dictionary is dated 1903; the next is dated 1926.

10. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 7–8.

11. Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Our thanks to Rifkin for illuminating this point in discussions around the 2016 MLA panel.

12. On this point, see especially J. Kellaulani Kauanui, "Colonialism in Equality: Hawaiian Sovereignty and the Question of US Civil Rights," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 635–50.

13. Jodi A. Byrd, "Indigeneity's Difference: Methodology and the Structures of Sovereignty: Introduction," *J19: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 133. See also Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

14. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

15. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 6.

For Further Reading

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The End of Reconstruction, Again: Dylann Roof, Thomas Dixon Jr., and the Transhistorical Structures of Racist Feeling

Gordon Fraser

North Dakota State University

On the night of Barack Obama's election to the presidency, the New York *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman expressed an understandable hopefulness about the future of race relations. "Breaking with our racial past," he predicted, would be the "least" of our problems. Friedman closed his column with words that bridged the troubled past and the hopeful future. "The Civil War is over," he wrote. "*Let reconstruction begin.*"¹ Yet by invoking the Civil War and Reconstruction,