

Constructing and Enforcing Racial Communities

Political Theory
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How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces, by Clarissa Rile Hayward.

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Race and the Politics of the Exception: Equality, Sovereignty, and American Democracy, by Utz McKnight. New York: Routledge, 2013. 249 pp.

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“This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish,” James Baldwin wrote to his young nephew in 1962. “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways possible, that you were a worthless human being.”¹ Baldwin’s searing assertion alluded to both the willful formation of racialized zones of physical and socioeconomic enclosure and the devaluation of the racialized individuals they contained. Black life, he suggested, is bare life:² to be defined by race and confined to the ghetto is to be subjected to various modes of structural deprivation, political marginality, and lethal violence which will not be deemed criminal, to be excepted from a larger constituency whose lives will be nourished and whose life chances will be nurtured. Nearly six decades later, Baldwin’s words find striking resonance in the declaration of Black Lives Matter movement leaders that black lives are “systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.”³ Two new works by Clarissa Rile Hayward and Utz McKnight trace the construction and enforcement of racial communities in their social, political, and spatial dimensions. In unique ways, Hayward and McKnight not only compel their readers to dwell on the sinister connotations of “community” by detailing the institutional development and collective reproduction of America’s black and white communities. They also provide vital theoretical resources for the kind of critical and transformative racial poli-

tics which recent events—spectacular instances of racial community enforcement, from Ferguson to Charleston—may have tragically made possible.

I.

Utz McKnight's *Race and the Politics of the Exception: Equality, Sovereignty, and American Democracy* develops a critique of the definition and enforcement of what he, in an innovative appropriation of Carl Schmitt, refers to as racial communities. In so doing, McKnight builds a theoretical case, and furnishes literary resources, for the greater task of transforming the current American racial state into one based on an inclusive conception of community, a revaluation of black life, and a fulfillment of structural racial justice. McKnight's central claim is that what Foucault would term the contemporary American political apparatus, arising out of the "political settlement" that defused the civil rights movement, conceals the continuing salience of race, the antidemocratic sovereignty wielded by the white community, and the sustained political and social marginality and mortal vulnerability of the black community-cum-"public enemy" (p. 34).

Part I of McKnight's three-part book argues that the white community responded to the political crisis created by 1960s civil rights activism by refashioning the state as a meritocracy defined by formal racial equality and nominal integration. These two political concessions should be understood not as signposts of progress toward the full realization of liberal ideals but as strategies to "immunize" the white community while preserving both the fiction of race and the material effects of this fiction (pp. 27, 38).

The otherwise untenable coexistence of the political apparatus of equal opportunity and racial inequality is made possible, McKnight argues, by the white community's construction of two exceptions. The figure of the white racist as an aberrant and ignorant relic who vainly resists racial progress absolves "normal" white persons of responsibility for persistent racial disparity. This exception proves the rules of white tolerance and amicable integration (pp. 20–23). Likewise, the figure of the exceptional black individual whose outstanding talent and tenacity have borne personal success is exalted as proof of the unqualified success of the civil rights movement. Exceptional black subjects are celebrated for their capacity to "transcend" or "lose" blackness, as Ralina Joseph has also argued, or to distinguish themselves from "the normal Black community" (p. 47) that continues to experience the effects of race.⁴ McKnight's claim that the incorporation of exceptional blacks and the institution of formal equality have effectively demobilized the black community and delegitimated ongoing struggles for racial justice by co-opting its leadership and removing the basis of its grievances evokes Black Power theorists'

censure of “token Negroes” as “showpieces for a conscience-soothed white society.”⁵ While the alienation of the white racist creates a “wound” or fissure within the white community, and the integration of exceptional blacks endangers its dominance, these necessary sacrifices also lend a semblance of closure to American racial conflict and “suture,” or cover over, the ongoing enforcement of racial hierarchy (pp. 22–24, 45).

Swiftly discounting the relevance of Carl Schmitt’s own racism (he was a Nazi apologist in the early 1930s), McKnight contends that Schmitt’s understanding of the nature and basis of sovereignty and politics can illuminate the contemporary American racial order. Schmitt famously defined politics as the enterprise of discerning “the friend-enemy antithesis” and determining the necessity of acting against the enemy “in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.”⁶ The sovereign is defined by the prerogative to pronounce a state of exception, and suspend the normal operation of law and rights, for the sake of community preservation. The friend–enemy distinction is the only properly political one, the only form of antagonism so “intense and extreme” as to engender a conflict in which each group “could be required to sacrifice life.”⁷ Race remains the American polity’s most salient division, McKnight argues, and the persistently cohesive white community continues to view blacks as a collective threat to its superiority and sovereignty. That race is an elaborate, empty fiction is immaterial; for Schmitt those categorical distinctions elevated to political relevance need not have any inherent significance. And although what Du Bois termed “the color-line”⁸ is “a distinction usually held in abeyance”—it “recedes into the background” of everyday life—the basic friend–enemy distinction resurfaces, and the white community exercises its prerogative of self-preservation, whenever its “political primacy . . . is brought into question” (pp. 36–37, 40). The white community must continually assess whether certain developments in American race relations—say, the (re)election of a black president—constitute necessary concessions or intolerable threats to what Ian Haney López aptly calls “colorblind white dominance”⁹ (pp. 39, 100).

McKnight in Part II critically engages with continental philosophy in an effort to develop what he calls a critical race theory of community. How, he asks, do we criticize the definition and enforcement of racial communities? Foucault’s description of the *parrhesiast*, or truth teller, grounds McKnight’s claim that African Americans today are denied the capacity to “defin[e] the truth of racism” (p. 67). Blacks have the right to call out racial injustice in the “structure” and “ethos” of the polity—they “can, at considerable personal risk, speak truth to power”—but blacks’ articulations of their own experiences remain subject to white interpretation, validation, and action (pp. 70–72). In Heideggerian terms, African American are denied “access [to] the process of

thinking their own being” (pp. 103–4). Nancy’s and Blanchot’s conceptions of identity as constructed in contrast to designated others inform McKnight’s arguments that “the decision of race” conceals a deeper human interdependence and that white community solidarity becomes visible precisely when whites act as race traitors—namely, by acknowledging the role race plays in determining life chances (pp. 82–84, 74–76). Particularly instructive are Foucault’s definition of racism as the indispensable biopolitical mechanism by which the state rationalizes its structural deprivation of the racialized groups it deems unworthy of its positive attention and Agamben’s understanding of the “anthropological machine” that devalues and condemns these groups to bare life. Each of these theories converges on the fundamental fact that as it creates a “type of person whose life matters as a life worth living,” the idea or decision of race creates another community of people whose lives do not matter (p. 93).

Yet “traditional” approaches to racial (bio)politics fall short, McKnight argues, because they assert the indispensability of race to modern biopolitics and reinscribe the friend–enemy distinction without formulating a new “critical racial politics” that will redress the mortal and material consequences of the fiction of race (pp. 221–22). This new politics is precisely what McKnight calls for. He urges a “reworking of the politics of race to allow for a single cohesive community of Whites and Blacks, a common democratic polity.” This reworking must “destroy the salience of the decision of race” (p. 93) by moving beyond formal racial equality (pp. 105–6) and enhancing the life chances of all Americans (p. 115). It must bring black lives “back in” to the community of lives that matter (p. 93).

McKnight spends the third and final part of the book not so much mapping out this transformative politics as mining African American fiction for models of “resistant Black subjectivity” and alternative strategies that might guide it (p. 120). Each of three successive chapters treats a pair of texts written in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, and the post–civil rights period. Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1893) reveals the political limits of intimate interracial relationships: whites’ individual transgressions of the color line leave the decision of race, and its material repercussions for the larger black community, unchanged (pp. 130, 136). Charles Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) depicts whites’ development of post-slavery structures of social control and freed blacks’ attendant innovation of self-defensive instincts and “internal controls” in response to the pervasive threat of white acts of terror and violence (pp. 144, 155–56). What Loïc Wacquant has called the “functional analog[y]”¹⁰ of the institutions of black social control constructed during the Jim Crow era and those of the present day are not lost on McKnight. Nor is the need for the black community to continue to

cultivate self-policing instincts in order to avoid the costs of challenging the racial hierarchy, whether doled out in the form of violence or “social ostracism, economic deprivation, and political marginalization” (pp. 171, 46). After considering how the light-skinned Angela of Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928) negotiates racial barriers to social mobility, McKnight reads Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* as “giving the reader an almost visceral exposure” to the black experience of living under a system that granted every white person the power of “interpretation and social control of Black activity” (pp. 184, 171). The contemporary political apparatus, McKnight suggests in his reading of Tayari Jones’s *Silver Sparrow* (2011) and John Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), must rely less on individual white authority and more on black “self-censorship” and self-policing (pp. 208). Yet the fact that we still live in a world in which whites may “take matters of racial social control into their own hands” with scarce legal impunity is evidenced for McKnight in the presumed innocence and eventual acquittal of George Zimmerman, who in 2012 responded to the presence of teenaged black Trayvon Martin in his Florida gated community by fatally shooting him (p. 177).

McKnight’s critique of the inadequacy of the post-civil rights era extension of formal equality, and his articulation of the tragic irony that the ideals of personal and legal colorblindness obscure and sustain racial inequality, are not wholly novel. His analysis of the “political settlement” that deactivated the civil rights movement recapitulates Gary Peller’s critique of the “cultural bargain” made with 1960s black liberation activists and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s elaboration of the paradoxical relationship between “transformation and legitimization,” among many other canonical works of critical race theory.¹¹ McKnight’s contribution lies in how he adapts Schmitt’s concepts of sovereignty and community to illuminate what Henry Giroux has called the race- and class-based “biopolitics of disposability”¹² and then pushes past continental philosophy to reimagine a form of community that can foster substantive racial equality. His book is an arduous read, burdened by complex syntax and esoteric diction. But many difficult texts bear unique rewards, and the reader who endures will be struck by the relevance of McKnight’s account of the American racial state. His elucidation of the hollow core of formal racial equality, the biopolitical devaluation of black life, the unceasing if latent prerogative of whites to enforce the racial hierarchy, and the harrowing efficacy with which the exceptional black and the white racist preserve a broader pattern of racial disparity and white innocence speaks directly to a contemporary moment defined by stark racial disparities in both life expectancy and life chances, the expansion and entrenchment of the carceral system as a means of racial social control, and serial episodes of police killings

of unarmed black Americans in cities across the country, all under the reign of America's first black president.

II.

In the pilot episode of the breakout ABC sitcom *Black-ish*, protagonist Andre "Dre" Johnson, who has been impatiently anticipating a promotion that will make him the first African American senior vice president at his advertising firm, balks only momentarily upon learning that he will preside over the firm's newly created Urban Division. "Wait," he wonders, "did they put me in charge of black stuff?"¹³ His musing needlessly decodes the commonsense premise on which the scene's punch line rests: that "black" and "urban" are synonymous. Through McKnight's analytic we see that Dre epitomizes "exceptional" blackness; Dre's professional advancement not only lends the firm an aura of black cool but sustains a racial order defined by subordination and social control of the overwhelming majority of African Americans. Moreover, the very conceit of the series—the Johnson family members' playful traversing of boundaries dividing black and white spaces, socioeconomic statuses, and intellectual interests and athletic talents—rests on what McKnight terms the decision of race. What would most concern Clarissa Rile Hayward about this particular scene, though, is the insidious history behind the entanglement of place and race that Kenneth Clark captured in his sociological concept of the "dark ghetto"¹⁴ and that Charles Mills has deemed a "circular indictment."¹⁵ Hayward's second book, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces*, explores the processes and means by which the decision of race has been inscribed in institutional forms and concretized in physical space. How have places been raced, and how in turn does the racing of place perpetuate the fiction of race?

This fiction is what Hayward calls a "bad story." Good stories, or sound narratives of individual and collective identity and becoming, meet the basic criteria of being credible, legitimate, and coherent. Dominant narratives of collective racial identity, premised on an implicit conception of race as biological type, are empirically and ethically bankrupt as well as internally inconsistent. Yet Americans "very often" avail ourselves of these bad stories as we craft our own stories of individual identity and becoming. Far from throwing us into "epistemological crises" or compelling our earnest reckoning with what Baldwin called the "lie" of race and the hierarchies of power, privilege, and personal worth it sustains,¹⁶ bad racial stories remain central components of ordinary Americans' personal identity narratives. To explain why this is so is the principal task of Hayward's book (pp. 30–36).

Hayward approaches this task by addressing the dynamic and constitutive relationships between “stories, institutions, [and] spaces.” Her thesis is that the victors of competitive processes of collective identity construction entrench their own narratives by institutionalizing them in rules, laws and norms and by objectifying them in physical spaces and landscapes. Consequently, individuals, through our engagement in practical activities structured by these norms and situated in these places, implicitly learn and relearn the meanings of collective identities that have been built into our material environment. Bad stories of collective racial identity persist, and continue to be incorporated into individual identity narratives, because they have been translated into material forms. As individuals navigate institutions and landscapes, we learn corporeally how we fall into particular identity categories, how our social intelligibility and esteem depend upon our position within this matrix, and how this matrix advantages or disadvantages us both psychically and materially. We learn our race, that is, “through place”: “to experience a particular place as a ‘black place’ is to experience blackness as a social fact” (pp. 45–47). Quoting one of her interview subjects, a resident of Columbus’s Near East Side ghetto, Hayward explains,

When racial stories are institutionalized, . . . and when they are built into the very fabric of urban and suburban landscapes, they acquire a kind of geographic facticity that renders them lived reality. If race is embedded in our minds, . . . this is the case [] not simply because we are *told*, [but] because we come to know—as a matter of fact, as a matter of racial knowledge—that “there’s certain places you don’t go. There’s certain people you don’t socialize with” (p. 47).

Because we learn racial, gender, and other identity categories practically rather than through explicit teaching, and because some of us stand to benefit from the privileges these categories confer to us, the “bad” nature of collective identity narratives goes uninterrogated. These narratives continue to frame personal identity stories, influencing individuals’ self-conceptions, beliefs, and actions and thereby aiding their own reproduction (pp. 38–40).

In the four chapters that follow her elaboration of the role of narrative in identity construction, Hayward traces the institutionalization and objectification in America’s urban and suburban landscapes of two twentieth-century racial stories and the interaction of these collective identity narratives with the personal identity narratives of American citizens. The first pair of chapters (2 and 3) argues that before the fiction of inherent racial difference and its corollary mandate of differential treatment and segregation were scientifically discredited in the 1940s, they were “institutionalized and objectified through the construction of the black ghetto and the racially exclusive white [suburban]

enclave" (p. 45). In metropolitan regions like Columbus, Ohio—Hayward's primary case study—residential segregation took shape through mutually reinforcing private, municipal, and federal actions and policies, from restrictive covenants to racial zoning ordinances to state-endorsed redlining.

These initiatives not only institutionalized narratives of racial difference but also produced what Hayward, in the vein of López's elucidation of "the value to whites of whiteness"¹⁷ and Cheryl Harris's notion of "whiteness as property,"¹⁸ terms "racial interests" (pp. 58, 69). They suggested to whites (new and old) that they stood to benefit, in terms of opportunities for home ownership and wealth accumulation through property value appreciation, from the fiction of race and the maintenance of racial residential exclusivity. As the larger American landscape became increasingly segregated and the distribution of benefits and burdens became increasingly color-coded, it became increasingly profitable for whites not only to physically and financially dissociate themselves from black places, but also to disavow responsibility for creating "racialized" ghettos or addressing joblessness, poverty, and the attendant social problems caused by systematic urban disinvestment. The geographical concentration in "black places" of the very problems caused by the collective actions of state officials, real estate professionals, and suburban homeowners transformed them, "both in practical effect and in popular consciousness," from collective problems into "black problems" (pp. 45–47). These reframed "black problems" breathed new life into the "bad racial stories" that in turn justified ongoing disinvestment in black places, imposing a viciously circular logic on the lives of those black Americans confined to ghettos and consigned to economic, social, and political marginality.

Once bad racial stories have been built into the material environment and have acquired physical facticity, the "coercive actions" (p. 82) and collective decisions that created and maintain "black places," channel resources away from them, and "localize" communal problems in them (p. 71) no longer register as causally significant or "tellable" facts and forces in the personal identity narratives that ordinary Americans weave. Instead, they recede into the background, remaining uninterrogated "nonevents" in personal stories driven by individual agency. The racialized landscape and the racial interests behind it, Hayward argues, have been effectively depoliticized (pp. 88, 110).

The second pair of chapters (4 and 5) traces the parallel process of the institutionalization and objectification of the narrative that suburban single-family home ownership is a universal value, central facet of the American dream, and prerequisite of republican virtue. Championed by the newly professionalized real estate industry in the interwar years, this identity story languished until the Great Depression aligned the immediate political goals of job creation and housing market stabilization with the financial interests of so-called "community builders." New Deal housing policies and federal

agencies permitted the previously implausible “fact” of a home-owning American public to be quite literally built on the ground. This second story of “the (white) American ‘we’” implicitly presumed the first narrative of racial difference (p. 125), gesturing toward universal property and privacy rights while garnering state support, both legal and financial, for profit-driven residential development in racially exclusive suburbs. Emblematic of this process was the transformation of New Albany, Ohio, a small rural village northeast of Columbus, into a white fence-lined, Georgian-themed, and largely state-subsidized suburban enclave.

Why do Americans accept and tolerate public subsidization of suburban development and elite suburban public schools that overwhelmingly serve and benefit those with racial and class privilege? Hayward’s answer, again, is that because the “bad story” of a home-owning (white) America has been objectified, the political decisions and actions behind it—the ways in which the state has subsidized suburban housing and education, supported the mortgage market, and allowed public funds to be channeled away from already underserved “black places”—have been rendered narrative backdrops to personal identity stories that center on individual choice. Moreover, Hayward argues, whites have a material interest in overlooking “the relation between the advantages they enjoy . . . and the disadvantages on the other side of the (white) fence.” The less prominent a role they assign to racial interest in their personal identity narrative, the longer that whites who have accumulated wealth in discriminatory housing markets may reap the profits of racial apartheid, and the less responsibility they must assume for deconstructing the current metropolitan landscape (p. 185).

Skillfully interweaving narrative theory, American political development, public law, political philosophy, critical race studies, and field research, Hayward crafts a rich and cogent theory of how racial identity is reproduced not merely discursively but materially. Hayward’s book not only enriches renowned accounts of the architecture of American apartheid¹⁹ and the entrenchment of a “possessive investment in whiteness.”²⁰ Her nonideal theories of how bad racial stories influence our movement through space and how whites are incentivized to maintain racial communities are also timely theoretical resources for efforts to critique and reform the systematically racially biased, punitive, and exploitative police practices used in “black places” such as Ferguson, Missouri, and Cleveland, Ohio, and recently laid bare by the Department of Justice.

III.

Race and the Politics of the Exception and *How Americans Make Race* establish Hayward and McKnight as formidable interlocutors and valuable contributors

to political theoretical critiques of race and racial inequality. Hayward's investigation into the mutual constitution of races and spaces and the untheorized practical knowledge informing both white citizens' avoidance and law enforcers' coercive invasion of "black places" powerfully complements McKnight's emphasis on the "rule" of social control and subordination of "normal" African Americans and the contingency of white sovereignty, white privilege, and whiteness itself on the ongoing enforcement of racial hierarchy. Together, these books enable a more enlightened thinking through of questions surrounding some of the most salient racial political issues of our time, foremost the astonishingly routinized nature of police killings of unarmed black Americans, the anything-but-counterintuitive rise of the carceral state alongside racial liberalism,²¹ and the need for a truly thoroughgoing political movement founded on a new concept of community and devoted to structural and substantive racial justice.

On a more hopeful note, we might read the Black Lives Matter movement as initiating precisely the kind of transformative racial politics that Hayward and McKnight prescribe. Black Lives Matter directly counters the devaluation of black life revealed by both statistical indicators of structural racial disparity and the lethal police treatment of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and others. Furthermore, by explicitly transcending the misogyny, male normativity, and "hetero-patriarchy" that marked past black liberation movements, by articulating "a racial justice agenda that is inclusive of our shared fate as Black men, women, trans and gender non-conforming people," and by linking the reevaluation and meaningful uplift of black Americans to the welfare of all Americans,²² its founders have moved decisively to form the larger, transracial community that McKnight envisions as the basis of a challenge to the present political apparatus.

And finally, they have undertaken the "particular kind" of storytelling that Hayward argues is vital to the unmaking of race and the symbolic and spatial hierarchies this "bad" fiction underpins. Dismantling the present racial order must entail "storytelling that motivates both institutional redesign and the reconstruction of material forms" (pp. 6, 189). Black Lives Matter leaders have laid out a vision for racial justice that demands institutional and spatial transformation, namely, the demilitarization of local law enforcement, the end of racial bias in the police and due process procedures behind mass incarceration, and the severing of the school-to-prison pipeline through the reinvestment of law enforcement spending in black community education, employment, and housing services. The movement marks the first step towards the transracial and structurally transformative critical racial politics that McKnight and Hayward collectively envision. Whether it can dislodge the white racial interests and racial innocence that these authors have so

freshly contextualized—and institute a political system that truly treats black lives as if they matter—depends largely on those of us who comprise the white community.

Notes

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3. Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *Black Lives Matter*, 2014, <http://www.blacklivesmatter.com>.
4. Ralina Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
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7. *Ibid.*, 29, 35.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.
9. Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 143–62.
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16. Baldwin, "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies," *Essence* (April 1984): 90–92.
17. López, *White by Law*, 139–142.
18. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 276–91.
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22. Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement"; Anon., "Our Vision for a New America"; and "State of the Black Union: The Shadow of Crisis Has NOT Passed," *Black Lives Matter*, 2014, <http://www.blacklivesmatter.com>.

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