

## Racism's Labyrinth<sup>1</sup>

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Critics of identity politics often blame it for heightening people's sense of their own particularisms thus also making incidental differences, especially racial, seem irreconcilable. More to the point, they argue that race is merely a social construct and identities aren't fixed or stable, so why rely on such shaky concepts to describe oneself or to seek racial equity?

My quarrel with such arguments isn't over the claim that race isn't "real" or that identities are fluid; rather, it is with the implicit assumption that an idea needs to be real or true in order for one to be impacted by it. Race may indeed be unreal but the racial labyrinths that exist in Western societies are not and neither are the psychological costs of trying to negotiate them. I want to make this point by sharing something of my own experiences in the U.S. which, from having lived here for nearly thirty years, I know are hardly unique.

Like other immigrants from the "darker nations,"<sup>2</sup> I also stepped into the minefield of U.S. race relations as a newly minted "minority" by becoming a "naturalized" citizen. So, I went from being a formerly colorless "legal alien" (a Pakistani) to being classified as an Asian, albeit one now cathected to America. In truth, of course, Asian-American is not a race since Asia and America (or, rather, the U.S., since two whole continents are called America), are "imagined geographies," to borrow Edward Said's (1979) phrase. Hyphenating them doesn't make them into a racial category. Moreover, if what marks my race are geographic links to Asia and the U.S., then my simultaneous designation as a "woman of color" unmoors me from a sense of place altogether. Yet, in the end, place does end up trumping race because, although I am called ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, Native), when push comes to shove, I don't count as much as a U.S.-born "minority." At the point when folks start asking just how many faculty of color there *really* are on my campus, I stop being ALANA and start being referred to as a stateless and deracinated "international" instead.

One can, of course, dismiss these incoherent and slippery identities as mere legal fictions but it's harder to disregard the pervasive and intractable national discourse on race that treats it as an aspect of one's very being, an ontology, rather than a taxonomy invented by the Europeans. We *know* that they only became white in the fifteenth century, in the course of colonizing the people they encountered beyond their own geographic borders. All this tells us is that, in the topography of their imaginations, human diversity was perceived as racial difference and difference itself became a signifier of inequality. It tells us nothing about the people they conquered or even about the idea of race. If

knowing all this, Western states can continue to deploy race as an organizing principle of social life today, it just goes to show that colonial practices were always functional at “home” as well.

To say that race was a figment of the European colonial imaginary, however, is not to say that there is no globalized system of racial oppression or no such thing as an epistemology of white privilege. Long before I crossed the borders of the U.S., I encountered this epistemology in my education at the hands of British and U.S. Catholic nuns and missionaries in Pakistan. This educational trajectory, which mirrored that of my parents, created in me a view of the world and of my place in it as a Muslim that was anti-Islamic and Eurocentric. But, I learned this rather late in my life and at the cost of having to excavate and undermine my own intellectual foundations.

This excavation happened in the U.S. partly because it was here that I stumbled on the counter-narratives that eventually allowed me to reorient my intellectual universe. In Pakistan, not only was I unaware of alternative views of history and, indeed, of alternative histories, but I didn't feel an emancipatory urge because we didn't feel overwhelmed by race or see it as being decisive. In fact, we could see its hollowness. Thus, even though white missionaries had cultivated the West in our minds and we spoke the colonizers' language at home, I also grew up in a part of the world that had shaken off British colonial rule. Of India's many conquerors, they were the only ones who hadn't become Indian and the only ones to be driven out and, to many of us, this signaled their moral defeat. In the face of this defeat, it was hard to view race as signifying ontological superiority or even the permanence of privilege.

In the U.S., though, it is precisely a system of generational advantages and disadvantages that the ideology of white supremacy underwrites and, yet, except for right-wing racists, white people don't overtly claim their whiteness. In fact, many refuse to name themselves as such. While ALANA people are always only ALANA, white people prefer to self-identify as liberals, feminists, conservatives, and so on. None the less, I feel that it is race, and even racism, that permits their political individuation since it is in their relationship to *other* people's race that whites also differentiate themselves politically. For instance, I know most liberals from their desire to experience an exotic racial otherness; feminists from their view of women of color as teachable moments writ large, and conservatives from their attacks on the “unqualified minorities” they fear have invaded the academy. Naturally, not all white people fit these categories and nor are the categories mutually exclusive; my point, rather, is that racial differences are vital to constructing political identities even if the people who are constructing them persist in feigning race and color-blindness.

Whether white people want to claim their whiteness or not, whiteness claims them<sup>3</sup> by positioning them as potential saviors of people of color. Liberals speak on our behalf; feminists tutor us, and conservatives discipline us, all of which are ways of saving us from ourselves. I am no stranger to the Catholic redemption narrative, but what I find foreign are the salvational pedagogies of a racism that is packaged as a secular good. Having dispensed with the idea of a religious savior, it seems Western secular democracies have embraced a racial logic that allows *all* white people to play at being redeemers. Now, *everyone* can save me, though for what reward, remains debatable.

Even though this secular whiteness feels foreign to me, I don't use my foreignness as an alibi to seek an out from U.S. racial politics unlike many immigrants who dislike being racialized. Distancing oneself from this politics does not indemnify one from the violence of racism and, more crucially, it forecloses the possibility of fighting against it. Ironically, then, it is also racism that allows me to differentiate myself politically by seeking solidarities with people with whom I do not share a common religion or history or culture. If there were no racism, our lives would not intersect in the quite ways in which they do.

This uncomfortable truth suggests that racism creates psychic investments in its own preservation on the part not only of those who are its beneficiaries but also of those who are marginalized or oppressed. Perhaps such investments are unavoidable in societies where not just access to resources but also modes of recognition are aligned with racial hierarchies. However, if the point is to dismantle such a system, in which power itself is racialized, then an identity politics that does not actively seek to divest from it is hardly productive. But, at the other end, neither are anti-identitarian critiques that, while getting us to think critically about the constructed nature of race and identity blithely ignore the reality of racism. Meanwhile, all of us continue to be locked into this racial labyrinth together, with little sense of how to get out of it.

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this essay, I have benefited from suggestions and critiques by Ulises Mejias as well as from (spirited) disagreements with Madhavi Menon and Naeem Inayatullah.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is Vijay Prashad's. *The Darker Nations*; New Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> I have borrowed the idea that whiteness claims people from Paula Ioanide.