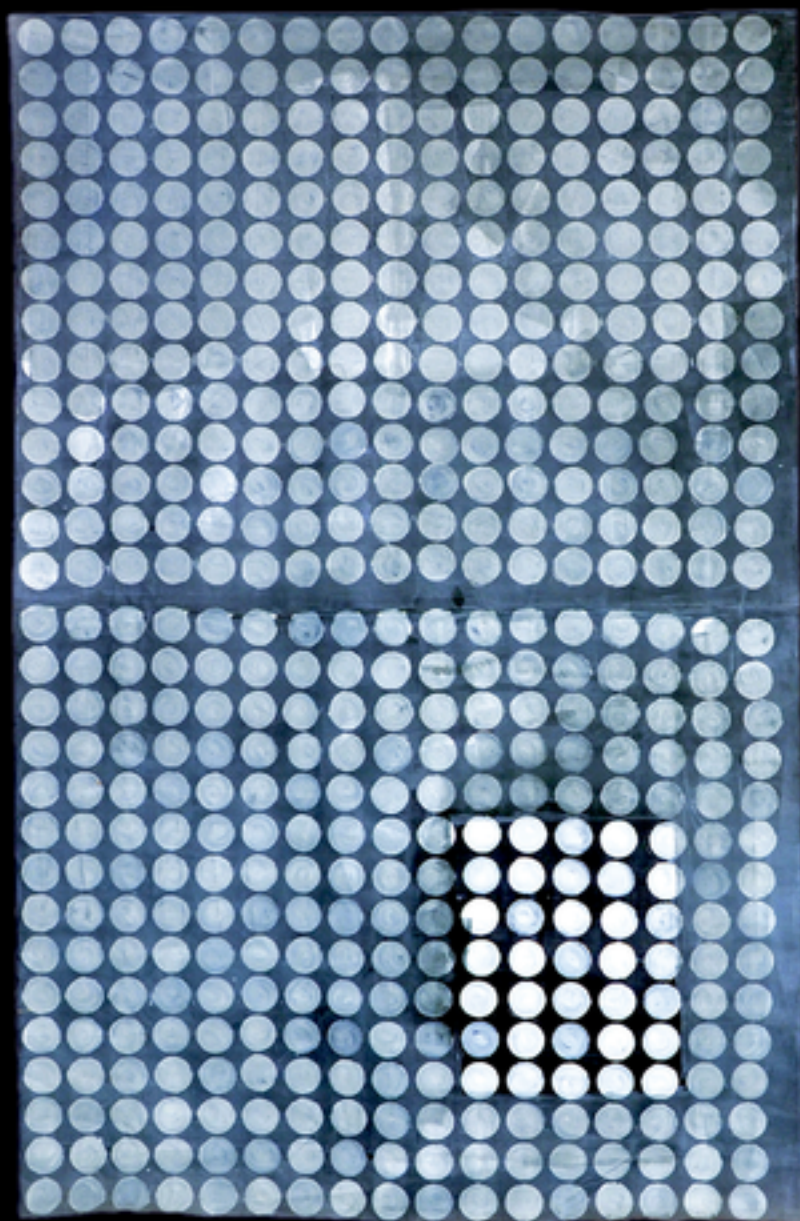


Stain Removal

Ethics and Race



J. Reid Miller

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J. REID MILLER

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Miller, J. Reid, author.

Title: Stain removal: ethics and race / J. Reid Miller.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016015919 (print) | ISBN 9780190280970
(hardcover : alk. paper)

Subjects: Ethics and race—The everlasting stain—The secret of the mark—Cursed inheritance—Criminal suspicions.

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016015919>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

Your Stain Removal kit includes:

- instruction manual*
- patented removal solution (dry packet and activator)*
- mixing tub*
- mixing spoon*
- cleansing pad*

*Always begin with mildest treatment; increase strength as necessary.
(Note: Heavy stains may require repeat applications.)*

Caution: Use only in well-ventilated areas

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Acknowledgments

I AM FORTUNATE to have had a great deal of support during the production of this book.

My appreciation to those who contributed to the content of the manuscript at various stages: David Hoy, Jocelyn Hoy, Joel Yurdin, Aryeh Kosman, James Gulick, Naomi Koltun-Fromm, David Marriott, Ravi Sharma, Keith Bolton, and Lewis Gordon. My deepest thanks as well to those who provided support and encouragement during this time: Andrea Morris, Lisa Jane Graham, Darin Hayton, Rajeswari Mohan, Juno (Rheana) Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Andrew Friedman, Bethel Saler, Erica Cho, Chiming Yang, Gus Stadler, Matthew Budman, Farid Azfar, Noah Tamarkin, David Sedley, Wendy White, Chiou-Ling Yeh, Stephen Sohn, Juliana Chang, and Richard T. Rodriguez. Special thanks to Alison Wittenberg, Tilden Broemser, Charles Easley, Melanie Boyd, E.B., Irene Miller, the inner circle, and especially to Bill Bellone for years of hot tea and shocking embellishments that kept me alert and skeptical. Cristina Beltran's friendship and generosity was instrumental to the publication of this book. Danielle Macbeth's guidance through the process of writing sustained my belief and focus on the project. Sometimes one needs a room of one's own; other times a borrowed one is what's called for—special thanks to Teresa de Lauretis for providing this room, intellectually and geographically, during the production of this work. And finally, for everything and everything, then now and to come, thank you Celine Parreñas Shimizu.

Convention holds that I include here the caveat that, despite the contributions of those above, any and every mistake of the book is solely mine, although, honestly, I don't see why I should have to take all the blame. How is it that those who receive credit for the success of a venture bear no responsibility for its failure? But here the argument of the book itself defeats me, for one of the consequences of rethinking value through the metaphor of the

“stain” is a disabling of the fantasy of such reciprocal equations. Even my own work is against me.

This is not entirely true: yes, this book will seek its revenge on me; again, however, I hold little pretense of its being my own. Any half-witted analysis will show that everything in this book worth saying has been said before, inherited from writers more nimble and canny, more deserving of historical and intellectual recognition. The claims herein should not lose credibility because of this; indeed, their persuasiveness depends precisely on this familiarity—if anything is managed here it is not the forging of dangerous new ground but a redirection to what has previously been stated repeatedly and exhaustively, the crooked arc of the book’s finger pointing readers to well-worn grooves that trace and retrace established circuits. This book does not survey uncharted territory but roots its nose in the most beaten treads of theoretical and folk wisdom regarding bodies and value. I guarantee that you have heard all of this many times before.

As it is with the best told stories.

Stain Removal

Introduction

SETTING THE STAIN

*A man's character greatly takes its hue and shape from the
form and color of things about him.*

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

THIS BOOK, as the title indicates, is about ethics and race. The conjunction may confuse—would not the phrase “ethics *of* race” be more accurate? The grammatical modification, though minor, is meant to capture an endeavor distinct from the application of a metric to a concept. A short discussion of the latter formulation—of what an “ethics *of* race” designates—will help to distinguish the approaches.

An “ethics of” may be said to denote an assessment of the value, contingent or absolute, of any number of possible representational “objects,” including but not limited to phenomena, deeds, states of affairs, affects, and beliefs. This “ethical” assessment is conventionally distinct from ontological determinations of “what something is,” those apperceptive processes by which objects are said to appear to consciousness. An “ethics of,” then, implies the coming of some object into consciousness prior to and independent of an “ethical” process to which it is subsequently subjected. Representational identity, in other words, is taken as initially nonevaluative; “what exists” serves thereby as the object upon which “ethics” enacts its effects. Accordingly, only a small set of representational objects would appear for us as ethical objects; solely those matters that pose significant and practical problems—that rattle what we think of as the smooth exercise of daily life, or that explode in ways that make anything like a “daily life” impossible—would comprise the primary material for these critical if optional evaluative reflections. On this understanding, to engage in an “ethics of” is to bring the question of value, as if for the first time, to phenomena definable without reference to value.

At its most rudimentary, an “ethics of” thereby connects two elements: a distinct “ethical object” (i.e., an action, quality, belief, or state of affairs capable of being put into question)—an account, that is, of “what is now going on” that calls for rethinking—and a mode of evaluative interpretation (i.e., a system, formula, or hierarchy of principles in light of which the value of the ethical object, of “what is now going on,” is disclosed). Without a distinct object an “ethics of” has nothing—or rather too many things—to evaluate, leading to overly formless imperatives. General agreement may exist, for example, that “technology” raises important ethical questions, yet as an ethical object “technology” reasonably includes information gathering systems, molecular gastronomy, autotuning, and perhaps, as Jacques Derrida contends, language itself.¹ An “ethics of technology” at this panoramic scope could furnish little more prescriptive insight than cautious support of “good” rather than “bad” technologies—in effect, unhelpful restatements of the original question. Conversely, the absence of a coherent mode of evaluation easily trivializes the ethical object, creating contradictory or banal prescriptives. Applying an intuitive or “common sense” approach to a particular state of affairs, for instance, implies an ethical object that requires no special exercise of thought; moreover, it overlooks the possibility that this state of affairs may be itself the expression of contradictions internal to that “common sense.” Sartre’s account of the student torn between caring for his mother and fighting for his country illustrates how “common sense” core values like “family” and “patriotism” can generate the dilemmas they are then invoked to resolve.²

On these conditions an “ethics of race” would appear a prime or at least serviceable philosophical project. “Race,” though difficult to define, certainly expresses a linguistically distinct notion that no other term replicates in its knotty mix of genealogical meanings and associations. Moreover, that race remains resiliently and controversially significant for descriptions of “what is now going on”—globally, psychologically, politically, and economically—suggests that it presents a legitimate and urgent object for ethical interrogation. It would appear as well that any number of evaluative theories might be harnessed to yield an ethics of race: communicative ethics, contract theory, natural or human rights discourse, virtue ethics, etc. The availability of plausible models of application suggests an ethical examination of race is not only feasible but also well overdue. Despite this, no ethical analyses of race exist.³ To be sure, the topic of race surfaces occasionally in contemporary cultural and political theory, fields of discourse that frequently employ the prescriptive language of ethics but for which that language and the conditions of value are not themselves

primary matters for reflection. In these interventions—often examining some aspect of multiculturalism, postcoloniality, hybrid identities, or transnational movements—the nature of the good (as freedom, equality, self-expression, etc.) and of the ethical subject (as a discrete possessor, giver, and arbiter of value), on which ethical claims about race necessarily depend, tend to be presented as self-evident, and thus escape precisely the critical attention that an evaluative study would generate. As a result, most cultural and political theory wagglingly presented under the auspices of “ethics” has little to no ethical analysis to recommend it.

Take, for instance, the common presupposition in discourses of race that the qualitative assessment or “prejudgment” of embodied racial appearance constitutes a discriminatory practice. The broader evaluative principle invoked here is that ethical worth be determined independently of physiological appearance. It is a dualism that, in effect, holds that the *object* of ethical analysis and the *object* of material analysis be separate and non-intersecting. Most interventions of ethics and race start from this premise, yet it is far from decisive. For one, it presumes that an evaluative apperception of the body is a kind of “doing” or practice distinct from and subsequent to a value-neutral perception. This would mean we first “see” embodied subjects as sets of ethically unmediated physiological features to which we then, from some private internal reserve, affix (false) qualitative judgments. Relatedly, a principle that “one should not judge people based on appearance” imagines ethical subjectivity as what can be grasped apart from material “appearance.” If so, what precisely would be the genuine, non-material substance of subjectivity being grasped here? Lastly, there is the metethical problem of the exclusion of phenomena like bodies from the set of proper ethical objects, insofar as any such prohibition against ethics would itself be an ethical proposition. From where, other than ethics, could such a dictate come? Do bodies not have to fall under the auspices of ethical judgment in order to be deemed off limits to ethical analysis? How could ethics be expected to oversee itself in this way?

These are only a handful of the questions that an ethical examination of race would be obliged to address, questions that, notably, do not reduce to whether “racialization” is “good” or “bad” but place under negotiation the very parameters of ethics and thus the nature and function of value. It should not be expected, then, that the results of such an intervention will lend theoretical legitimacy to what is now being said about ethics and race, grounding conventional patter. On the contrary, they will indicate the relation of ethics and race as conducting an ongoing logic that Western modernity has long tried to disown, that of the genealogical inheritability of embodied value.

The disclosure and tracing of this logic begins by way of the briefest explanation that an “ethics of race” of the type described above has not taken place because, in short, it is not possible. This impossibility is not a consequence of “race” being too diffuse a notion to serve as an ethical object or of the lack of an appropriate ethical formula to which it could be submitted but of the overlapping discursive functions of ethics and race such that to speak of one is already to invoke the other.

The impossibility of an “ethics *of* race” should create some worry for any imagined application of ethics (inclusive of “justice” and “rights”) to either racial strategies or ends, as it will affirm that race is not the kind of thing to which ethics could *apply*. Correlatively, it should be emphasized that “race” is not here *the* problem—as if the conceptual logic of value were not deeply implicated in this simultaneity of signification. As the book will show, one will be misled from the start by imagining ethics as innocent or impartial and thus as what displaces all responsibility for incoherence, contradiction, and paradox onto the delinquencies of “race.” It may even turn out that, in the historical fight against racial hierarchies, “ethics” has always—perhaps necessarily—been playing both sides.

The Descent

So why is an “ethics *of* race” not strictly possible? Why, that is, is the relation of ethics and race not amenable to the guise of form and content, method and data, or theory and practice? The answer begins with the standard model of ethical theory, operative for any “ethics of X” as explained above, as what contains, in essence, three sequential steps: the presentation of an ethical object for evaluative assessment, the submission of that object’s qualities to evaluative scrutiny, and the securing of that assessment to the object through the metaphor of “attachment” or “disclosure.” This standard model of ethical theory, Bernard Williams writes, “implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles.”⁴ Williams also gestures, however, toward the existence of ethical objects that defy the operation of that standard model, not because they are “bad objects” but because, in some fashion, they corrupt or disable the model itself such that “there cannot be such a test” of the object’s value. This standard model or “test” thus has two possible outcomes: either the revelation (or confirmation) of the object’s proper worth or the disabling of the test by the object that incapacitates the very procedure of ethical evaluation.

This object for which can there be no test—that implodes it or elicits compromised and tainted results—is, for Williams, the “prejudicial” object. As he explains, when “prejudices” are held about an object, for instance, a type of person, ethical theory cannot conduct a proper evaluation, for what that theory would encounter is not that type itself but an already *prejudged* kind of entity. Accordingly, to properly evaluate an object ethical theory must encounter it as what has no known worth; for ethics to give an *unprejudiced* assessment value cannot have previously infiltrated and distorted that upon which it is to pass authoritative judgment. Even if value were intrinsic to the object, ethical analysis would need to approach it as having an as yet undetermined and thus unknown worth. Ethical theory on this account must be *other* than that which it assesses, something *external to and outside of* the object’s definition and representational possibility; the object, for its part, must not have value as constitutive of or “attached” to its definitional identity but must instead be available to consciousness as ethically *unmarked*. In the matter of “race,” then, the efficacy of the standard model depends upon ethics demonstrating its externality to race such that race as a possible ethical object be conceptually available prior to and outside of any value that may later characterize it.

In those instances, however, in which race *does* arise as a theoretical problem—the kind of problem that an ethics of race might be summoned to treat—value seems already “insinuated” in advance of its application through a formal model. That is to say, race names a difference that emerges precisely in the context of evaluative hierarchies. For example, when Immanuel Kant catalogues the “genuine races” in the following manner

First race, very blond (northern Europe), of damp cold.

Second race, copper-red (America), of dry cold.

Third race, black (Senegambia), of dry heat.

Fourth race, olive-yellow (Indians), of dry heat.⁵

the list means to indicate not merely a genealogy of anthropological descent but simultaneously that of evaluative “descent.”⁶ Racial kinds are for Kant qualitative as well as physiological—a single taxonomy suffices to map both distinctions. Kant does not treat us to a singularly ontological argument justifying racial difference and then, in a subsequent move, overlay comparative worth upon those differences. To exhibit behavioral patterns of comparative worth correlative to physical features is rather just *what it means to be raced*. The list is thus ordinal as well as cardinal—in telling us that there are “four”

racess it simultaneously indicates their “natural” positions with respect to the human template as “unraced.” No additional mechanism is required outside of this declarative to situate races evaluatively; there are no sequential “steps” as in the standard model: no unmarked object that precedes evaluation, no separate judgment of worth, and no “attachment” of value to a discrete yet neutral representation. Value appears here not as external and secondary to racial difference—as a procedure recognizably distinct from and posterior to it—but as the expressive significance of that difference. Races are what they “are” in being thus ethically differentiated.

The question raised is whether race can function as an “ethical object” prior to and outside of value such that it can act as the novel recipient of value’s attentions or whether, if suffused by value in its basic configuration, it is contaminated by the very thing that would study and assess it from *without*. The “test,” it seems, could not be whether value has infiltrated race in all of its appearances but whether value is nothing other than that differentiating force by which *race* is understood to enact its effects. The affirmation of this premise would signal the impossibility of an “ethics of race” for the reason that “race” would designate thereby an articulation of the ethical. Race could not then be “presented” to ethics as a stranger or inconnu; neither could it stand “before” ethics as what temporally precedes it, for that would mean enjoining ethics to deliver a verdict upon itself—that is, upon a sign that mobilizes in the name of value.

This book maintains not only the impasse of “ethical” analyses of race for these reasons but also elucidates the intricate logic and implications of the relation that ensures, likewise, that each and every analysis of race is “ethical,” which is to say, always and necessarily that of value. What is meant by “ethics” and “race” will of course be under consideration throughout, but it can be shared in advance that by the close of this study neither term will have ceded to the other nor to any third term that would attempt to secure and temper their effects (e.g., truth, system, description, history, language, etc.). What will be shown instead is that, despite their appearance as antithetical, ethics and race execute similar and corresponding functions as what designate and justify coordinated and relational appearances of differential value. It will be asserted, moreover, that this value is not preceded by an earlier mode of difference—most notably, a purely descriptive difference to which value then can be said to apply, attach, or otherwise adhere. Value, on the contrary, will disclose itself not as this or that *kind* of difference but as that by which anything could show up *as such*—that is, by which any entity exists as “itself.” As constitutional and conditional for the appearance of representation and

meaning, value (and by extension, race) will at once refer to (1) a historic and material coordination of signifiers or marks through which embodied ethical subjectivity becomes recognizable, and (2) the idiom that sustains simultaneously the causal logic of responsible subjectivity *and* the logic of transferable responsibility and thus inheritable worth.

Such claims may seem implausible as a consequence of a study like this: how could an analysis of “race”—a concept so unrepentantly narrow, historically leaden, and *unjust*—generate insight not only into the structuring of value to which “history” and “justice” are themselves indebted but also to the very possibility of representation? Indeed assertions like these threaten a host of what we have come to believe about the proper place of ethical and racial difference: that a subject’s qualities should be determined solely on its deeds and not its embodied features; that deeds are knowable as *pre*-ethical phenomena prior to their evaluative assessment; that ethical worth is uninheritable such that all subjects enter the world as ethically innocent and hence unmarked; and that the subject in its ethical expression detaches from all affiliative lineages of embodied worth.⁷ All of these convictions attest, in effect, to the inessentiality of evaluation and racialization—that as subsequent to epistemological determinations of “what is” they in no way enable the representations to which they “attach.” Instead these applied ancillary layers are taken to envelop original phenomenal content in a manner that readily obscures and corrupts our ability to grasp that original existent in its primordial value-neutral and unraced state.

It is not merely, however, that ethical and racial determinations are understood to obscure original percepts but are thought to do so by means of a particular force of distortion. Of values, Nietzsche writes that “almost every sense impression [in] our world is *colored* by them”; Frantz Fanon relatedly describes race as a “dye” [*colorant*] that “fixes” the development of embodied self-consciousness.⁸ In both depictions ethics and race face incrimination as what discolor or *stain* percepts, a staining that eclipses, distorts, hides, and falsifies otherwise unfettered and directly intuited phenomena. To encounter and contemplate a being or phenomenon as it originally accedes to conscious awareness—as unmarked and uncolored—one becomes thereby obliged to strip from that existent all ethical and racial associations: to perform an interpretive exercise of stain removal.

The guiding question of this book is whether value denotes an inherently secondary, applied feature that succeeds—and thus attaches to or imprints itself upon—already existing representations. Does value by its very definition exhibit the structure of the stain as what “colors” both the world and

its inhabitants and thus, simultaneously, tarnishes, distorts, and hides those initial existents as they originally arise to consciousness as value-neutral? Is value truly a valence that we *place* upon phenomena, as an evaluative interpretation conducted separately from and subsequent to the perceptual awareness of phenomena? (How would we then measure this break? This temporal lag between the “unmarked” representation *not yet* stained by value and its evaluative marking? Or the equivalent distance between the “initial” recognition of the subject in its unmarked and unmediated state of disaffiliation and that in which it becomes perceptually yoked into criminal ties of racial association?) If, alternatively, the perceptual world is unavailable to us in the way we have so long dreamt—unmarked, uncolored, unstained—value would not signify a stain one attempts to remove to get at a more authentic and original impression underneath. It would stand, rather, for the differential marking any phenomenon—as *this* and not *that* entity—must presuppose for its appearance, insofar as relations of difference by which existents may arise as distinctly “what they are” would be necessarily relations of *value*.

And if this is so? What then would have to be said about the nature of value? One might begin to think, as Frederick Douglass suggests in the opening epigraph, that the very “character” of something—the qualities of any representation or being—has not only a “shape” but a “hue” or resonance of value that has no intrinsic content or “color” but rather acquires that content—that is, becomes available to perception—in and through its actualized relations to other “characters.” One might then start to wonder whether value as a nonsensory, nonempirical condition for the possibility of differentiated representation could be mistaken for an a priori form of intuition like space and time.

Any such conclusion would have to be a mistake. For how could someone like Frederick Douglass—he or any other figure so deeply and historically *stained*—attune us to greater philosophical *transparency*?

Two Alibis

That ethics and race both exhibit the dynamic of the stain neither exempts nor immunizes them from the effects of the other. On the contrary, their greatest danger lies, we are told, in their interaction. Each is said to stain the other so severely as to produce misperceptions and distortions that render the other unrecognizable. Contemporary theory, accordingly, gives us two versions of ethics and race in which each is derided and mourned, respectively, as the attachment that stains and that which is stained. The protestation that

race is perverted by ethics is perhaps the less conspicuous of the two complaints so will be addressed first. A discussion of the complementary claim positing the staining of ethics by race follows.

The Ethical Staining of Race

In *Visible Identities*, Linda Alcoff offers that the “visibility” of race enables the exploitation of differences of physical embodiment such as “skin tone, hair texture, [and the] shape of facial features.”⁹ Although “almost laughably insignificant” in their own right, she explains, these differences nevertheless provide the physiological indices for racial classifications. Such constellations of physiological features, Alcoff emphasizes, are not themselves inexorable referents of race but what have become historically intuited “visual manifestations” and “markers” of racial difference. Each bodily mark by which race is signified and materialized is accordingly a “sign” that “invites interpretation to discern what is behind it, beyond it, or what it signifies.”¹⁰ As with any semiological system, these marks of race acquire meaning through their relation to other physiological marks, those both apparent as well as “hidden” on and through the body. Race, like gender, is itself never seen or conceptualized as such; one apprehends only materialized instances of it, instances that are not themselves unified representational figures (e.g., the body as such) but a coalescence of signs that testify, sometimes assuredly, sometimes vaguely, to the synthetic of race.

Visibility, Alcoff continues, is nevertheless only one of three components of racial difference: “The concept of race and racial difference emerged as that which is visible, classifiable, and morally salient.”¹¹ Each element, moreover, bears varying culpability for the discriminatory effects of race. That we *acknowledge* visible corporeal differences, Alcoff contends, is not insidious in itself—neither are classifications based on those differences, she proposes, even when those categories are “arbitrary” as in the case of race. Danger arises, Alcoff asserts, only when the intrinsically value-neutral differences between features become disparately valorized. Accordingly, it is the third element, “moral salience,” that for Alcoff converts embodied distinctions into symbolic marks of differential worth. By “moral salience” Alcoff does not mean any simple valorization of racial signifiers as either “good” or “bad” but their more complex linking to dispositional and behavioral tendencies—seemingly descriptive assertions, that is, of the performative qualities of subjects: “What is pernicious about race classifications . . . is the host of attributes purportedly correlating to physical racial features.”¹² Classifications of race untouched by