

**BOOK REVIEW**

*Critical Philosophy of Race:  
Essays*

Robert Bernasconi. Oxford:  
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*Critical Philosophy of Race: Essays* collects fifteen wide-ranging contributions by Robert Bernasconi on topics in the philosophy of race and the intellectual history of racial ideologies. Each chapter bears the distinctive traits of its author, displaying the historical depth and contextual subtlety of a scholar who possesses a remarkable facility with texts on these subjects. His basic procedure is to forage through understudied and often rare primary sources in order to reconstruct episodes of argument or ideology that lend nuances to our histories and philosophies of race. One rhetorical difficulty with this approach is that there can appear to be too many trees in the forest, as new contexts and details sprout up paragraph after paragraph. For my part, I prefer these dense woodlands to the desert landscapes offered by other scholars. Nonetheless, in this review I will resist the temptation to chop through the considerable textual thickets that our author has mapped for us. I present instead a picture of the *kurieuon logos* or “guiding argument” running through these fifteen chapters.

As befits Bernasconi’s intention to present the philosophy of race as a critical enterprise, the guiding argument has a largely negative cast. Its main premise is that an exaggerated distinction between nature and culture has underwritten an overly simple opposition between racial realism and

social constructionism. One result of this distinction is an artificial division of labor in the academy, for instance, between natural and social sciences. So critical philosophers of race must play a sort of Humpty Dumpty with their literary sources. A second, more damaging result is an ineffective strategy of antiracism. It turned race into an exclusively biological concept, one that belongs to nature rather than culture. When biologists eventually declared that there are no races, racism appeared to be an epistemological error: a racist, on the account targeted for criticism, is someone who discriminates against others on the basis of a false biological notion. Proponents of the standard approach thereby leave the moral, political, and social facts of racism largely untouched, obfuscating their power and suggesting something of their anomalousness due to the supposed biological unreality of race.

A second key premise of the guiding argument is that racism “has frequently changed its form and the language in which it is expressed” (1). Race and racism are shifting targets of analysis, and to identify their current forms we will need a proper genealogical run-up.<sup>1</sup> Bernasconi’s critical philosophy of race is thus an historical enterprise undertaken with an activist intention, and he argues that rival accounts of racism are overly simple and lack sufficient historical scope:

Most accounts of race and racism do not do enough to differentiate the different forms of racism, reducing it to a belief in the essential inequality of the human races. But there are many racisms. They include systemic, essentialist, xenophobic, environmentalist, gradualist (in terms of the alleged spread of civilization), and medicalizing racism. It is important to be aware of all these different forms and their different targets, both because they often coexist and also because attempts to combat one form of racism can reinforce another. (87–88)

Despite this warning and the sometimes-dizzying details of his genealogies, Bernasconi offers a fairly straightforward outline of his project. The five articles in Section II trace “The Construction of Race” from early modernity to the end of the nineteenth century, resulting in an historical or diachronic race-concept focused largely on reproduction. Section III provides a five-article interlude called “Black Philosophers Speak Out,” in which our author presents the insights of Afro-Caribbean and African-American thinkers as antidotes to some of these older racist theories. And the four

articles in Section IV treat “The Construction of the Concept of Racism,” deploying the guiding argument as an attack on mainstream liberal approaches to racism. Bernasconi’s conclusion is that the popular notion of racism, codified in the UNESCO statements of 1951, was not informed by a genuine study of racist social formations (e.g., slavery, eugenics). Instead, UNESCO identified, and the academy subsequently adopted, the same strategy, only a kind of *racism lite*: once the term “racism” came to denote the error of using a wrong biological notion, it became an easy game to dispense with this racism lite while leaving the real racial problems in our world—*racism extra*—untouched.<sup>2</sup>

All this negative work purports to produce a positive result: once we glimpse precisely how Humpty fell apart, we might put him together such that we can meaningfully track, and possibly counteract, the real racism operating in our world. The guiding argument, then, should be a very salutary development, one that would equip us (to quote the first sentence of the book) to put “philosophy to work in the fight against racism” (1). The most reasonable task for a critical reviewer, then, is to try and strengthen Bernasconi’s guiding argument. I attempt to do so mainly by separating it somewhat from the rhetorical contexts in which Bernasconi first articulated its premises. Running through these articles, in particular, is something of a defense of continental philosophy against the more analytic forms of the philosophy of race. On at least a few points he meets with success. Bernasconi *has* developed an important set of arguments about race and racism partly by examining texts from the continental tradition. But I take this to be merely a biographical fact about the author, and I find that many of his conclusions may be better defended when removed from their original contexts. The main points of contention, between him and me, are his frequent appeals to a phenomenological method and his reliance on a few canonical European philosophers like Nietzsche, Foucault, and Sartre.

Bernasconi himself acknowledges, in his introduction, that our arguments ought not lean too heavily on our own subdisciplinary heritage:

Critical philosophy of race is at a crossroads. It is not enough to say that if one is an analytic philosopher, then one will address it in one way, but if one is a continental philosopher, one will approach it in another way, as if the decision were neutral. The approach one adopts must be determined not by one’s training but by the subject matter to be addressed. (9)

And it is true, as he proceeds to argue in most chapters, that philosophers from the continental tradition have offered many insights on race that analytic philosophers have yet to duly consider. But despite this, the continental versus analytic issue ought not be overstated: that is a local debate between two schools of Anglo-European philosophy. It is unlikely that the keys to understanding our global, or even our local, problems with race and racism will derive (*except* biographically) from either side of such a provincial divide. So, in reviewing Bernasconi's histories and arguments I will try to remove the husk of continental methods and recommend a somewhat different and more interdisciplinary approach in its place. Here as elsewhere Bernasconi offers some of the key argumentative moves that need only be abstracted and reapplied.

### 1. The Rise of the Diachronic Notion of Race

After a brief introductory chapter that places its subject mainly within the continental tradition, *Critical Philosophy of Race* presents five articles (Section II) on "The Construction of Race" through the late nineteenth century. The end goal of the section is to sketch a big history of how race concepts arose in a variety of endeavors (social, political, scientific, etc.). But the section culminates in a distinctive concept of race in the masterful (Chapter 6) "Crossed Lines in the Racialization Process: Race as a Border Concept," which is probably the best summary of Bernasconi's approach to these subjects. In that article, he explains the relationship between race—*die Sache selbst*—and racial categories. Race is an interpretive prism through which we experience our fellow humans, and we do so by applying common terms such as "white" or "Caucasian." But these categories are fluid and interrelated. Racial terms such as "Black" or "white" apply differently over time and across contexts, and they possess a kind of meaning holism. Something similar holds of races themselves, suggesting that we should not study a given race "in isolation from the other races with which it has dealings" (107).

Bernasconi argues further that in order to understand a given racial term at a given time and context, we should look to its borders rather than to its center. What, for instance, did "Black" or its equivalent terms mean in America at the turn of the twentieth century? To answer that we need to look to history and the law, for instance at the many attempts to define

Blackness fractionally. These culminated, rather famously, in the one-drop rules common to American antimiscegenation law. But the concept “Black” was thereby fixed largely by its boundary cases: attempted passers, octo-rooms, and others who might have fit less obviously into the working racial scheme. At various points such schemes tend to break under the right pressures, but race and racism do not for that matter lose their grip on the world. Instead, new categories form just as new people are birthed. The “historical component” of the critical philosophy of race focuses partly on these shifts among categories, and the consequent changes of racialization scheme:

Rather than seeing race in the United States as a rigid system whose boundaries were protected by laws, we should see it as a fluid system that never succeeded in maintaining the borders it tried to establish, but whose resilience came from the capacity of the dominant class within the system to turn a blind eye to their inability to police those boundaries effectively. (118)

Bernasconi takes great efforts to highlight inconsistencies—among racial science, law, various practices of racialization, reproductive issues, etc.—in the history of racism. But this does not prevent him from presenting and defending a straightforward historical thesis about the concept of *a* race or races. He argues in particular that in the mid- to late-nineteenth century there was a basic shift from a static to a dynamic conception. The early modern classification schemes, whether we look to Linnaeus, Kant, or Blumenbach, consisted of simple divisions of the four or five varieties of human. In some cases (e.g., Kant) these were supposed to be permanent, whereas in others (Blumenbach) there is a greater sense of the contingency of the categories themselves. But it was not until much later that theorists came to view races as the products of human activity, and Bernasconi identifies historians as the lead actor on this stage: “It was in the context of the writing of history that the focus shifted decisively from a largely static portrayal of races to an account which highlighted the fashioning or making of races” (59).

Bernasconi thus argues that races are diachronic objects,<sup>3</sup> but that both race terms and so the theories based on them are unstable. This explains both why a race is an object best identified across a large swath of time, as Du Bois once argued, and why there are conceptual difficulties in the historical

identification of any particular race (as Appiah once lamented in reply to Du Bois).<sup>4</sup> Although I might dispute some of the ways in which Bernasconi tells the story, I find the basic argument about the rise of diachronic race concepts to capture a genuine strain common to theories from all disciplinary stripes. We find in the nineteenth century a geology, a geography, an historiography, and an ethnography that offer big-picture accounts of how the Earth, the climate, the legal practices developed in forests by Teutonic tribes, or what have you, led to the production of the white race and hence to civilization. The question driving all these scientific pursuits of the late nineteenth century was no longer, as with Linnaeus or Kant, *What are the subdivisions of humankind?* but rather *How have the extant races been made?* (This of course often really meant variously *What made the white race superior?* or *Why did the nonwhite races not similarly progress?*)

The diachronic race concept would eventually receive its mature scientific shape in Mendelian genetics, and its crowning philosophical synthesis in Du Bois's notion of race as a "vast family." Before arriving at these key moments, Bernasconi tours a few dozen episodes in the history of nineteenth-century racism, especially in his concise chapters 3 and 4 "The Philosophy of Race in the Nineteenth Century" and "Racial Science in the Nineteenth Century." The latter chapter introduces the cast of villains (Josiah Nott, Samuel Cartwright, Louis Agassiz) who defended polygenism, or the thesis that the four or five "main" races were in fact distinct species. There is much to say about Bernasconi's accounts of the details of the mid-century, but the big-picture point is simple: polygenesis is the paradigmatic example of a static conception, as it does not account for how races might evolve or change shape. It also became untenable once Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* were received by a critical mass of scientists. The requirements of a race theory then became developmental or historical, and our libraries contain scores of treatises composed with the intent to satisfy these requirements.

In "Philosophy of Race in the Nineteenth Century," Bernasconi argues that an effective history of racism will examine theories chiefly in relation to the relevant social movements, and so he derides some of the standard practices of historians of philosophy:

Any account of the history of the concept of race needs to be broad. A critical philosophy of race cannot confine its historical component to listing what the canonical philosophers have had to say

about race: their contributions can only be assessed if they are seen in their context, that is to say, as interventions in ongoing scientific debates and responses—or failures to respond—to the social movements of the day: such as calls for the abolition of slavery, the pursuit of Empire, and demands for segregation. (51)

In these chapters Bernasconi thus sifts through both scientific contexts (e.g., polygenism or Darwinism) and social movements. Everyone's ears should perk at this moment: we citizens of the early twenty-first century have our own social issues that provide the context for our theorizing activities. Replacing slavery, empire, and segregation, namely, are incarceration, migration, environmental and medical crises, as well as scores of other issues in which matters of race and racism play a leading role. Critical philosophers of race who wish to abide by Bernasconi's guiding argument—which is to say, those who seek an activist philosophy of race—will have to decide how to respond to the social movements of our own day. We also need to recognize both the similarities and the differences between our moments and the racial politics that gave birth, for instance, to Jim Crow. But we can do this effectively only if we understand how our common notions of race and racism were formed in response to a substantially different set of issues.<sup>5</sup> Much of these sections of *Critical Philosophy of Race* focus appropriately on the social issues consequent to nineteenth-century science. Key to Bernasconi's story is how the triumphs of Darwin and Mendel in particular ceded to regrettable developments such as eugenics.

The big theoretical question underlying so much science and philosophy in this period—*How have the extant races been produced?*—rather obviously makes room for a series of more future-directed corollary issues: if races are produced, do they also decline or even die out? If races decline, might they not rather be conserved, preserved, improved upon, etc? What actions do we need to embark upon if we are to combat racial decline or even elimination? With these questions we find ourselves, if we look to the writings of white scholars, among some of the more disturbing relics of the Victorian age. There were panics over amalgamation and race mixing, immigration restrictions, antimiscegenation laws, and eventually lynching and segregation in order to protect white women from Black men, etc. In the face of all these harrowing topics, Bernasconi remains concise and scholarly, offering a few well-enough documented historical theses on the subjects. He concludes that “By the middle of the nineteenth century, the

Northern European obsession with race mixing had been turned into a law of history based in biology" (58).

But the more important moments in the period from about 1880 to 1920 were political. The historical accounts of races purported to show race mixing to be destructive of human culture. The key political questions then appealed to the set of possible collective actions that might prevent the decline of a given civilization cum race, especially the white, or the Nordic, or eventually the Aryan race. The relevant questions in these contexts concerned how to guide the future of a race. And the obvious answer is that we do so by controlling reproduction. So, in the late nineteenth century there arose what Bernasconi calls, in his elegant title to chapter 5, "The Policing of Race Mixing." We learn how a slew of writers responded to worries about amalgamation with the various rationales for segregation, not to mention the newly discovered science of eugenics and other travesties of the age.

Whereas "Race as Border Concept" is Bernasconi's most successful article in the relevant historical genre, "The Policing of Race Mixing" is his least successful. Here, much more than elsewhere, his intradisciplinary program obscures the big argument. The premise of the chapter is that the historical shift in late nineteenth-century race theory was accompanied by a medicalizing of racial discourse. That is true, and the contemporary scholar is in possession of several dozen volumes on medical history that detail this fascinating subject.<sup>6</sup> Bernasconi instead mixes his admirable intention to wade into the relevant material—i.e., to examine how medical discourses overtook race concepts in the period in question and then deployed them to social ends such as the restricting of race mixing—with some misguided references to Foucault: he wishes to claim Foucault's notion of "biopower" as "a valuable tool for those engaged in the task of clarifying the history of racism" (87). That might indeed seem a promising rhetorical move if one's audience is already committed to viewing Foucault as an important figure, as is probably true of the original audience for the article (in *Research in Phenomenology*). But in the context of this book, the move fails: instead of engaging the extant research on the question, and advising his readers to do the same, he appeals to the lone figure whose name might invoke the authority of a certain philosophical canon. But Bernasconi himself acknowledges (89) the rather brow-raising flaws in Foucault's treatment of the subject, and I worry that his readers might take these references as an invitation to further the practice of examining world events through the lens of francophone critical theorists.



At this stage we can nonetheless abstract a few key conclusions drawn from Bernasconi's big history: there arose a "dynamic" or diachronic notion of race that oriented racism toward questions of collective action regarding reproduction. How do we conserve a race? We do so by policing race mixing. How do we do that? Again: eugenics, segregation, immigration policy, antimiscegenation law, lynching, etc. If we move into the twentieth century, we then arrive at birth control, involuntary sterilization, industrial genocide, and much else. Bernasconi has thus managed to trace a shift rather convincingly from *what races there are* to the question of *how races are produced*. And he has done so by highlighting the central role of reproduction.

Race production, to put it simply, is through and through a matter of human reproduction, with the result that sexuality takes center stage in the late-modern obsession with the production of races. Bernasconi makes many of the relevant historical points, such as the manner in which he highlights the links between Darwinism and our postbellum social movements (or later Mendel and the rise of Nazism). And just as significantly, he had already presaged the centrality of race mixing and reproduction in his account of polygenesis. In our twenty-first century context, when a former (and possibly future) president has already spoken of "poisoning the blood of our nation," the attention drawn to these rather unpleasant issues of political demography is surely welcome, and the general contours as well as many of the details of this history are sound.

## 2. An Interlude on Black Philosophers

Bernasconi's big-picture narrative leads ultimately from his compelling account of the rise of nineteenth-century diachronic notions of race to the newer idea of *racism*, which is a twentieth-century contribution. The main thesis will be that the modern notions of racism, *racism lite*, fail to adequately speak to the important social issues involving race. Slavery and genocide were not, to put it simply, an inevitable result of mistaken beliefs about biology. Bernasconi has long argued that scientific racial theories tend to be latecomers, just as chattel slavery in the Americas predated the theories of polygenesis meant to defend it. Before completing the historical strains of his argument, however, *Critical Philosophy of Race* reprints five articles under the title "Black Philosophers Speak Out." In these, Bernasconi draws out some promising philosophical ideas defended by

Black authors (but ignored by white ones). The chapters include quality contributions on Cugoano, Firmin, Du Bois, and Fanon (who is the subject of two articles).

In this context there is no sense in avoiding a few sensitive points of disciplinary politics as they pertain to the philosophies of race and racism. It would be impossible to present an adequate account of these subjects without promoting the voices of nonwhite philosophers, both among the dead whose texts we study and among the living who fill our classrooms and journal pages. To that end, Bernasconi's biggest contribution to the profession has not been any argument or article that he pushed under his own name, but rather the work he has done to make space specifically for Black philosophers in the profession. His accounts of the Black philosophers of the past are fair-minded enough on their own, but they provide little more than an impetus to the rest of us to make additional space for colleagues present and future to further these developments. Much more work is needed by scholars of all stripes on the manners in which racism was diagnosed in the past by Black as well as other non-European philosophers. And just the same, today's critical philosophy of race stands little chance of correctly diagnosing our own racisms if the dominant voices are white philosophers (like Bernasconi and myself).

A parallel issue looms over Bernasconi's treatment of Cugoano, who plays a special role in modern political philosophy: Cugoano provides the example of an eighteenth-century Afro-British philosopher who authored antislavery treatises in a time when white philosophers, especially those who belong to our received canon, had far too little to say on the subject. Bringing this work to public attention is, then, no matter of merely including a Black face in a white crowd. It is rather a matter of rethinking what we commonly count as philosophy, and drawing attention to the presence in our textbooks and lectures of a too narrowly circumscribed discipline and set of authors, texts, and themes. In the main our philosophy, and especially our view of its history, has not spoken sufficiently to the social contexts of our age. Chapter 7 has both a title and subtitle that speak to this problem in the historiography of philosophy: "Ottobah Cugoano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy: Slavery and the Philosophical Canon." Bernasconi thus appropriately highlights the comparatively small role played by slavery in the political theories of white European philosophers, before reviewing some of the intellectual context and content of Cugoano's (1787) *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*.

Chapter 8's "A Haitian in Paris" performs a similar task for Firmin's classic *The Equality of the Human Races* of nearly a century later (1884). He situates Firmin's work among the Paris school of ethnography, poring through French translations of Darwin and other texts to provide context. More directly relevant to the guiding argument, however, is chapter 9's "Our Duty to Conserve." Here Bernasconi isolates a misinterpretation by analytic philosophers of what became a key text for them: Appiah had initially argued for his eliminativism in 1985's "The Uncompleted Argument," a commentary on Du Bois's *The Conservation of Races*. Bernasconi argues that Appiah misread the import of this text by foregrounding the mere concept of race (159). Du Bois's task in *Conservation* was not, he convincingly argues, to redefine the concept of race, nor was it to defend the use of that term in everyday speech. Du Bois aimed rather to articulate what he saw as the duty befalling members of his own race: to conserve the race in particular through family life and sexual selection. Here we might glimpse something of the critical import of Bernasconi's work, if we approach it with a view to a profession that has amplified questions of the sort *What is race?* but treated issues of sexuality and domesticity as marginal. Du Bois's famous lecture, in this context, gets reinterpreted as a treatise about the meaning of "race" while its real subject—the endogamic imperative for Black men and women—is ignored.<sup>7</sup>

Fanon makes for an even more convenient figure than Du Bois, and readers should derive pleasure and enlightenment from Bernasconi's two excellent studies (comprising chapters 10 and 11) of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Here the intradisciplinary argument has its best successes: Fanon was indeed influenced by what we now call continental philosophy, and from it he drew important notions such as "lived experience"—this popular academic term of art derives from Husserl's distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, mediated through its French translations before Fanon adapted it in the title of a key chapter—and cultural racism. So, we have a real case in which continental philosophers have items in their tool kits that other philosophers lack, and any judicious reader, even those who do not share Bernasconi's subdisciplinary affiliations, should nod in approval of the fact.

In her foreword, Linda Martín Alcoff announces (xi) the intention to publish a second volume by Bernasconi on *Critical Philosophy of Race*, which would include just some of our author's many contributions to racism in the history of philosophy. It remains to be seen, then, what type of statement he will make on the state of the historiography of philosophy, and how the

important work on Black philosophers reprinted here fits into that picture. On the whole, it should confirm the words of Carter G. Woodson, who in the *Mis-education of the Negro*, claimed that “the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching.”<sup>8</sup> That is true of our canonical histories, and Bernasconi has done as much as any contemporary scholar to give substance and detail to the point. His critical philosophy of race is thus no minor addendum to the subfield “philosophy of race,” but rather a large-scale rejection of philosophy in all its classical, Eurocentric forms. And that point hits home not when we study the racist claims by one Kant or Hegel, as is perhaps too often done, but when we both examine the received history of philosophy with an eye to social context and incorporate voices from the margins.

### 3. Formulating the Guiding Argument

The ten articles discussed above precede a final section of four chapters on “The Construction of the Concept of Racism.” This includes a detailed genealogy of the argument that casts racism as a merely epistemological error, which Bernasconi spreads over two well-written chapters (12 and 13), respectively, on the UNESCO statements and the Boasian school of anthropology. In the first piece, “Nature, Culture, and Race,” he traces the strong version of the nature-culture distinction through the work of Ashley Montagu to UNESCO. The point is that anthropologists slowly developed a notion of culture that would exclude race, the latter concept becoming the exclusive property of biologists (214–15). Once they achieved that, they could characterize racism as the improper (re: anthropological) use of a biological concept. But this whole approach is patently inadequate for Bernasconi’s own task: we could not in all seriousness argue that inappropriate use of biological concepts was the cause of slavery, eugenics, and the Holocaust. What UNESCO dubbed as racism, what I have called “racism lite”, thus fails to align with the object of study (re: “racism extra”) for those who seek to mount “a defense against racism in its myriad forms” and illuminate “the history of racism” (218).

The second chapter on this theme, “A Most Dangerous Error: The Boasian Myth of a Knockdown Argument against Racism,” deploys the same argument to establish a slightly different pair of theses. He first argues that the Boasian school neglected to base their definition of racism

“on the basis of a thoroughgoing study of racism” (208), before elegantly reconstructing the Boasian argument as “an elaborate two-step”:

First, the biologists claimed to be the only ones knowledgeable enough to use the word *race* legitimately, and then, by denying that they themselves had any use for the term, they were able to outlaw the word altogether. If racism is discrimination of someone on account of their race, then society can be cured of its racism by being persuaded there are no races. (226)

Unfortunately for us, it turns out, philosophers drew from the same well as the anthropologists and the UN: “It was a strategy that was subsequently adopted by Anthony Appiah” (226). And this is indeed something of a direct hit on the Appiah of the middle 1990s, the author, with Amy Gutmann, of *Color Conscious*, who did argue that racism consists in the application of outdated scientific terms.<sup>9</sup> But the same point holds against any philosophical context or argument that needlessly foregrounds the concept of race, identifying the so-called philosophy of race (which Mills called “the uncritical philosophy of race”<sup>10</sup>) with the question as to whether the term “race” refers to anything real. In those instances, the implication is supposed to be that if race is not real, racism must consist in an epistemological error, or the application of an empty concept. This might seem a fortunate result for philosophers, who could then spend our time addressing “racism lite” merely by teaching people that there really are no races, or that races are socially constructed, or what have you.

The second thesis concerns how the Boasian notion of racism lite “acquired its own political power” (220): this occurred at least partly because of its affiliation with Nazi Germany. In the post–World War II period, no one wished to be affiliated with Nazi Germany. So when racism was given such a thin definition that could apply (albeit only superficially) to Nazis but not to, for instance, the social structure of the American South, it became easy for white Americans especially to adopt the Boasian notion with a kind of zeal: by it we are able to achieve a remarkable level of moral self-exoneration. The new concept of racism allows, namely, everyone to discover it in *other people’s* hearts and minds, without it thereby leading to an honest reckoning with the world in which we live. One of Bernasconi’s corollary theses here (227–31), is that the term “racism” in its modern guises actually concealed anti-Black racism and focused excessively on

anti-Semitism. This enabled white Americans in particular to ignore the otherwise considerable similarities between Nazi Germany and Jim Crow, and it enabled us (white liberals) individually to direct the term “racist” outwardly while we continue to benefit from and proliferate the actual, material sorts of racism that Black philosophers (but not the UN, nor Boasian anthropologists, nor analytic philosophers) have historically identified.

Here again the reader with contemporary concerns should perk up: there are signs about us that the word “racism” is finally losing the power that Bernasconi is attempting to describe. Racism might again become something that, by contrast with the late twentieth century, at least some people own rather than disown. Bernasconi has argued effectively that the power of the word “racism” entailed that the term be outwardly directed: racism is something we accuse in others, with the concealed implication that we who so accuse are not racist (233). In other words, the term “racism,” consequent to its epistemological interpretation and nested in its common uses as a “racism lite,” has become chiefly a method of self-exoneration by white people. The point I wish to add to his analysis is that—despite the misfortune that this use of “racism” conceals what we would rather call anti-Black racism, institutional racism, systemic racism, etc.—this power has probably had a few welcome political effects. I am not sure I would prefer to live in a world where “racism” and “racist” take on positive connotations. More hard times await, so we shall see.

#### 4. Conclusion

I began this review by highlighting Bernasconi’s main premise, viz., that the epistemological argument results from an exaggerated and simplistic form of the nature-culture distinction. It thus remains to conclude this review to say something about the author’s strategies for combating this distinction. The first strategy is historical, and consists in investigations like chapter 2, “Racialization and the Construction of Religions.” In that chapter Bernasconi argues that in seventeenth-century contexts, the terms “race” and “religion” were not yet clearly distinguished in their modern form. Both terms were employed mainly in Europeans’ slow efforts to categorize the peoples of the world. Neither religion nor race, then, came clearly into its modern form until race could be defined as purely natural and religion as purely cultural. Religion needed to be constructed just as race

was—a point foundational to our modern discipline of religious studies—and some of the shortcomings of this construction remain in debates like whether Islamophobia is a form of racism.

Bernasconi's deepest argument against the exaggerated forms of the nature-culture distinction is thus historicist: if we come to see all these terms and the academic disciplines that define them as historically contingent, and if we examine how they failed to capture the phenomena they sought to describe (or should have described, as in the central case of slavery), we will be less likely to take them for granted in the manner of Boasian anthropologists and analytic philosophers. That is to say, a scholar informed by the history of racism and its interdisciplinary ideological structures will not seek to combat racism by insisting, as the epistemological strategy does, on more stringent boundaries between the study of nature and the study of culture. We rather need to examine how the boundaries between disciplines were established, as Bernasconi does so fruitfully in his genealogy of the divide between cultural and biological anthropology. I add here only that this argument, if it were to be raised to the level of generality that the guiding argument requires, needs further supplements, especially by historians of biology.<sup>11</sup>

His second argument to the point marks a return to the *intradisciplinary* theme: phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty have been critical of the nature-culture distinction (209), partly because it does not appear with any certitude in the type of first-personal investigation common to him and Husserl. This argument, while unlikely to persuade many people, does explain why someone like Bernasconi, steeped as he is in the phenomenological tradition, might have first come around to viewing “nature” and “culture” as abstractions. As I claimed in my introduction, I cannot but interpret references of this sort biographically. They explain to me how Robert Bernasconi arrived at some of the important ideas that he espouses, but they offer little in the way of a justification as to why others should follow him in this. Nonetheless, I do not doubt that some variant of an argument from Merleau-Ponty or other phenomenologists could take a more persuasive contemporary shape.

A third argument derives from a short review of some passages from Rousseau and Hegel, by which Bernasconi purports to show that “the Western philosophical tradition was by no means universally blind to the way that whenever nature is considered primary it becomes hard to differentiate from its other” (211). Here the task should be to examine the history

of European philosophy with a view to criticizing the nature-culture distinction. Probably the predecessor to this task would be *The Racial Contract* and other texts critical of the social contract tradition in political philosophy (which of course always attempted to derive an imaginary society built by the antecedently natural humans).

But all this work remains to be done, and we should take from Bernasconi no more than the suggestion that diagnosing the inadequacy of our modern concepts of racism will probably involve coming to understand some of the more naturalistic tendencies of the modern academy as consequences of flawed ideologies. More important from the work under review is the admirable historical scope that Bernasconi provides for racism: if we are to study something like the history of racism, we will need to cast our net wide. And just as persuasively, he has argued that in order to properly identify the forms of racism currently ruling our world, we will need to undertake some study of its history. In these essential tasks, *Critical Philosophy of Race: Essays* is at the very least a remarkable beginning. I recommend that anyone interested in race and racism study these articles thoroughly.

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#### NOTES

1. "Only a richer understanding of how past racisms have operated and, above all, reinvented themselves in response to attempts to challenge them prepares us to be truly effective in the fight against current racisms" (103–4).
2. The terms "racism lite" and "racism extra" are mine, though I deploy them only to track the distinction that I take to be central to Bernasconi's argument.
3. His term is "dynamic," and he locates the main points appropriately in his analysis of Du Bois (158–63). But I employ "diachronic" because I take it as a more accurate descriptor of the kind of race theory common to Du Bois, Mendel, and others.
4. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, [1897] 2000), 108–17; K. Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1) (1985): 21–37.



5. To give just one example, Bernasconi notes that “racial essentialism” was “a late invention” and “a desperate response to the challenge to justify racist practices, like slavery, that had ceased to make sense” (105).
6. The year 2023 alone added quite a few texts to this genre, such as Willoughby and Schwalm. But interested readers should consult the classics of this genre, such as Roberts, Washington, and Hoberman, Christopher D. E. Willoughby, *Masters of Health: Racial Science and Slavery in U.S. Medical Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Leslie A. Schwalm, *Medicine, Science, and Making Race in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2006); John Hoberman, *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
7. Harris offers a similar reading of this text. For a different approach, see Jeffers. Kimberly Ann Harris, “W. E. B. Du Bois’s ‘Conservation of Races’: A Metaphilosophical Text,” *Metaphilosophy* 50 (5) (2019): 670–87; Chike Jeffers, “The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at Du Bois’s ‘The Conservation of Races,’” *Ethics* 123 (3) (2013): 403–26.
8. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1933), 5.
9. K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 71–74.
10. Charles W. Mills, “Critical Philosophy of Race,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*, ed. H. Cappelen, T. Gendler, and J. Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 709–32. See Ngo and Harris for further discussion. Helen Ngo, “Critical Philosophy of Race: An Introduction,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 40 (2) (2019): 206–9; Kimberly Ann Harris, “Review of Bernasconi, *Critical Philosophy of Race*,” *Mind* (2024).
11. See Lewontin and the argument that “Environmental variation and genetic variation are not independent causal pathways.” My point in raising this issue here is that the extreme nature-culture distinction that Bernasconi finds among the anthropologists is not always shared by biologists. Richard C. Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 30.

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