Chapter 4 - Color
From: The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity
by Kwame Anthony Appiah

THE EXPERIMENT

In 1707, a boy no more than five years old left Axim, on the African Gold Coast, for Amsterdam, aboard a ship belonging to the Dutch West India Company. In those days, the trip to Europe took many weeks, but his arrival in the Dutch port was not the end of his long journey. He then had to travel another few hundred miles to Wolfenbüttel, the home of Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Anton Ulrich was a major patron of the European Enlightenment. His librarian was Gottfried Leibniz, one of the leading philosophers, mathematicians, and inventors of his era, and cocreator, with Isaac Newton, of calculus; and the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel housed one of the most magnificent book collections in the world.

The child had apparently been offered as a "gift" to the duke, who, in turn, handed the boy on to his son, August Wilhelm; and we first hear of him as a member of August Wilhelm's household. From his baptism until 1735, the boy continued to receive the patronage of the dukes of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, as Anton Ulrich was succeeded by August Wilhelm, and August Wilhelm was succeeded by his brother, Ludwig Rudolf, in turn. And, as a child, he would no doubt have met Leibniz, who lived, as he did, under their patronage.

We don't know what the African boy's status was: Had he been enslaved? Was he sent by missionaries for a Christian education? What we do know is that Anton Ulrich took a special interest in him, arranging for his education, and giving him, at his baptism, both his own Christian name and his son's middle name: so the young

man came to be known as Anton Wilhelm. The dukes had apparently taken the occasion of the gift of an African child to conduct one of those famous Enlightenment experiments, aiming to explore whether an African could absorb and contribute to modern scholarship. The ducal family might have been aware of a similar experiment, which began a few years earlier, when Tsar Peter the Great of Russia took an African slave as his godson, naming him Hannibal. He went on to be a successful Russian general, and was the great-grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, the founder of modern Russian literature. (Pushkin began, but never finished, a novel called "The Moor of Peter the Great.")

We're not sure when Anton Wilhelm started using his Nzema name, Amo. At his confirmation, the church records in Wolfenbüttel call him Anton Wilhelm Rudolph Mohre; *Mohr* (Moor) being one of the ways Germans then referred to Africans. But in later life he often called himself Anton Wilhelm Amo Afer, using the word for African in Latin, which was the language of European scholarship. So he wanted to be known as Amo the African.

The experiment with the young African has to be accounted a success. Our knowledge of his early education is sketchy, but Amo, as the duke's godson, perhaps began his schooling at the Wolfenbüttel Ritter-Akademie, alongside the children of the local aristocracy (*Ritter* is the German word for a knight). We do know he went on to the nearby university at Helmstedt, founded more than a century earlier by one of the duke's predecessors. Amo must have flourished there, because he earned the right to go on, in 1727, to study law at the University of Halle, then (as now) one of Germany's leading centers of teaching and research.

Halle took Amo out of the duke's domain into the state of Brandenburg, which was then ruled by the Prussian king. He was awarded a master's degree for his legal thesis at Halle—which dealt, aptly enough, with the European law of slavery—and then went on to study at the University of Wittenberg (where a young Martin Luther had taught theology), becoming the first black African to earn a European doctoral degree in philosophy. Here, he was in the domain of the Elector of Saxony, who was soon to become King of Poland, as well. Along the way, Amo added knowledge of medicine and astronomy to his philosophical and legal training. When the Elector of Saxony came to visit in 1733, Amo was chosen to lead the students' procession in his honor. His Wittenberg thesis, which was published in 1734 under the title, *On the Apatheia of the Human Mind*, makes important criticisms of Descartes's views of sensation.

Amo, who came to know Dutch, French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and, perhaps, English, as well as German, went on to teach at Halle and Jena, publishing, in 1738, a book entitled *The Art of Sober and Accurate Philosophizing*, which discussed issues in almost every area of the subject. He won eminent admirers. The great physicist and philosopher Martin Gotthelf Loescher, who examined his thesis at the University of Wittenberg, spoke of the Gold Coast as "the mother . . . of the most auspicious minds," and added:

> Among these auspicious minds, your genius stands out particularly, most noble and most distinguished Sir, seeing that you have excellently demonstrated felicity and superiority of genius, solidity and refinement of learning and teaching, in countless examples before now, and even in this our University, with great honor in all worthy things, and now also in your present dissertation.[1]

I have said that Amo's education was an experiment. But we need to be careful in deciding what hypothesis it was designed to explore. Amo, as we saw, was referred to as a Moor in his baptismal records and called himself, later, *Afer*, the African. When he wrote about the law of slavery, he titled his work *De jure maurorum* (On the Law of the Moors). The great contemporaneous encyclopedia the *Zedler*, in its definition of the word "Moor," treats it as equivalent to Ethi-

opian or Abyssinian, but continues, "this name is also given to all blacks, like the Negroes, and other African peoples of this color."[2] "*Afer*," in classical Latin, referred to a people—the Afri—who lived around ancient Carthage. But gradually it came to mean a person from Rome's African colonies, and, finally, anyone from the whole continent. Still, it is clear that Amo's black skin linked him in the minds of his German contemporaries not just with all black people but also with other inhabitants of the African continent. These are not, however, as they knew as well as we do, the same thing.

When Johann Gottfried Kraus, the Rector of Wittenberg, complimented Dr. Amo on his successful defense of his dissertation, he began by talking about his African background, mentioning some of the most famous African writers from Antiquity, including the Roman playwright Terence—who, like Amo, had given himself the last name Afer—and Tertullian and St. Augustine, along with other Fathers of the Church born in North Africa. He mentioned the Moors who conquered Spain from Africa. All of these people, as Kraus surely knew, were of Berber or Phoenician or Roman ancestry. None of them would have had dark skin or tightly curled black hair like Amo's. When Luther lived in Wittenberg, his home was an Augustinian monastery, but no picture he would have seen of St. Augustine would have depicted him as black.

So, if the dukes who supported him were interested in whether an African could be a brilliant intellectual, they already knew the answer: people such as Terence, Tertullian, and St. Augustine had long ago proved that they could. Presumably, they were interested in a question not about Africans but about black people, about Negroes. Yet what would you learn from a single experiment with one black man? Did Anton Ulrich and his friends conclude that any black child, taken at random and given Amo's education, would have ended up as a professor of philosophy? And if Amo had not passed the exams, would they have concluded that this showed something about every black person?

THE RISE OF RACE

Three hundred years later, we are bound to see his story through the prism of the modern idea of race. This was not so in Amo's day. Then, everyone agreed there were what I earlier called "peoples," groups of human beings defined by shared ancestry, real or imagined, as there had been since the beginnings of recorded history. But the idea that each people shared a common, inherited biological nature was not yet the consensus among European thinkers. For one thing, most of them still believed in the truth of the biblical story of creation, and that meant that every living person was a descendant of Adam and Eve, and each was also a descendant of one of the sons of Noah, whose family was the only one to survive the Biblical Flood. For another, the idea of distinguishing between the biological and the nonbiological features of human beings was still in the intellectual future. When Leibniz wrote about what distinguished one people from another, he thought what mattered was language. (Indeed, he spent much of his life trying to persuade people to send him information about the languages of various peoples in Europe and Asia, for exactly this reason.) And if you read contemporaneous accounts of what distinguishes the various peoples of the world in the writings of European travelers and the thinkers who read them, the great debates were about the role of climate and geography in shaping color and customs, not about inherited physical characteristics.

This shouldn't be very surprising. The very word "biology" was invented only around 1800 (in Germany, as it happens). Until then, the discussion of the nature of living things took place under the heading of Natural History. And it's only with the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, Amo's contemporary, that scholars began to think of

human beings as part of nature in a way that meant that we could be classified, like other animals and plants, by genus and species. Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, was the person who first classified us as *Homo sapiens*, and who placed us alongside monkeys and apes in the natural order. As he wrote to a colleague, "But I seek from you and the whole world the difference of kind between men and monkeys that follows from the principles of Natural History. Very certainly, I know of none."[3]

Beginning in the years that Amo was in Europe, a contest developed between the older biblical understanding of the nature of humanity and this newer one that grew with the increasing prestige of the scientific study of humankind. In Amo's day, almost everyone would have agreed that, since all human beings had to be descended from the sons of Noah, the different kinds of people might be different because they descended from Shem or Ham or Japheth. The basic division of humankind suggested by this typology was threefold: first, the Semites, like the Hebrews and the Arabs and the Assyrians; second, the darker-skinned people of Africa, including Egyptians and Ethiopians; and, third, the lighter-skinned people of Europe and Asia, like the Greeks, the Medes, and the Persians. That gives you three races: Semites, Blacks, and Whites.[4]

But the travels of European scientists and explorers led to increasing knowledge of the diversity of types among modern human beings, and a greater familiarity, too, with other primates. And it became increasingly difficult to fit every kind of human being into this framework. To begin with, there was the absence of East Asians—like the Chinese and the Japanese—or of Amerindians from the biblical account. Some thinkers even began to wonder if all the people in the world were really descendants of Adam. Over the course of the nineteenth century, out of a noisy debate, three ideas increasingly took hold, ideas that made it harder to accommodate the earlier, biblical picture.

THE RACIAL TRIAD

The first was that you could explain many of the characteristics of individual human beings as a product of their race. People might be assigned to the Negro race on the basis of their skin color and hair, their thicker lips and broader noses. But these visible differences, though important for classification, were only the beginnings of a catalogue of deeper differences. (You'll hear echoes here of the essentialisms I explored in my first chapter.) Arthur de Gobineau, a French count who, in the mid-nineteenth century, published the mammoth *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, sought to expose the differences in aptitudes and appetites that underlay such morphological differences, distinguishing not only among black, yellow, and white, but, within the white race, the distinctly favored "Aryan family." For him, race was a motive force of history. Other theorists produced racial cartographies that varied in detail, but the essential idea—that much that mattered about people was shaped by their race—was broadly accepted.

We might call this idea the racial fixation. And by the last half of the nineteenth century in the world of the North Atlantic, the racial fixation was everywhere. It wasn't just found among medical scientists like Josiah Nott, whose *Types of Mankind*, written with the Egyptologist George Gliddon, became the bible of racial hierarchy for planters in the American South. Literary critics like Matthew Arnold in England, or Hippolyte Taine in France, would explain the work of poets and novelists by speaking of the innate character of the race to which they belonged. "Science has now made visible to everybody the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in race," Arnold writes in the 1860s. Physiologists can contribute to

understanding the nature of races by cataloguing the physical differences between them, he says, but the literary critic must consider the "data . . . afforded by our literature, genius, and spiritual production generally."[5] For each race has a specific genius, a spirit that shows up in its literature. Here is what he thinks the "data" show about the Celtic race, for example, which includes, as I mentioned earlier, the people of Wales and Ireland and Scotland and parts of France: "The Celtic genius [has] sentiment as its main basis, with love of beauty, charm, and spirituality for its excellence, ineffectualness and self-will for its defect."[6] And the "data" here include what the critic sees in their poetic traditions.

Taine, writing again about literature a decade later, says:

> A race, like the Old Aryans, scattered from the Ganges as far as the Hebrides, settled in every clime, and every stage of civilisation, transformed by thirty centuries of revolutions, nevertheless manifests in its languages, religions, literatures, philosophies, the community of blood and of intellect which to this day binds its offshoots together.[7]

For Taine, as for Arnold, literary history is part of the scientific study of race. Taine was one of the half dozen most influential European historians and critics of his era. (The ground-shaking nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called him "the first of living historians.") Matthew Arnold was the most distinguished English literary critic of the later nineteenth century.[8] By their day, then, race was a central preoccupation of European history and literary criticism, and not just of the social and biological sciences.

A second idea that took hold in the years after Amo came to Europe followed from the racial fixation. If your individual character—not just your body, but your temperament, your habits of life, your artistic work—was deeply formed by your race, then we could see the shared nature of a race in each of its members. Each of us not only belonged

to a race, we expressed its nature. The result was that each member of the group was typical: representative, that is, of his or her type.

This form of what we might call "typological" thinking made Amo, in particular, a crucial exemplar in the debates about the capacity of the Negro that took place in the Enlightenment and beyond. For, against this background, Amo's very existence showed something not just about an individual African, but about all Negroes: that the race had the capacity to achieve at the very highest levels in philosophy.

The Abbé Grégoire, the great French revolutionary priest and anti-slavery campaigner, published a survey of the cultural achievements of black people in 1808. He subtitled it "researches on their intellectual faculties, their moral qualities and their literature," and he offered up Amo as evidence for his belief in the unity of the human race and the fundamental equality of black people. Thomas Jefferson had remarked in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) that he could never "find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration."[9] Grégoire sent him a copy of his book *On the Literature of Negroes*, including its extended discussion of Amo's life and work, and asked him to think again.

Amo was not the only counterexample to Jefferson's blighted view of the Negro. Grégoire's exemplary Negroes included Angelo Soliman, another West African enslaved as a child, who had been educated by a marchioness in Messina in Sicily, and became the tutor to the heir to the Prince of Liechtenstein in Vienna, joining the same Masonic lodge as Mozart a couple of decades after Amo's rise to eminence. Soliman was famous for taking walks through Vienna arm-in-arm with the emperor.[10] The French revolutionary priest also told the older tale of Juan Latino, the poet and professor of grammar and Latin in sixteenth-century Granada; known as "El negro Juan Latino," he shows up in the first of the burlesque poems that Cervantes wrote at the start of *Don Quixote*. The black professor is mentioned because he has the "gift of tongues" and so could write in Latin, unlike Cervantes, who must write in the Spanish vernacular.

Reading *On the Literature of Negroes,* Jefferson would have been reminded, too, of his countrywoman Phillis Wheatley, who published in 1773 the first book of poetry by an African-American. George Washington had praised Wheatley as "so favourd by the Muses" after receiving a copy of her patriotic poem "His Excellency George Washington."[11] Part of what we should notice is that these wildly diverse lives were brought together only by the question "What are the intellectual capacities of blacks?"

Behind both the racial fixation and the typological thinking was a third habit of mind: we find ourselves face-to-face once more with our natural essentialism, reconstructed now at the heart of scientific theory. Since the late eighteenth century, the conviction has grown and spread that all of us carry within us something derived from the race to which we belong that explains our mental and physical potential. That something, that racial essence, was inherited biologically, transmitted through procreation. If your parents were of the same race, you shared their common essence. If people of different races married, their offspring carried something of the racial essence of each parent.

Of course, even if there had been a racial essence, it wouldn't have meant that Amo's gift for philosophy told you very much about it. No one ever thought that because Plato or Descartes was a European, every European was capable of works of philosophical genius. But Amo's relevance in Grégoire's argument derived largely from the fact that, for black people, the racial essence was thought by many to rule out real intellectual capacity. The philosopher David Hume, one of the beacons of the Scottish Enlightenment, wrote in a footnote in 1753, "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation." No empire of Mali, then, no Chinese philosophy, no architectural glories of the Mughal Empire.

Immanuel Kant, the most influential European philosopher of the eighteenth century, famously declared, in 1764—it was not his best moment—that the fact that someone "was completely black from head to foot" was a "distinct proof that what he said was stupid."[12] Amo's existence did refute that view. But it was open to those skeptical of Negro capacity to insist that Amo was a singular anomaly. So Grégoire not only assembled the dozen or more extraordinary counterexamples in his book but reported on a visit to a group of black children brought from Sierra Leone to a school founded in London by William Wilberforce, the great evangelical antislavery campaigner, concluding that, so far as he could tell, "there exists no difference between them and Europeans except that of color."[13]

RACE AS RATIONALE

Part of the background to the debate about the capacity of the Negro was the explosion of African slavery in Europe's New World colonies in the Americas. In Amo's years in Germany, the transatlantic slave trade was rising toward its late-eighteenth-century peak, when some 80,000 people a year were transported in shackles from Africa to the New World. Many historians have concluded that one reason for the increasingly negative view of the Negro through the later eighteenth century was the need to salve the consciences of those who trafficked in and exploited enslaved men and women. As Grégoire put it, bleakly but bluntly, "People have slandered Negroes, first in order to get the right to enslave them, and then to justify themselves for having enslaved them. . . ."[14]

Many in Europe needed, in short, to believe that the subjugation of black people was justified by their natural inferiority. This argument—that some people are natural slaves—has a classical ancestry: it can be found in Aristotle. As in Aristotle's day, this view was supported by pointing to the limited achievements of actual slaves. But, Grégoire and others insisted, you couldn't tell much

about what black people were capable of by seeing what most of them achieved in the appalling conditions of New World slavery. Who knew what would happen if all black people were offered the education of Anton Wilhelm Amo? (Or, conversely, if Amo had been sent, like his brother, to work as a slave in the sugarcane fields of Suriname?)

It is, perhaps, worth noting that the discovery that not a single Negro was good at philosophy wouldn't have justified black slavery. As Thomas Jefferson admitted, in responding to the Abbé Grégoire, "Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others."[15] The slanders against the Negro race may have salved some Christian consciences, but they could never have justified what had been done in enslaving millions of black people.

Still, ideology—enlisted by forms of domination from slavery to colonization—does help explain why, at a time when scientists were discarding notions like phlogiston, supposedly the substance of fire, they made extraordinary efforts to assert the reality of race. There were the physical anthropologists, with their craniometrical devices; there were the ethnologists and physiologists and the evolutionary theorists, who, discounting Darwin, propagated notions of race degeneration and separate, "polygenic" origins for the various races. One illustrious discipline after another was recruited to give content to color. And so, in the course of the nineteenth century, in a hubbub of contentious argument, the modern race concept took hold.

MENDELISM

This theory of the racial essence developed before modern genetics. In 1866, a Czech monk by the name of Gregor Mendel published his proposal that the particulate factors we now call "genes" explained the patterns in the inheritance of the characteristics of organisms.[16]

But the significance of his work would not be appreciated for another thirty years. Modern genetic theory, which treated our biological inheritance as the product of tens of thousands of individual factors, did not really begin until around 1900.

Once you grasped the Mendelian picture, though, you could see an alternative to the idea of a racial essence. There need be no underlying single something that explained why Negroes were Negroes or Caucasians Caucasian. Their shared appearance could be the product of genes for appearance that they had in common. And those genes need play no role in fixing your tastes in poetry or your philosophical ideas. The prejudices that Arnold and Taine represented no longer had a foundation in the sciences. There was no longer a theory to support the racial fixation.

On the older view, if you wanted to say that blacks had rhythm, you would declare that a rhythmic sense was part of the Negro essence. On the new scientific view, if all Negroes liked rhythmic music, it had to be either because they happened to come from places where that taste was taught—a shared environment—or because they shared, alongside the genes for skin color or hair, other genes that made for a taste for rhythm. When chromosomes were discovered, in the early twentieth century, you could understand that genes would mostly be inherited independently of one another; even those on the same chromosome could become separated in the cell divisions that precede the creation of each sperm and each egg.

Another thing became clear through the course of twentieth-century genetics. The vast bulk of our genetic material is shared with all normal human beings, whatever their race. Of course, it turned out that we shared a great deal of our genome with our primate cousins, too, though we alone among the great apes have twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. So what was more important was that the existing variation between populations didn't correspond to the old racial categories. Equally significant was the vast variability *within* the populations of Asia or Europe or Africa. Ninety percent of the

world's genetic variation is found in every so-called racial group. Take any two human beings, entirely at random: the continental origin of the majority of their ancestors could play only a relatively small role in accounting for their genetic differences.

All three elements of the older view were put in doubt: the racial fixation and the typological assumption made sense if there was a racial essence. But if there wasn't, then each human being was a bundle of characteristics and you had to have some other reason for supposing that Anton Wilhelm Amo, the African, told you anything more about another black person than he told you about a white person with whom he would also share most of his genes.

It's true that if you look at enough of a person's genes you can usually tell whether they have recent ancestry in Africa or Asia or Europe; and you'll find, naturally, that many have ancestry on two or three continents. (As you've learned, my family is full of such people!) But that's because there are patterns of genes in human populations—which is a fact about groups—not because there are distinctive sets of genes shared by the members of a race, which would be a fact about individuals. Some of the genes that signal my Asante ancestry are different from the ones that identify other people of recent African descent. And many, many people in the world live at the boundaries between the races imagined by nineteenth-century science: between African Negroes and European Caucasians there are Ethiopians and Arabs and Berbers; between the yellow races of East Asia and the white Europeans are the peoples of central and South Asia. Where in India is there a sharp boundary between white and brown and black?

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have made huge strides in understanding the human genome. Statistical techniques allow us to reconstruct the ways in which genes travel (and don't travel) together. So we can find broad patterns of correlation, clusterings of genetic material, that allow us to assign human populations into groups that fade into one another. Because there are no sharp boundaries, some ways of doing this will put together two

people who would be separated by another, equally reasonable, way of doing it. Some biologists think that there are reasons to favor some clusterings over others, because they clump more people into a small number of groups, capturing broader features of the statistical landscape of human variability. Those patterns reflect the ways in which human groups have traveled over the last 100,000 years or so, as well as the history of the forces of selection that have shaped local populations. But what, biologically, makes you you, or me me, isn't best explained by tracing our respective ancestries; it's the total genetic package each of us carries *now*: which genes—among the tiny proportion of our genome that varies in ways that have biological significance—we actually have. (It's also increasingly clear that it matters what microorganisms are living in and on us.) There are patterns in populations, but each of us is an individual. To say that these statistical discoveries vindicate the racial theories of the nineteenth century would be like arguing that the statistical correlation between birth month and the length of a career in the National Hockey League confirms the claims of astrology.[17]

It is clear that genes make a difference, alongside environment, in determining your height or the color of your skin. Some people are cleverer or more musical or better poets than others and, no doubt, part of the explanation for that, alongside environment, is in their genes as well. But those genes are not inherited in racial packages. And so, despite the fact that the genetic story is vastly more detailed than it was a century ago, a fundamental fact remains. If you want to think about how the limits of human capability are set by genetic inheritance, it won't help you to think about those nineteenth-century races: Negro, Caucasian, Oriental.

More than this, what actually matters to us about other people depends on connections that pass through language and culture as well as through our physical bodies. After all, whether or not we share a language, as Leibniz knew, makes a profound difference in how we interact with one another. Pick your favorite way of classifying

people by their genetic similarities into a small number of groups. In each of those groups, the world's largest languages—English, Chinese, Hindi, for example—will be spoken with equal ease and fluency; in each of them, there will be Christians and Muslims and Buddhists; and, yes, in each of them, there will be both philosophers and psychopaths.

What the new understanding of genetics has made clear is that the old picture of race conflated questions of biology and questions of culture. It wanted to explain every difference between groups in terms of an underlying racial essence, inherited by each generation from the one before. Nowadays, it is clear that one of the most distinctive marks of our species is that our inheritance is both biological *and* cultural. Each generation of human beings in a particular society can build on what was learned by the ones before; by contrast, among our great ape cousins, there is little cultural inheritance, and in most other organisms there is almost none. What makes us the wise species—*sapiens*, remember, is the Latin for "wise"—is that our genes make brains that allow us to pick up things from one another that are *not* in our genes. Amo's ability to wrestle with Descartes required his European teachers, not just his African genes. The extended period of dependency that we call childhood is necessary because to be a fully functioning member of our species you need to have the time to learn the things that make us human.

THE COLOR OF POLITICS

The racial assumptions of the nineteenth century were not just scientific; they were also moral. People didn't only belong to natural racial types; they also had a natural and proper preference for—indeed, they had special obligations to—their own kind. Edward W. Blyden, one of the founders of Pan-Africanism, who was born in

the Caribbean but moved to Liberia as a young man, expressed this thought as well as anyone. "Abandoning the sentiment of race," he wrote in a Sierra Leonean newspaper, in 1893, was like trying to "do away with gravitation."[18]

In reality, the history of the world shows that hatred and warfare was as common within the so-called races as it was between them. Over the long haul, indeed, conflict among white Europeans or black Africans or yellow Asians was much more common, since conflict requires contact. There was nothing racial in the fifth-century BCE conflicts between China's warring states, or the sixteenth-century battles that created the Mughal Empire, or between Asante and Denkyira in West Africa at the turn of the eighteenth century, or among the various Amerindian states of Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish.

Still, this dynamic, in which the idea of race becomes the common currency of negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance, would prove dauntingly difficult to withdraw from. That's unfortunate. Because there is little doubt that the race idea was associated with moral disasters from its earliest beginnings. Not only did European racial thinking develop, at least in part, to rationalize the Atlantic slave trade, it played a central role—often a pernicious one—in the development and execution of Europe's nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial projects; and, with the Nazis, it was central in organizing the systematic genocide of millions and millions of people, Jews and Roma, conceived as inferior races, among them. In the Armenian, Herero, and Rwandan genocides, the language of race played a terrifying role alongside the language of nation. It is hard to think about race without mentioning racism, a word that was coined—somewhat belatedly, you might think, given this history—not to evoke hostile white attitudes to blacks but to describe the anti-Semitism of the German National Socialists.

In 1900, in an address "To the Nations of the World" at the first Pan-African Conference in London, the eminent black

intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois proclaimed that the "problem of the twentieth century" was "the problem of the color-line," to wit:

> the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization. . . .[19]

Du Bois was the beneficiary of the best education that our North Atlantic civilization then had to offer. He qualified for a doctorate in Germany, returning home without it only because he couldn't afford to stay to meet the residence requirements, and receiving (almost as a sort of consolation prize) the first doctorate earned by an African-American at Harvard University, in 1895. A year before the London conference, he had published *The Philadelphia Negro*, the earliest detailed, statistical, sociological study of an American community. Anyone with a respect for scholarship was, and is, bound to take his views seriously.

I'm not sure it would be useful to debate which of the many problems in the disaster-filled hundred years that followed Du Bois's observation should count as *the* problem of the twentieth century. But there's no denying that race, as Du Bois understood it, was central around the world in the moral and political life of that century. Du Bois was not remotely parochial in his interests or his analyses: and when he said that race was to be the problem of the twentieth century, he didn't just mean in his own country, and he didn't just mean his own race. He was talking, as he said, about "over half the world"; elsewhere in the address, he spoke not just of "the millions of black men in Africa, America and the Islands of the Sea," but of "the brown and yellow myriads elsewhere."[20] So Du Bois had very much in mind the ways in which race figured in the European colonial schemes that were reshaping Africa and

Asia as well as its role in the American social injustices he had experienced at first hand.

Indeed, European colonial conquest in Africa was still very much under way when he spoke to the delegates in London. In West Africa, the final British conquest of Kumasi, where I grew up, occurred just a few weeks after Du Bois's London conference; and the Sokoto caliphate, in northern Nigeria, was conquered only in 1903. In the North, Morocco became a French protectorate in 1912, Egypt a British one in 1914. To the east, Ethiopia remained independent until 1936 (and became so again a mere five years later). To the south, the Boer War was still in bloody progress when Du Bois spoke. In all of these African conflicts, notions of race played a crucial role; and after the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which defined Europe's shared understanding of the terms of its African empires, the status of the subject peoples in the Belgian, British, French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese colonies of Africa—as well as in independent South Africa—was defined in racial terms.[21]

BLOODLINES

Du Bois was not alone in failing to anticipate that race would also play a disastrous role in the history of Europe itself in the mid-twentieth century; but, familiar as he was with German culture at the turn of the century, he was well aware that attitudes to the Jews and the Slavs there had resonances with the antiblack racism he knew from his homeland. Nevertheless, his German training left him touched by the anti-Semitism that was already on the rise during his student years. In 1893, a year after arriving in Berlin, he wrote,

> It must be ever remembered that the great capitalists of Germany, the great leaders of industry are Jews; moreover, banded together

by oppression in the past, they work for each other, and aided by the vast power of their wealth, and their great natural abilities, they have forced citadel after citadel, until now they practically control the stock-market, own the press, fill the bar and bench, are crowding the professions—indeed there seems to be no limit to the increase of their power. This of course is a menace to the newly nationalized country. . . .[22]

That "of course" would have received more than a murmur of assent in many places in Europe and the Americas. Du Bois was taking for granted here not just the standard grumblings of the enemies of German Jewry but also the idea that the German nation was the home to a German race, a race to which Germany's Jews, however assimilated, could not belong; and in thinking of nations in racial terms, he was following the theories whose rise I have been sketching. These notions persisted well into the twentieth century: during the Second World War, Winston Churchill's doctor wrote in his diaries, apropos of the prime minister's attitude to China: "Winston thinks only of the color of their skin; it is when he talks of India or China that you remember he is a Victorian."[23]

Despite his youthful parroting of anti-Jewish commonplaces, Du Bois was, for most of his adult life, a powerful critic of anti-Semitism along with other forms of racism. He visited Nazi Germany for six months in 1936—taking in a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* at Bayreuth—and when he returned he wrote frankly (in one of his country's leading black newspapers, the *Pittsburgh Courier*) that the "campaign of race prejudice . . . surpasses in vindictive cruelty and public insult anything I have ever seen; and I have seen much." And he went on, in distinct contrast to the tone of his 1893 report: "There has been no tragedy in modern times equal in its awful effects to the fight on the Jew in Germany. It is an attack on civilization comparable only to such horrors as the Spanish Inquisition and the African Slave trade."[24] This was more than five years before the creation of the first *Todeslager*, as the Nazis called the camps created specifically for the purposes of mass murder.

The Nazis did not invent modern racially motivated mass murder, though. The first genocide of the twentieth century began in the German colony of South West Africa, which is now Namibia. In 1904, General Lothar von Trotha issued what came to be known as his *Vernichtungsbefehl*—an extermination order—in which he told the Herero that if they did not abandon their lands, he would shoot "every Herero man, with or without weapons" and that he would "accept no more women and children," expelling them or allowing them, too, to be shot.[25] And, as the world now knows, the recurrent mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire rose to the level of genocide in the period of the First World War, as modern Turkey came into being. The Armenians might not have been one of Du Bois's races, but the Ottomans thought of them as a community of shared ancestry with more than religion and culture in common; one needs little more than this to be thinking in racial terms. As for the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the separation of the country's people into two races, Hutu and Tutsi (with a dash of Twa) was the product of Belgian colonial racial theory. All three were on the same side of the color line: but what Du Bois meant by the problem of the color line didn't have to be literally about color.

Against this somber background, it's worth reminding ourselves, then, that the 6 to 9 million Soviet citizens whose deaths were due to Stalin, or the even greater numbers of Chinese who succumbed in the Great Leap Forward, or the millions of victims of the murderous policies of Pol Pot in Cambodia, or the hundreds of thousands killed in India's partition or the anticommunist campaigns in Indonesia in the 1960s, were mostly the victims of hostilities based on ideology or religion, rather than anything like race.[26]

RACISM'S RANGE

Violence and murder were not the only political problems that Du Bois associated with the color line. Civic and economic inequality between races—whether produced by government policy, by private discrimination, or by the very complex interactions between the two of them—were pervasive features of states at the start of the twentieth century, and they remained so long after that first Pan-African conference was but a distant memory. All around the world, people know of the struggle of African-Americans and of South Africa's nonwhite population for racial equality; but political struggles over racial inequality have been central in the politics of Australia, New Zealand, and most of the other countries of the Americas, as well, whether the racial groups seeking justice were first peoples or the descendants of African slaves or South or East Asian indentured laborers. Over time, as non-Europeans, including many citizens of Europe's former empires in Asia and Africa, have migrated into Europe in increasing numbers, questions of racial inequality in rights, in education, in employment and housing, and in income and wealth have come to the fore there, too. Japanese and Chinese people were, in Du Bois's mind, on the same side of the color line as he was.

But the condescension (and worse) displayed toward China by many Japanese in the decades between the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and World War II is naturally thought of as racial, too. The sheer viciousness of the murder and rape in the massacre in Nanking, capital of the Republic of China, in 1937–38, where tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of people were killed by Japanese soldiers, is a paradigm of racist violence. The continued denial by many Japanese of the scale, or even the occurrence, of these atrocities mirrors the

forms of denial of those who deny the mass murder of Armenians in Turkey or Jews in the Nazi genocide.

Less violent, but as racially grounded, are the anti-African attitudes reported by black visitors to China, who hear themselves described as *hēi guǐ* (black ghosts). Among the hundreds of thousands of Chinese now working in Africa, racial condescension of a sort familiar from the European colonial period is common (and, alas, anti-Chinese attacks have occurred in many African countries in recent years).[27] While these East Asian attitudes must have roots in earlier traditions of the sort of xenophobia that is found historically around the planet, they are no longer independent of racial attitudes that came from the traditions of Europe and North America. Racial discrimination and insult remain global phenomena.

Still, once more, it's worth insisting that ethnoracial inequality is not the only social inequality that matters. In 2013, the nearly 30 million white people below the poverty line in the United States made up slightly more than half the total number of America's poor.[28] Nor is racial discrimination the only significant form of discrimination. Ask the Christians of Somalia or Indonesia, Europe's Muslims, or Uganda's LGBTQ people. Ask women everywhere.

LOCALIZING RACE

Racial concepts work out in particular ways in particular places. In the United States, the social idea that anyone with one black parent was also black meant that a person could be socially black but have skin that was white, hair that was straight, eyes that were blue. As Walter White, the midcentury leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (a man whose name was one of his many ironical inheritances), wrote in his autobiography: "I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits

of my race are nowhere visible upon me." (In "The Ballad of Walter White," the African-American poet Langston Hughes put it more succinctly: "Now Walter White / Is mighty light.")[29]

In the colonial context, race thinking produced anomalies, too. Treating all Africans in Nigeria, say, as Negroes would combine people with very different biological traits. Rates of multiple births are much higher among Yoruba than among Hausa women, to take a random example, never mind the considerable cultural differences between the two groups.[30] If there were interesting traits of national character, they belonged not to races but to ethnic groups: and people of one ethnic group—Arabs from Morocco to Oman; Jews in the diaspora—could come in a wide range of colors and hair types.

I mentioned that some scholars have sought to reintroduce a biological race concept in recent years, using sophisticated statistical techniques that uncover patterns among individual genotypes that reflect shared ancestry. But none of these arguments would support the claim that the boundaries of the social groups we call races are drawn by biological rather than social means.[31] Discussions of the social significance of race, then, need not be distracted by arguments about whether the groups in question are biological. Members of a socially constructed group can differ statistically in biological characteristics from one another (as rural folk in the United States differ in some health measures from urban people); and whether we should treat someone differently in virtue of the statistical characteristics of a group to which she belongs is always a separate question from whether such group differences exist. As a result, when questions arise about the salience of race in political life, it is seldom a good idea, as Du Bois was one of the first to argue, to turn to questions of biology.

You might think that, because racial difference is not biological, it must be more malleable; but this is a mistake. Whether a biological difference is malleable depends on its nature: skin color, as we all know, can be affected by exposure to the sun; the appearance of hair

can be chemically manipulated; differences in susceptibility to disease can be eradicated by vaccination; noses can be altered by surgery. Conversely, as we have learned in the United States, racial disparities in wealth and in many other measures can persist long after the government has given up trying to impose them. In 2009, the median wealth of American white households was twenty times that of black households, almost half a century after the 1965 Voting Rights Act.[32] The recognition that these differences are produced by social processes has not made it any less difficult to alter them.

COLOR INSIDE THE LINES

In the twenty-first century, one might have hoped to see signs that race thinking and the hostilities grounded in race—the problem of the color line—might be vanishing. Yet belief in an essential difference between Us and Them persists widely and continues to be thought by many to be inherited. And, of course, differences among groups defined by common descent can be the basis of social identity whether or not they are believed to be based in biology. As a result, ethnoracial categories continue to be important in politics at the national level, and racial identities shape people's political affiliations.

Once ethnoracial groups are in place, inequalities between them, whatever their causes, provide bases for political mobilization. Many people now know that we are all, in fact, one species, and think that racial differences are, from a biological point of view, illusory; but that seldom undermines the significance for them of racial identities and affiliations. Around the world, people have sought and won affirmative action for their ethnoracial groups. In the United States, in part because of affirmative action, public opinion polls consistently show wide divergences on many questions along racial lines.[33] On American campuses where the claim that "race is a social construct" echoes like

a mantra, Asian, black, and white identities continue to shape social experience. Conversely (in part, I suspect, because essentialism is so natural to us), many people around the world simply couldn't be persuaded that race, as we experience it in social life, is a "construct."

When I think about why the racial fixation has proved so durable, I sometimes recall the lost-wax method by which goldweights in Ghana are cast. (You create a wax model, surround it with clay, and melt the wax away by pouring in molten brass.) In this case, the nineteenth-century race concept is the lost wax: the substance may have melted away, but we've intently filled the space it created. In the United States, nativists aim to define the country in terms of color and creed (namely, white and Christian). On the other side of the color line, the persistence of material inequality gives a mission to racial identities, for how can we discuss inequities based on color without reference to groups defined by color?

One reason race continues to play a central role in international politics, as well, is the politics of racial solidarity that Du Bois helped to inaugurate in the black world, in cofounding the tradition of Pan-Africanism. It shows up in diverse ways: African-Americans are more likely than whites to be interested in U.S. foreign policy in Africa; people in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, protested the 2014 killing of Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri; black Americans have a special access to Ghanaian passports; Rastafarianism in the Caribbean celebrates Africa as the home of black people; and heritage tourism from North and South America and the Caribbean to West Africa has boomed.[34]

But Pan-Africanism is not the only movement in which groups defined by common ancestry show transnational solidarity: many Jews show an interest in Israeli politics; Chinese follow the fates of Chinese in their diaspora; Japanese follow goings-on in São Paulo, home to more than a million people of Japanese descent—and to perhaps a million people of Arab descent (largely Lebanese), some of whom follow events in the Middle East.[35] Identities rooted in the reality or the fantasy of shared ancestry remain central in our politics, both within and between nations. In this new century, as in the last, the color line and its cousins are still going strong. Race, you might say, has become a palimpsest, a parchment written upon by successive generations where nothing is ever *entirely* erased. Often with the most benevolent of intentions, and sometimes with the least, we keep tracing the same contours with different pens.

GOING HOME

At some point, Amo Afer put aside his own pen. Reaching middle age, he decided that it was time to go home, and, in 1747 he made his way back to the Gold Coast, to the Nzema villages of his birth. It was a bold move. Someone who had been raised in the heartland of the European Enlightenment and had built a scholarly career in some of the most prestigious seats of European learning was now turning his back on the grand experiment he embodied and resolving to make a life in a land he'd last glimpsed as a small child.

We can only guess why. There is some suggestion that increasing color prejudice in this period in Germany—the early stirrings of Europe's racial fixation—may have caused discomfort: a satirical play was performed in Halle in 1747 in which Astrine, a young German woman, refuses the amorous advances of an African philosophy teacher from Jena named Amo. "My soul," Astrine insists, "certainly cannot ever love a Moor."[36] The work demonstrates that Amo was a famous figure in Halle. But the rejection of the Moor is Astrine's, not the author's; and some conjecture that what drove Amo off was not racial prejudice but a broken heart.

We know a little more of what happened to him. A Dutch ship's doctor met him in the mid-1750s at Axim. "His father and a sister were still alive and lived four days' journey inland," the doctor reported.

He also reported that Amo, whom he described as "a great sage," had "acquired the reputation of a soothsayer."[37] Both sage and soothsayer: This is someone who knew that the deliverances of the Enlightenment were no less his own than those of his Nzema ancestors.

Sometime later, Amo moved from Axim and went to live in Fort St. Sebastian, one of a couple of dozen forts and castles on the coast of Ghana that served the slave trade, near the town of Shama, where he is buried. (It's a mere dozen miles from where, a century and a half later, Kwame Nkrumah, the world's best-known Nzema, was born.) Today, we're left with questions: What did the soothsayer tell people he had learned from his long sojourn in the north? And how did he explain his decision to leave behind everything he had built there? It's impossible not to wonder whether his was a flight from color consciousness, a retreat to a place where he would not be defined by his complexion. A place where Amo Afer could be just Amo again; where he didn't need to be *the* African. Indeed, his odyssey asks us to imagine what he seems to have yearned for: a world free of racial fixations. It asks if we could ever create a world where color is merely a fact, not a feature and not a fate. It asks if we might not be better off if we managed to give up our racial typologies, abandoning a mistaken way of thinking that took off at just about the moment when Anton Wilhelm Amo was a well-known German philosopher at the height of his intellectual powers.