34. BETWEEN BELONGING AND THE F/ACT OF NIGGERISATION

As a race theorist, I seek to clarify the artificiality and arbitrariness of racial categories that nonetheless have implications so real that they can structure who lives and who dies, who is imprisoned and who goes free. In this chapter, I analyze the Trayvon Martin tragedy through the frame of "niggerization," drawing conceptually from my previous work (Roland 2006). I argue here, as I argued elsewhere (Roland, 2013), that racialization is about belonging, and I define "niggers" as social non-beings who do not belong.

PARTIAL BELONGING AND THE ORIGINS OF NIGGERIZATION

It is generally agreed that the word "nigger" derives from the Spanish Negro, which translates to 'Black' in English, and the term seems to have gained its derogatory connotations as slavery spread across the Western Hemisphere. In the United States, where the term "nigger" gained particular potency, the new nation was founded amidst debates about how to evaluate slaves' liminal role as compulsory laborers who were non-citizens by birth and color. For electoral purposes, slaves were ultimately determined to be three-fifths of a person, though they had no voting rights (Franklin, 2010; Valey, 2004). I contend that the moment when slaves were defined as "less than" fully human was the seminal act of niggerization in the United States. In being defined as partial humans, enslaved Africans became a source of power for whites while they themselves were niggerized—reified as social and political outsiders, de jure as well as de facto.

The Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court case of 1896 established the legality of "separate but equal" facilities for Blacks and whites (Baker, 1998; Woodward, 1974). The finding legalized segregation and paved the way for the South to institute Jim Crow laws that reaffirmed the supremacy of whiteness and the amended nature of Black citizenship, reinstating it as partial and unstable (Woodward, 1974). These early legal framings constitute what I am calling the "act of niggerization"—behaviors and actions that delineate who belongs and who does not.

I distinguish the "act" of niggerization from what I call the "fact" of niggerization, which involves the actual use of the n-word. I want to be clear that I do not contend there is any such thing as a "nigger," which is why I insist on activating the term by making it a verb. The fact of niggerization is the attempt of the speaker to put the
target of the term back in what is presumed to be his/her place as a social outsider. The inflections with which the term has been uttered may have changed over time—under slavery, after emancipation, and throughout the Jim Crow period—but the meaning remains the same: “You are not one of us and you do not belong here.” I refer to invocations of the term as a “fact” because it involves making plain the sentiments behind the perhaps less legible, if more tangible “acts.” I situate the murder of Martin at the intersection of such facts.

POST-CIVIL RIGHTS AND “ACCEPTABLE” BLACKNESS

The Civil Rights movement sought to address the niggerizing laws and practices of the Jim Crow era. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that desegregated schools, white America had to contend with its longstanding niggerizing acts toward their fellow citizens while the courts had ruled against them (Baker, 1998). Through the lens of televised media, the world watched as restaurant patrons, police dogs, and fire hoses tried to force African Americans into outsider status as they protested in a quest for their rights as full citizens. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are generally accepted as the moment when the act of niggerizing became illegal as Blacks again were legally granted full and equal citizenship status with whites (Franklin, 2009; Valley, 2004). Like the amended citizenship granted in the late nineteenth century, African American membership in the national and social body continues to require white permission—it is not a given.

Because the Civil Rights Movement, and subsequent Black Power Movement, facilitated a degree of African American mobility into the white worlds of education, work, and residence, whites came to know a pioneering class of Blacks who could gain entry into white spaces, often due to their high social status in segregated Black America based on their color, material wealth, and/or education. Then, as is also the case now, those who most closely enacted white norms and values might be deemed “acceptable” Blacks. This acceptance is presumably in contrast to the rest of those unacceptable, non-conforming Blacks.

Because Blacks and whites are often in the same spaces in this new era—as friends, neighbors, classmates, and colleagues—niggerization must be practiced more subtly. The fact of niggerization had to go underground; whites can no longer toss about that offensive term to express the sentiment that they find most Blacks unacceptable intruders into white spaces. There remain, however, innumerable acts of niggerization—from following them while shopping, to stopping and frisking young Black and Brown man while walking down the street, to killing them with impunity. A frequent excuse for the niggerizer’s actions is “Well s/he should not have been there (i.e., wherever they were) in the first place.” Certainly, the most common means of enforcing that Blacks (and Latinos) do not belong in broader American society today is through their mass imprisonment.
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Bill Cosby, Don Lemon and Well-meaning Niggerisers

Because the post-Civil Rights era has seen significant social mobility among African Americans, many people—African Americans included—argue that those Blacks who remain in the country’s massive underclass after the removal of legal structures must somehow be at fault: they are not smart enough, they are not working hard enough, they are bad parents, they do not dress or wear their hair the right way, etc. (D’Souza, 1995; O’Reilly, 2006). Some of the most cited propagators in recent years are African Americans (Mosbergen, 2013; Obama, 2013; Trice, 2008). Philanthropist and entertainer Bill Cosby regularly uses his privilege and position to address the Black underclass about its perceived inadequacies (Mosbergen, 2013; Trice, 2008). President Barack Obama, the first Black elected to the nation’s highest office, also publically cajoles Blacks into participating more fully in “the land of opportunity” without himself attending to the niggerizing structures that remain in place that prevent them from getting a decent job, getting out of debt, or getting the same quality of education as their suburban peers (Obama, 2013). Following the verdict in the trial exonerating George Zimmerman of the murder of Martin, CNN news anchor Don Lemon joined Dr. Cosby and President Obama in condemning those Blacks who emulate hip-hop or ‘street’ culture for behaving unacceptably, with the subtext being that if they do not change their ways and begin to act acceptably, they may find themselves in the same position as young Martin (Lemon, 2013).

What none of these well-meaning niggerizers recognizes is the insightful, counter-hegemonic message underclass members who enact aspects of hip-hop culture may be trying to communicate to the broader society about acceptability and belonging through their rejection of white middle class norms: that Blacks can only ever contingently be accepted in a nation in which the standard for belonging is a white ideal they will never achieve. Why try to fit into a society that will never wholly accept you? From the perspective of the middle and upper classes, such a position may be interpreted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. From the perspective of families that have seen generations struggle through public housing and other forms of public assistance while working multiple shifts to take care of basic necessities, it may be involve a new definition of progress and how to “live the good life” (Thomas, 2006).

Paula Deen, George Zimmerman, and the Fact of Niggerizing

Before proceeding, I should remind readers what was going on in U.S. race relations in the weeks preceding the Zimmerman verdict. Early in July 2013, during a court case to resolve a discrimination suit by a former employee, Southern-style chef Paula Deen admitted to having used the n-word in the past. The story was reported on all news outlets amidst public outrage and disgust. However, as an African American who grew up in the South, I found it difficult to imagine a white person of her generation who could honestly answer the same question in the negative—hence

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Deen’s nonchalant, “Yes, of course.” Did the Food Network, from which Deen was promptly fired, think they had hired the one authentic white Southern cook who had not niggerized at some point in her life? Should Deen have lied about the fact of niggerization? Despite a tearful video apology, Deen lost much of her business empire in the aftermath of her admission.

Two weeks after Deen was pilloried in the press for using the n-word, attorneys concluded Zimmerman’s trial for killing young Martin as he walked from the neighborhood store to his parents’ home wearing a hoodie on a drizzly evening. Neighborhood watchman Zimmerman followed Martin first in his car and then on foot, finding him to be a suspicious outsider who did not belong in that neighborhood. While there was a great deal of discussion at the time—in court and in the press—on whether Zimmerman had uttered the n-word himself on the 911 call, I suggest that the mere fact of niggerization on February 26, 2012, would have proved far less dangerous than the act of niggerization that I have argued was actually at issue. Deen lost everything for uttering the word, while Zimmerman walked free for killing an unarmed youth who was deemed to be out of place.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: ON SELF-NIGGERISATION

Countering well-meaning niggerizers who identify hip-hop culture as the source of Blacks’ continuing outsider status, I have great respect for hip-hop’s counter-hegemonic style. While I have apparently aged out of understanding rap lyrics and video culture in the 21st century, I do not care if Black males pull their pants up or not. Indeed, you never know what manner of genius—or idiot—may be disguised in any exterior presentation. However, this chapter has been about the practice of niggerization, whether in act or fact, and I would be negligent to suggest Blacks are not also perpetrators of these facts.

The most prevalent form of self-niggerization is Black-on-Black gun violence; however, we must attend to the societal contexts in which violence occurs. Urban districts throughout the United States have been sorely neglected for decades, in terms of investment in family-sustaining jobs, quality education, and community-relevant infrastructure development. Generations of youth grow up trapped in this hopeless cycle and take their frustrations out on whoever is closest to them. Black youth have taken ownership of the few things at their disposal, like the re-worked word “nigga” which is distinguished from the slur ‘nigger’ (see Neal, 2013). They also take ownership of street corners, neighborhoods, and symbols associated with group membership. In-group members are part of the brotherhood of niggas, while outsiders must be made to know they do not belong and are niggerised. Black life remains devalued, just as it has been at so many points in U.S. history.

Can anything be done to curb niggerisation? A start would be to invalidate the “nigger” category because there is no such being. If all humans are equal, and all Americans belong fully to the nation, then we as a society need to stop treating some people as though they belong more than others. Another suggestion is to stop
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paying so much attention to the fact of niggerisation and attend more to acts of niggerisation. If racists are freed to utter the n-word once again, there might be some hint that s/he may perpetrate an act that mobilizes beliefs about belonging before it becomes a fact.

REFERENCES


