

Racism in a Black White Binary: On the Reaction to Trayvon Martin's Death

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Charles Blow, visual Op-Ed columnist for the *New York Times*, illuminated the significance of Trayvon Martin's death in his piece "The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin" through one question in particular: Why did George Zimmerman find Trayvon Martin 'suspicious?'¹ He writes of his own worry "that a man with a gun and an itchy finger will find [Blow's own two black teenage sons] 'suspicious.'" Blow names race as the salient concern: "One other point: Trayvon is black. Zimmerman is not." Notice that Blow's claim explicitly relies on a binary conceptualization of race and racism: black and non-black. Thinkers have recently paid critical attention to this idea.² In this paper I examine how a black-white binary paradigm, which conceptualizes blacks and whites as the two predominant races and conceives all racism according to anti-black racism, determines the race discourse surrounding the Trayvon Martin case for its first three weeks. This binary has great force, and while it seems like it cannot circumscribe everything that we mean when we use the discourse of race, there is a compelling argument that race and racism are essentially binary structures. By dealing with that argument I work to free thinking about oppression from binary race discourse so as to address victims better.

I first describe race binary in general through a position derived from Foucault. I then appeal to work by authors who agree that, while important especially for understanding anti-black racism, race binary constrains discourse about other forms of racism by either assimilating them into forms associated with anti-black racism or silencing them. Accordingly, these authors, who I call racism pluralists, wish to deconstruct the binary: by treating racism as operating differently in regard to different social groups, we can provide more specific and effective resources against these various forms of racism. However, the Foucault position indicates that racism is essentially binary: a challenge to the pluralist view. Though this reading of Foucault is not decisive, it is instructive because it allows us to see that some attempts to expand the concept of racism beyond the binary and distinguish many forms of racism may actually yield impediments to recognizing the multivalent nature of oppression. To conclude I offer another option which requires delineating myriad racial *and nonracial* forms of oppression and recognizing the force of race binary so as to use it as a productive tension.

Foucault's Race War

In his "*Society Must Be Defended*" lectures,³ Foucault tracks a mode of historical discourse, emerging in the early modern era, that treats race war as a binary structure fundamental to conceptualizing some European societies (Foucault 18-9, 60). "Race" in

this context “designates a certain historico-political divide,” he explains (77). The division is of a nation into two races with different origins and practices. Various concepts can be used to articulate the racial divide: differences in geographical origins, ethnicity, language, or savagery and barbarism, for example (60). Regardless, the link between the two races is “a link established only through the violence of war” whose form is a “permanent confrontation” (77, 69). The “us versus them” war structure, about which Foucault is cautious but which he ultimately seems to endorse, indicates that race discourse, at least in this early formulation, essentially operates as a binary and that racism is an inevitable part of that discourse. Foucault calls this early modern race discourse “external racism” because the races are defined as populations exterior to one another, separable in theory although perhaps mixed in the same territory. Its contrast, internal racism, is a historically later phenomenon in which one race exists as a constant social threat interior to the social body. This race is a deviation from the “superrace” or “one true race” that is “entitled to define the norm[s]” that govern society. In the analysis of internal racism Foucault modifies his schema from a binary of two races to a monism of one population with multiple elements potentially identifiable racially (61). On either account, race is a way of conceptualizing a division between somehow distinguishable social groups in perpetual conflict.⁴

Is the monism of internal racism still a kind of binary? I think it is: let us briefly tease out some reasons for the shift in conceptualizing race discourse from binary to monism. The shift indicates a difference in how a population is conceived: the binary of races “exterior to one another” (*deux races extérieures l’une à l’autre*) conceives races to be fundamentally distinct from each other, whereas the monism of “internal racism” (*un racisme interne*) signifies a social body admitting differentiation of its own parts. The shift also delivers a difference in tactics: in monism, multiple, heterogeneous elements of the state may bear the title of deviant from the one true race and may remain dissimilar in their deviant acts yet similar in classification as deviants; the binary distinction, to the contrary, paints all combatants into one specified camp or another. Most importantly for Foucault, monism lends a conception of biological sameness to all members of the population that can then be used in a discourse of purity so that deviant elements may be identified and extracted to “purify” the race; purity is a value concept absent from the binary. Despite these differences in articulation of the theory of races, however, almost all of the most important qualities of the binary remain present in the monism. In particular, the race discourse in its racism maintains the “us versus them” war structure (Foucault 257). Furthermore, Foucault’s monism continues to describe race according to duplication (*le dédoublement*) and to refer to “one true race” and “the other race,” the one and the other (61-2).⁵ No doubt, Foucault is not perfectly clear on this matter, but his continued conceptualization even in his monism of a division into two races allows us to extend analysis in terms of binary through contemporary race discourse.⁶

Foucault’s race project (as all critics recognize) is radically incomplete, wrong and misleading in parts, and not the primary emphasis of “Society Must Be Defended.” Given space constraints, I leave the soundness of the argument aside (like other philosophers I find it compelling, but under-argued). Nevertheless, we face an intriguing idea with some *prima facie* plausibility. Race binary is no accident: it is part of the basic

structure of the state. While Foucault's analyses do not define the race binary in terms of black and white, they do provide a conceptual nexus that allows us to fix a model of race thinking that *enables* the contemporary black-white binary paradigm. As we shall see, conceiving race as binary, the races as permanent, the relationship between the races as antagonistic, and one race as defining social norms and the other as deviant are all hallmarks of the black-white binary; all that is missing is a theory of visible identity to define the particular differences that this binary form takes to be the relevant differences for the establishment of races. Moreover, this history of race explains the prevalence of race binary throughout early modern and contemporary discourse.⁷ It also provides reasons for why it has been and continues to be difficult to think race discourse otherwise than in binary terms. Race binary is not arbitrary to contemporary America, but is a deeply entrenched feature of our understanding of our social structures, implicit or not.

Perea's Account of the Black-White Binary Paradigm

Let us turn specifically to the black-white binary paradigm through the work of racism pluralists Juan Perea and Linda Alcoff.⁸ Perea utilizes Kuhn's concept of a paradigm to characterize race discourse in the United States. He describes a paradigm as "a shared set of understandings or premises which permits the definition, elaboration, and solution of a set of problems defined within that paradigm." Put differently, paradigms "define relevancy" and "control fact-gathering and investigation" (Perea 1216). A related feature of paradigms is that they determine what counts as normal (or "normal science") or anomalous. What is normal is integrated into the paradigm, and what is anomalous is discarded or suppressed (1217).

Perea argues convincingly that normal science for race discourse in the United States consists of a black-white binary paradigm. Perea defines this paradigm as "the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White" (1219). In other words, only blacks and whites count in race discourse in America. Other groups are either assimilated into blacks or whites or silenced altogether; as Perea writes, "the paradigm dictates that all other racial identities and groups in the United States are best understood through the Black/White binary program" (1220). This paradigm has severe consequences for understanding racism. In brief, it presents the idea that racism only occurs against blacks by whites and that anti-black racism is the best way to understand racism in general.

The black-white binary paradigm fits the discourse around Trayvon Martin's death like hand in glove. *The Orlando Sentinel* described Zimmerman as a "white community watch member" and framed public outcry with a quote of an unnamed member of "Sanford's black community."⁹ After claiming that Martin's family's attorneys have portrayed Zimmerman as confronting Martin "simply because he was black and wore a hoodie," an article quotes family attorney Natalie Jackson saying that "Racism is too simple. It may have been a factor," thus connecting the shooting to anti-black racism.¹⁰ Yet another article recalls "the slaying of the unarmed black teen by a white crime-watch volunteer." It quotes Rev. Jamal Bryant's concern that "any racist who has a gun and thinks it's a license to kill our children" may do so.¹¹ The black-white

binary and anti-black racism underlie all of these depictions of the case. Nobody was questioning whether Zimmerman was white (or if Martin was black, for that matter). In many of the accounts from early March 2012 Zimmerman's race is presumed rather than specified (as in the quote from Bryant), as if the charge of racism and the perception of Martin's blackness make Zimmerman's whiteness clear.¹²

One further feature tells us how powerful the binary was in this case. George Zimmerman's father, Robert, asserted that his son is Hispanic and grew up in a multiracial household.¹³ His intent, I believe, was to insulate his son against charges of racism by disrupting the power of the black-white binary. If George is not white, then the binary is inapplicable. In response, it seems Blow and others refined the binary to an anti-black form: black and non-black.¹⁴ Notice that this is not a rejection of the binary structure of racism, perhaps not even a real rejection of the black-white binary, but a subtle shift in its form.

Alcoff's Extension of Perea's Argument

Linda Alcoff extends Perea's line of argument. She divides her discussion into descriptive and prescriptive claims. As a descriptive claim, the black-white binary characterizes "the fundamental nature of racializations and racism in the United States." As a prescriptive claim, it "intends to enforce the applicability of the paradigm by controlling how race operates" (Alcoff 248). Her arguments indicate that, while they have some region of application, the descriptive claim is inadequate to construct racialization in the United States, and the prescriptive claim does not achieve hegemony (249). On the one hand, she develops an account of how races outside of black and white have been shuffled around the legal system and classified as black or white in order to maintain white privilege; this argument reinforces the binary. On the other hand, Alcoff recounts forms of oppression that are prominent in racism against non-blacks, but are largely absent from anti-black racism. She thus finds a line of argument that disrupts the black-white binary. The position is a tensive one: the black-white binary does significant interpretive work for understanding some forms of racism while at the same time obscuring others.¹⁵

Alcoff's definition of racism is "a negative value or set of values projected as an essential attribute onto a group whose members are defined through genealogical connection, as sharing some origin, and who are demarcated on the basis of some visible features" (259). With this definition we can open up racism beyond binary forms associated with anti-black racism. Alcoff identifies four "axes" of racialization that have lent themselves to racism: skin color, physical features other than skin color, cultural origin, and nativism (discrimination against immigrants) (259).

By distinguishing diverse forms of racialization and race-based oppression we should be better able to identify victims which in turn should lead to improvements in alleviating oppression. For example, discrimination against immigrants certainly has anti-black forms but is more than this and varies regionally, especially in the southwest and on the west coast. Similarly, Alcoff argues that Asian Americans face discrimination

based on “covert quota systems” in many universities despite the seeming prominence of Asian American students in universities. Moreover, she believes that Asian Americans are seen as “unassimilable” and “are suspected of retaining loyalty to Asian countries” (262-3). Such forms of racism seem beyond the concerns of, or at least are not prominent features of, anti-black racism and the black-white binary.

This apparatus provides the opportunity for a plural account of racism which allows us to separate out some of the issues involved in the racialization of Martin’s death. For example, we can drop “whiteness” as an identity that must be established for the killing to count as racist. The idea that the “hoodie” motivated Zimmerman could be placed under a cultural origins form of racism. We could ask about racism between members of minority groups. Anti-black racism still has its place here; we have merely opened up the discourse to enable the search for myriad forms of oppression.

Concerns

We do not have time here to engage in detail the specific arguments Perea and Alcoff generate. I hope instead that the position they motivate has some intuitive plausibility or resonates with the reader’s own lived experience of how race and racism operate in general and were deployed in the aftermath of Martin’s death. Nevertheless, we can see the general contours of the position. A black-white binary serves as the paradigm through which race and racism are understood in the United States. This paradigm has some use in this regard, but it also holds dangers like covering over other forms of racialization and racism. Thus, to better diagnose and respond to oppression, we must deconstruct or open up the binary structure.

There are many possible lines of response to the racism pluralist position. We might think, for example, that forms of oppression such as nativism do not count as racism because they do not necessarily trade on visible identity, as Alcoff’s definition of racism requires; thus nativism should be analyzed along altogether different lines. Alternatively, we might think that we can keep a binary structure for racism and incorporate into it other forms of oppression. Or, we might complain that conceiving some forms of oppression in terms of racism will ineluctably lead to binary thinking that can never be adequately opened up to address a variety of concerns.

This last line of criticism becomes significantly problematic given the position I have derived from Foucault. Importantly, the war model indicates how race binary perpetuates itself. In an “us versus them” model all races can be assigned to either “us” or “them” and thereby assimilated into the binary. On this analysis, then, it will never be enough merely to claim that some action or another is racist toward some unrepresented group, because that group can be assimilated into the binary.¹⁶ It will not be enough to claim that some specific form of oppression is not represented, for that form will either be assimilated into the binary as a mode of some other represented oppression or excluded altogether from counting as oppression.¹⁷ Speaking of racisms in the plural will be difficult if not impossible.¹⁸

It is here that the claim that George Zimmerman is Hispanic really cuts its teeth. If Zimmerman is Hispanic, then he can be assimilated into the “them” group and thus the killing cannot count as racist murder. At the same time, the killing itself has become an action that is not represented in the race binary. In other words, once the fact of non-white origin is established, the very structure of racism eliminates the possibility that racism was present in Martin’s death, unless the binary shifts to black and non-black.

Three Proposals

Can this outcome be right? Does racism require a binary structure? Let us consider three proposals. First, we may make choices to reject the binary (as Perea and Alcoff do). We can attack it in at least two ways philosophically. First, we can recognize that Foucault’s argument is subject to rebuttal. One approach would question whether the texts he examines are representative of the dominant race paradigm of the time. In the philosophical discourse on the formation of the race concept, for example, we have influential thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and de Gobineau who reject binary thinking. Rousseau, on whom Foucault relies, models the people as sovereign-subjects in an explicit attempt to subvert binaries in the state’s structure. We could perhaps write a counter-history of the relationship between race and the state that eschews the binary; possibly it shows up but does not have the influence Foucault suggests.

Another version of the first proposal would emphasize the black-white binary’s arbitrariness and contingency. Once we diagnose the paradigm, distinguishing races outside its terms according to their own voices and concerns can mitigate the binary’s force. Similarly, I would note that the binary structure is a contingent feature of our race discourse’s history, even on Foucault’s scheme, and we can move against binary race thinking through practical advancement of the concerns of races outside the terms of the binary. This response assumes that the binary, while powerful, is not incontrovertible and can be separated from the “us versus them” war structure.

Let us now pursue a second proposal: we accept the binary structure of racism. We have seen there are positions, evidence, and arguments indicating that race discourse has a binary paradigm and that this has been the case since the origins of modern racism. If race discourse is binary and we act to destroy the binary, then, we may not be opening the door to identifying new forms of racism. Instead, we destroy the historical meaning of race altogether with the result that *all* oppression is detached from racialization (for better or worse). Conversely, we may rigidly circumscribe the boundaries of racism to one binary structure or another, which allows us to think *some* oppression outside of racialization. Either way, we may then move beyond thinking oppression predominately in racial terms. We may ask whether some forms of oppression, although taken as forms of racism, may be better addressed through nonracial discourses. (I have already indicated that nativism may not fit the concepts of racial oppression.)¹⁹

Now, though, we may uncover a new conceptual tension. The first proposal lets race remain a hegemonic concern (as it is for Perea and Alcoff), which means that forms of oppression that do not suit the race model of discourse may be covered over. The

second proposal protects nonracial oppressions from racialization, but it deemphasizes race discourse and the binary so that actually racist oppression may be overlooked.

I do not believe there is a resolution to this tension. However, I also do not believe that we need one. Thus, a third proposal: What we need to do is recognize that there is a tension. Rather than empowering the reduction of forms of oppression to racisms or rejecting the binary or tightly limiting its scope, we realize that there are many forms of oppression. Some will suit racial analyses completely or partly; others will not. We must actively reflect on sites and instances of oppression to determine which modes of oppression are in operation and provide the best resources we can manage. We have many possible modes of analysis for the Trayvon Martin case: anti-black racism, racism between minorities, cultural insensitivity, Stand Your Ground laws, the culture of fear, the culture of policing, the voicelessness of children, and so on. All of these topics and others deserve our consideration if we are truly to generate justice for Trayvon Martin and other victims. Some concerns may merit racialization and others may not. Reflection on such diverse concerns is not easy or failsafe, but at the least it means that we may take advantage of all available resources to identify effectively victims, modes of oppression, and options for relief.

The third proposal is a significant advance beyond previous positions. If pursued rigorously it has the potential to delimit what counts as racial *and nonracial* oppression so that we may recognize and pursue proper responses. The racism pluralist's move to expand the concept of racism does not give nonracial oppressions focused consideration, which leaves open the problem of giving race hegemonic status; that is, pluralist analyses raise the fear that all forms of oppression may be coded as racial. At least, the third proposal *requires* us to consider strategically where race begins and ends so that we do not overlook or crush into the discourse of race nonracial oppression. What proposal three does, in effect, is open the air for the voices of victims to speak and be heard with more clarity, which I believe is the intent of racism pluralists. What proposal three does not do is concretely demarcate racial and nonracial forms of oppression, which is both a strength and a weakness. Salient details will vary case to case. Firm determinations may not be possible in many cases, but recognizing that difficulty is itself something that the third proposal helps to enable by calling our attention to the multivalent nature of oppression.

As thinkers have recognized that race discourse in the United States *is* pluralistic, the black-white binary paradigm has become both untenable and common. By taking the binary seriously, the structure of race and racism will fundamentally change. What comes is uncertain, and may not be for the better, but if we are sensitive to both racial and nonracial considerations we have a chance to attend to once hidden modes of victimization. We owe this to all victims, including Trayvon Martin.²⁰

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NOTES

¹ Charles Blow, “The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/opinion/blow-the-curious-case-of-trayvon-martin.html?_r=0

² A recent survey of the philosophical literature on this topic can be found in Katherine T. Gines, “Introduction: Critical Philosophy of Race Beyond the Black/White Binary,” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2013), pp. 28-37. In fact, the essays in this volume represent the cutting edge of philosophical discourse on the binary.

³ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” ed. Maura Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, English ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003. Translations have been adjusted occasionally to reflect better the original French.

⁴ No doubt this quick summary does not do justice to Foucault’s thinking. For further detailed analysis see Robert Bernasconi, “The Politics of Race Mixing: The Place of Biopower within the History of Racisms,” *Bioethical Inquiry*, no. 7 (2010), pp. 205-216; Mary Beth Mader, “Modern Living and Vital Race: Foucault and the Science of Life,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 12 (Oct 2011), pp. 97-112; Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009 and “Decapitating Power,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 12 (2011), pp. 77-96; Chloë Taylor, “Race and Racism in Foucault’s College de France Lectures,” *Philosophy Compass* 6/11 (2011), pp. 746-56. My analysis is unique in focusing on the binary nature of racism.

⁵ Binary thinking also occurs in Foucault’s treatment of the monism of Nazi internal racism. See pages 82, 255, and 257.

⁶ My thanks to David Gougelet for leading me to clarify this point (with which he may not agree).

⁷ I do find race binary to be prevalent and important, though not hegemonic as Foucault’s analysis indicates, and probably not even dominant. More on that topic below.

⁸ Juan F. Perea, “The Black/ White Binary Paradigm of Race: The Normal Science of American Racial Thought,” *California Law Review*, vol. 85, no. 5 (1997), pp. 1213-58. <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/californialawreview/vol85/iss5/3>. Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race Gender, and the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁹ Rene Stutzman, “Trayvon Martin shooting case goes to the State Attorney’s Office today,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 13, 2012. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/os-trayvon-martin-shooting-case-20120312,0,2131784.story>

¹⁰ Rene Stutzman and Henry Pierson Curtis, “Many demand answers on teen shot in Sanford,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 13, 2012. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/breakingnews/os-trayvon-martin-sanford-shooting-20120313,0,7946966.story>

¹¹ Bianca Prieto, “Trayvon Martin: ‘we are gathered here today to demand justice’ in teen’s fatal shooting,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 14, 2012. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/seminole/os-trayvon-martin-shooting-death-rally-20120314,0,4575845.story>

¹² It is worth noting in passing that the black-white paradigm informs discourse by both blacks and whites.

¹³ Rene Stutzman, “George Zimmerman’s father: My son is not racist, did not confront Trayvon Martin,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 15, 2012.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/os-trayvon-martin-shooting-zimmerman-letter-20120315,0,1716605.story>

¹⁴ See also Darryl E. Owens, “Here’s why people are so angry over Trayvon Martin’s death,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, March 17, 2012.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/seminole/os-trayvon-martin-shooting-darryl-owens-031712-20120316,0,3856677.column>

¹⁵ Perea expresses similar ideas, especially at page 1253. See also Ronald R. Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008. Sundstrom delineates several more versions of the black-white binary with careful analysis.

¹⁶ For example, Alcoff references a California Supreme Court case wherein the Justice “concluded that black must mean nonwhite and white must exclude all people of color” (249-50).

¹⁷ For example, Perea describes Feagan and Vera’s *White Racism* as asserting “that normal, paradigmatic research is the key to solving pervasive, multiple racisms.” In other words, black-white binary racism is the lens through which all other racism can, perhaps should, be understood (Perea 1236-7).

¹⁸ We may be reminded here of Alcoff’s concern that moving to an ethnicity paradigm from a race paradigm is difficult because ethnicities are reduced to races (Alcoff 241).

¹⁹ Sundstrom (2008), *op. cit.*, especially chapter 3, seems to take this view. He also argues that nativism and xenophobia are deeply conceptually linked to black-white binary racism. His position is especially germane to Mexican Americans; I do not disagree that this form of nativism is often racialized, but it seems to me that there are nonracialized forms of nativism also and we must be careful not to conflate them.

²⁰ My thanks to Marcus Battle, Robert D’Amico, and David Gougelet for comments on early drafts of this paper. My thanks also to the Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations at the Levin College of Law at the University of Florida whose staff reviewed the article and whose 10th Annual Spring Lecture, “At Close Range: The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin,” gave an occasion for the writing and presentation of this paper.