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CHAPTER  
2

A GENEALOGY OF MODERN RACISM

The notion that black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West. The idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity remains problematic and controversial within prestigious halls of learning and sophisticated intellectual circles. The Afro-American encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy, which is embodied in institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this chapter is to give a brief account of the way in which the idea of white supremacy was constituted as an object of modern discourse in the West, without simply appealing to the objective demands of the prevailing mode of production, the political interests of the slaveholding class, or the psychological needs of the dominant white racial group. Despite the indispensable role these factors would play in a full-blown explanatory model to account for the emergence and sustenance of modern racism in the West, I try to hold these factors constant and focus solely on a neglected variable in past explanatory models—namely, the way in which the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy.

This requirement follows from a logic endemic to the very structure of modern discourse. This logic is manifest in the way in which the controlling metaphors, notions, and categories of modern discourse produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, specific conceptions of truth and knowledge, beauty and character, so that certain ideas are rendered incomprehensible and unintelligible. I suggest

that one such idea that cannot be brought within the epistemological field of the initial modern discourse is that of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity. This act of discursive exclusion, of relegating this idea to silence, does not simply correspond to (or is not only reflective of) the relative powerlessness of black people at the time. It also reveals the evolving internal dynamics of the structure of modern discourse in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in western Europe—or during the Enlightenment. The concrete effects of this exclusion and the intellectual traces of this silence continue to haunt the modern West: on the nondiscursive level, in ghetto streets, and on the discursive level, in methodological assumptions in the disciplines of the humanities.

I shall argue that the initial structure of modern discourse in the West “secretes” the idea of white supremacy. I call this “secretion”—the underside of modern discourse—a particular logical consequence of the quest for truth and knowledge in the modern West. To put it crudely, my argument is that the authority of science, undergirded by a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors and Cartesian notions, promotes and encourages the activities of observing, comparing, measuring, and ordering the physical characteristics of human bodies. Given the renewed appreciation and appropriation of classical antiquity, these activities are regulated by classical aesthetic and cultural norms. The creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian epistemology, and classical ideals produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which, though efficacious in the quest for truth and knowledge, prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity. In fact, to “think” such an idea was to be deemed irrational, barbaric, or mad.

#### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE GENEALOGICAL APPROACH

I call this inquiry a “genealogy” because, following the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, I am interested in the emergence (*Entstehung*) or the “moment of arising” of the idea of white supremacy within the modern discourse in the West.<sup>2</sup> This genealogy tries to address the following questions: What are the discursive conditions for the possibility of the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of white supremacy in modern discourse? How

is this idea constituted within the epistemological field of modern discourse? What is the complex configuration of metaphors, notions, categories, and norms which produces and promotes such an object of modern discourse?

My genealogical approach subscribes to a conception of power that is neither simply based on individual subjects—e.g., heroes or great personages as in traditional historiography—nor on collective subjects—e.g., groups, elites, or classes as in revisionist and vulgar Marxist historiography. Therefore I do not believe that the emergence of the idea of white supremacy in the modern West can be fully accounted for in terms of the psychological needs of white individuals and groups or the political and economic interests of a ruling class. I will try to show that the idea of white supremacy emerges partly because of the powers within the structure of modern discourse—powers to produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which set perimeters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas.

These powers are subjectless—that is, they are the indirect products of the praxis of human subjects. They have a life and logic of their own, not in a transhistorical realm but within history alongside yet not reducible to demands of an economic system, interests of a class, or needs of a group. What I am suggesting is not a history without a subject propagated by the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, but rather a history made by the praxis of human subjects which often results in complex structures of discourses which have relative autonomy from (or is not fully accountable in terms of) the intentions, aims, needs, interests, and objectives of human subjects.<sup>3</sup>

I am further suggesting that there is no direct correspondence between nondiscursive structures, such as a system of production (or, in Marxist terms, an economic base), and discursive structures, such as theoretical formations (or, in Marxist terms, an ideological superstructure). Rather, there are powers immanent in nondiscursive structures and discursive structures.<sup>4</sup> Traditional, revisionist, and vulgar Marxist types of historiography focus primarily on powers within nondiscursive structures—e.g., powers of kings, presidents, elites, or classes—and reduce the powers within discursive structures to mere means for achieving the intentions, aims, needs, interests, and objectives of subjects in nondiscursive structures. This reductionism is not wrong; it is simply inadequate. It rightly acknowledges noteworthy concrete effects generated by the rela-

tionship between powers in discursive structures and those in non-discursive structures, but it wrongly denies the relative autonomy of the powers in discursive structures and hence reduces the complexity of cultural phenomena.

The primary motivation behind such reductionism (such as personalistic analyses of race prejudice or orthodox Marxist accounts of racism) is to ensure an easy resolution of a highly complex problem, without calling into question certain fundamental assumptions that inform such resolutions. These fundamental assumptions, such as the subject-based conception of power, and easy resolutions, such as the elimination of race prejudice by knowledge or the abolition of racism under socialism, preclude theoretical alternatives and strategic options. In this way, these fundamental assumptions and hypothetical resolutions illustrate the effects of the powers immanent in certain liberal and Marxist discourses.

### THE STRUCTURE OF MODERN DISCOURSE

I understand "the structure of modern discourse" to be the controlling metaphors, notions, categories, and norms that shape the predominant conceptions of truth and knowledge in the modern West. These metaphors, notions, categories, and norms are circumscribed and determined by three major historical processes: the scientific revolution, the Cartesian transformation of philosophy, and the classical revival.<sup>5</sup>

The scientific revolution is usually associated with the pioneering breakthroughs of Copernicus and Kepler in astronomy, Galileo and Newton in physics, and Descartes and Leibnitz in mathematics. These breakthroughs were pre-Enlightenment, most of them occurring during the seventeenth century, the so-called Age of Genius. The scientific revolution is noteworthy (to say the least) primarily because it signified the authority of science. This authority justified new modes of knowledge and new conceptions of truth and reality; it arose at the end of the era of pagan Christianity and set the framework for the advent of modernity.

The originary figures of the scientific revolution went beyond the Renaissance problematic—of finding a compromise formula which reconciled Christian and classical modes of thinking and living—yet stopped short of drawing thoroughly secular conclusions from their breakthroughs, that is, of waging intellectual war on natural religion and dogmatic theology. Galileo's Platonism and Newton's Socinianism illustrate this peculiar protomodern world view

of making peace between science and religion.<sup>6</sup>

For our purposes, the scientific revolution is significant because it highlights two fundamental ideas: *observation* and *evidence*. These two ideas have played, in an isolated manner, a role in previous paradigms of knowledge in the West (since the times of Aristotle and Aristarchus). But the scientific revolution brought these ideas together in such a way that they have become the two foci around which much of modern discourse evolves. The modern concepts of hypothesis, fact, inference, validation, confirmation, and verification cluster around the ideas of observation and evidence.

The major proponents of the scientific revolution, or, more specifically, of the authority of science, were two philosophers, Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Bacon is noteworthy primarily because of his metaphilosophical honesty. For him, the aim of philosophy was to give humankind mastery over nature by means of scientific discoveries and inventions. He then promoted the philosophical importance of the inductive method as a means of arriving at general laws to facilitate this human mastery. Despite Bacon's acceptance of orthodox religion, his rejection of Copernican theory, and his lack of acquaintance with some of the major scientific discoveries of his time—e.g., the work of Andreas Vesalius on modern anatomy, William Gilbert on magnetism, or William Harvey (Bacon's own medical attendant) on the circulation of blood—Bacon's writings, especially *The Advancement of Learning*, did much to promote the authority of science.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes is highly significant because his thought provided the controlling notions of modern discourse: *the primacy of the subject and the preeminence of representation*. Descartes is widely regarded as the founder of modern philosophy not simply because his philosophical outlook was profoundly affected by the scientific revolution but, more important, because he associated the scientific aim of predicting and explaining the world with the philosophical aim of picturing and representing the world. In this view, the fruits of scientific research do not merely provide more useful ways for human beings to *cope* with reality; such research also yields a true *copy* of reality. Descartes's conception of philosophy as a tortuous move from the subject to objects, from the veil of ideas to the external world, from immediate awareness to extended substances, from self-consciousness to things in space, and ultimately from doubt to certainty was motivated primarily by an attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the legitimacy of modern science. Martin Heidegger made this crucial connection be-

tween Cartesian philosophy and modern science in his famous essay, "The Age of the World View":

We are reflecting on the nature of modern science in order to find its metaphysical basis. What conception of the existent and what concept of truth cause science to become research?

Understanding as research holds the existent to account on the question of how and how far it can be put at the disposal of available "representation." Research has the existent at its disposal if it can either calculate it in advance, in its future course, or calculate it afterwards as past. Nature and history become the object of expository representation. . . .

This objectification of the existent takes place in a re-presentation which aims at presenting whatever exists to itself in such a way that the calculating person can be secure, that is, certain of the existent. Science as research is produced when and only when truth has been transformed into such certainty of representation. In the metaphysics of Descartes the existent was defined for the first time as objectivity of representation, and truth as certainty of representation.<sup>8</sup>

Bacon and Descartes had basic differences: Bacon inductive orientation and Descartes the deductive viewpoint; Bacon the empiricist outlook and Descartes the rationalist (mathematical) perspective. Despite these differences, both of these propagandists of modern science agreed that scientific method provides a new paradigm of knowledge and that observation and evidence is at the center of scientific method. In *The New Organon*, Bacon likened his ideal natural philosopher to the bee, which collects "its material from the flowers of the garden and of the field" and digests it "by a power of its own." In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes set forth as a rule that "observations" become "the more necessary the further we advance in knowledge." And, as D'Alembert acknowledged in *The Encyclopedia*, both Bacon and Descartes "introduced the spirit of experimental science."<sup>9</sup>

The last major historical process that circumscribed and determined the metaphors, notions, categories, and norms of modern discourse was the classical revival. This classical revival—in response to medieval mediocrity and religious dogmatism—was initiated in the Early Renaissance (1300–1500), principally with humanist studies in Roman art and Latin literature, such as Giotto in painting, Petrarch in letters, and Dufay in music. This revival intensified during the High Renaissance (1500–1530), with Da Vinci, Raphael, Bramante, and the early Michelangelo in the arts; Ariosto, Rabelais, and Erasmus in literature; and Josquin and Lassus in

music. The revival mellowed in the Mannerist era (1530–1600), as illustrated by El Greco, Tintoretto, and the later Michelangelo in the arts; Montaigne, Cervantes, and Shakespeare in literature; and Marenzio, Gabrieli, and Frescobaldi in music. The revival was strengthened in the Baroque period (1600–1750), as seen in the works of Velasquez and Rembrandt in the arts; Racine, Milton, and Vondel in literature; and Bach and Handel in music. The classical revival culminated in the neoclassical movement in the middle of the eighteenth century, with the paintings of David and Ingres, the lyrics of Hölderlin, the tragedies of Alfieri, the verse and prose of Landor, and the music of Haydn and Mozart. The Enlightenment revolt against the authority of the church and the search for models of unrestrained criticism led to a highly charged recovery of classical antiquity, and especially to a new appreciation and appropriation of the artistic and cultural heritage of ancient Greece.

For our purposes, the classical revival is important because it infuses Greek ocular metaphors and classical ideals of beauty, proportion, and moderation into the beginnings of modern discourse. Greek ocular metaphors—Eye of the Mind, Mind as Mirror of Nature, Mind as Inner Arena with its Inner Observer—dominate modern discourse in the West.<sup>10</sup> Coupled with the Cartesian notion of knowledge as inner representation, modern philosophical inquiry is saddled with the epistemological model of intellect (formerly Plato's and Aristotle's *Nous*, now Descartes's Inner Eye) inspecting entities modeled on retinal images, with the Eye of the Mind viewing representations in order to find some characteristic that would testify to their fidelity.

*The creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, Greek ocular metaphors, and classical aesthetic and cultural ideals constitutes the essential elements of modern discourse in the West.* In short, modern discourse rests upon a conception of truth and knowledge governed by an ideal value-free subject engaged in observing, comparing, ordering, and measuring in order to arrive at evidence sufficient to make valid inferences, confirm speculative hypotheses, deduce error-proof conclusions, and verify true representations of reality.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN RACISM: THE FIRST STAGE

The recovery of classical antiquity in the modern West produced what I shall call a "normative gaze," namely, an ideal from which

to order and compare observations. This ideal was drawn primarily from classical aesthetic values of beauty, proportion, and human form and classical cultural standards of moderation, self-control, and harmony.<sup>11</sup> The role of classical aesthetic and cultural norms in the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse cannot be underestimated.

These norms were consciously projected and promoted by many influential Enlightenment writers, artists, and scholars, of whom the most famous was J. J. Winckelmann. In his widely read book, *History of Ancient Art*, Winckelmann portrayed ancient Greece as a world of beautiful bodies. He laid down rules—in art and aesthetics—that should govern the size of eyes and eyebrows, of collarbones, hands, feet, and especially noses. He defined beauty as noble simplicity and quiet grandeur. In a celebrated passage he wrote:

As the depth of the ocean always remains calm however much the surface may be agitated, so does the expression in the figures of the Greeks reveal a great and composed soul in the midst of passions.<sup>12</sup>

Although Winckelmann was murdered in middle life, never set foot in Greece, and saw almost no original Greek art (only one exhibition of Greek art in Munich), he viewed Greek beauty and culture as the ideal or standard against which to measure other peoples and cultures.

Winthrop Jordan and Thomas Gossett have shown that there are noteworthy premodern racist viewpoints aimed directly and indirectly at nonwhite, especially black, people.<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1520 Paracelsus held that black and primitive peoples had a separate origin from Europeans. In 1591, Giordano Bruno made a similar claim, but had in mind principally Jews and Ethiopians. And Lucilio Vanini posited that Ethiopians had apes for ancestors and had once walked on all fours. Since theories of the separate origin of races were in disagreement with the Roman Catholic Church, Bruno and Vanini underwent similar punishment: both were burned at the stake. Of course, biblically based accounts of racial inferiority flourished, but the authority of the church prohibited the proliferation of nonreligious, that is, protomodern, accounts of racial inferiority.

*What is distinctive about the role of classical aesthetic and cultural norms at the advent of modernity is that they provided an acceptable authority for the idea of white supremacy, an acceptable authority that was closely linked with the major authority on truth and knowledge in the modern world, namely, the institution of science.* In order to see how this link-

age took place, let us examine the categories and aims of the major discipline that promoted this authority, that is, those of natural history.

The principal aim of natural history is to observe, compare, measure, and order animals and human bodies (or classes of animals and human bodies) *based on visible, especially physical, characteristics*. These characteristics permit one to discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies.

The governing categories of natural history are preeminently *classificatory* categories—that is, they consist of various taxonomies in the form of tables, catalogs, indexes, and inventories which impose some degree of order or representational schema on a broad field of visible characteristics. *Observation* and *differentness* are the essential guiding notions in natural history. Foucault wrote:

Natural history has as a condition of its possibility the common affinity of things and language with representation; but it exists as a task only in so far as things and language happen to be separate. It must therefore reduce this distance between them so as to bring language as close as possible to the observing gaze, and the things observed as close as possible to words. Natural history is nothing more than the nomination of the visible. . . .

Natural history . . . covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations. It constitutes a whole domain of empiricity as at the same time describable and orderable.<sup>14</sup>

The initial basis for the idea of white supremacy is to be found in the classificatory categories and the descriptive, representational, order-imposing aims of natural history. The captivity of natural history to what I have called the “normative gaze” signifies the first stage of the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse. More specifically (and as Ashley Montagu has tirelessly argued), the genealogy of racism in the modern West is inseparable from the appearance of the classificatory category of race in natural history.

The category of race—denoting primarily skin color—was first employed as a means of classifying human bodies by François Bernier, a French physician, in 1684. He divided humankind into basically four races: Europeans, Africans, Orientals, and Lapps.<sup>15</sup> The first authoritative racial division of humankind is found in the influential *Natural System* (1735) of the most preeminent naturalist of

the eighteenth century, Carolus Linnaeus. For Linnaeus, species were fixed in number and kind; they were immutable prototypes. Varieties, however, were members of a species that might change in appearance. The members of a species produced fertile offspring; interfertility was the test for the division of species. There were variations of kind within a species; the races were a prime example. For Linnaeus, there were four races: Homo Europaeus, Homo Asiaticus, Homo Afer, and Homo Americanus.

Winthrop Jordan has argued that Linnaeus did not subscribe to a hierarchical ranking of races but rather to "one chain of universal being." Jordan states:

It was one thing to classify all living creation and altogether another to arrange it in a single great hierarchy; and when Linnaeus undertook the first of these tasks he was not thereby forced to attempt the latter. In the many editions of the *Systema Naturae* he duly catalogued the various kinds of men, yet never in a hierarchic manner.<sup>16</sup>

Yet it is quite apparent that Linnaeus implicitly evaluated the observable characteristics of the racial classes of people, especially those pertaining to character and disposition. For example, compare Linnaeus' description of the European with the African:

European. White, Sanguine, Brawny. Hair abundantly flowing. Eyes blue. Gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by customs.

African. Black, Phlegmatic, Relaxed. Hair black, frizzled. Skin silky. Nose flat. Lips tumid. Women's bosom a matter of modesty. Breasts give milk abundantly. Crafty, indolent. Negligent. Anoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice.<sup>17</sup>

Linnaeus' use of evaluative terms revealed, at the least, an implicit hierarchy by means of personal preference. It also is important to note that he included some remarks about the African woman, but that he said nothing about the European woman (nor the American and Asiatic woman). It also is significant that in the 1750s when he first acknowledged that hybridization of species occurs, he chose black people and apes as the probable candidates, while restricting such unions to black women and male apes.

Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon accepted hybridization without question in his famous *Natural History of Man* (1778). Although Buffon, like Linnaeus, viewed races as mere chance variations, he held that white was "the real and natural color of man." Black people and other races were variations of this natural color, yet some-

how not members of a different species. He remained uncertain about the objective reality of species. Buffon believed that black skin was caused by hot climate and would change if the climate became colder. Although he was a fervent antislavery advocate, he claimed that black people had "little genius" and then added, "The unfortunate negroes are endowed with excellent hearts, and possess the seeds of every human virtue."<sup>18</sup>

### THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN RACISM: THE SECOND STAGE

In the works of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, one of the founders of modern anthropology, the aesthetic criteria and cultural ideals of Greece began to come to the forefront. Like Linnaeus and Buffon, Blumenbach held that all human beings belonged to the same species and that races were merely varieties. Yet contrary to the claims by Winthrop Jordan, Ashley Montagu, and Thomas Gossett concerning Blumenbach's opposition to hierarchic racial ranking or irritation at those who use aesthetic standards for such ranking, Blumenbach praised the symmetrical face as the most beautiful of human faces precisely because it approximated the "divine" works of Greek art, and specifically the proper anatomical proportions found in Greek sculpture.<sup>19</sup> Applying the classical ideal of moderation, he claimed that the more moderate the climate, the more beautiful the face. The net result was that since black people were farthest from the Greek ideal and located in extremely hot climates, they were, by implication, inferior in beauty to Europeans.

The second stage of the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse primarily occurred in the rise of phrenology (the reading of skulls) and physiognomy (the reading of faces). These new disciplines—closely connected with anthropology—served as an open platform for the propagation of the idea of white supremacy not principally because they were pseudosciences, but, more important, because these disciplines acknowledged the European value-laden character of their observations. This European value-laden character was based on classical aesthetic and cultural ideals.

Pieter Camper, the Dutch anatomist, made aesthetic criteria the pillar of his chief discovery: the famous "facial angle." Camper claimed that the "facial angle"—a measure of prognathism—

permitted a comparison of heads of human bodies by way of cranial and facial measurements. For Camper, the ideal "facial angle" was a 100-degree angle which was achieved only by the ancient Greeks. He openly admitted that this ideal conformed to Winckelmann's classical ideal of beauty. Following Winckelmann, Camper held that Greek proportions and stature exemplified beauty and embodied perfection. Camper further held that a beautiful face, beautiful body, beautiful nature, beautiful character, and beautiful soul were inseparable. He tried to show that the "facial angle" of Europeans measured about 97 degrees and those of black people between 60 and 70 degrees, closer to the measurements of apes and dogs than to human beings.

Although many anthropologists readily accepted the "facial angle" as a scientific notion,<sup>20</sup> Camper made it clear that his aim was not simply to contribute to the new discipline of anthropology but also to promote the love of classical antiquity to young artists and sculptors. As George Mosse has noted, historians of race theories often overlook the fact that Camper and many subsequent theoreticians of race and racism were trained as artists and writers. Camper was a painter by training and, in fact, won the gold medal of the Amsterdam School of Art two years before he published his work on the "facial angle."<sup>21</sup>

Johann Kaspar Lavater, the father of physiognomy, explicitly acknowledged that the art of painting was the mother of his new discipline. Moreau, an early editor of Lavater's work, clearly noted that the true language of physiognomy was painting, because it spoke through images, equally to the eye and to the spirit.<sup>22</sup> This new discipline linked particular visible characteristics of human bodies, especially those of the face, to the character and capacities of human beings. This discipline openly articulated what many of the early naturalists and anthropologists tacitly assumed: *the classical ideals of beauty, proportion, and moderation regulated the classifying and ranking of groups of human bodies*. In short, physiognomy brought the "normative gaze" into daylight.

Lavater believed that the Greek statues were the models of beauty. His description of the desirable specimen—blue eyes, horizontal forehead, bent back, round chin, and short brown hair—resembled the beautiful person preferred by Camper. The common Greek ideals of beauty, though slightly distorted (to say the least), were the principal source of this "normative gaze." Lavater's new discipline was highly influential among scientists—for example, Jean Baptiste Porta, Christian Meiners—and artists. His close friend, the famous

Goethe, aided him in editing and publishing his physiognomic formulations and findings and Sir Walter Scott, among others, popularized them in his novels.

Lavater's promotion of what I call the "normative gaze" consisted no longer of detailed measurements, as was the case with the naturalists, but rather of the visual glance. He wrote: "Trust your first quick impression, for it is worth more than what is usually called observation."<sup>23</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that Lavater put forth an elaborate theory of noses, the most striking member of the face. Neither is it surprising that subsequent classifications of noses, based on Lavater's formulations, associate Roman and Greek noses with conquerors and persons of refinement and taste.

The next and last step we shall consider in this genealogy of racism in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe is the advent of phrenology, the new discipline which held that human character could be read through the shape of the human head. Franz Joseph Gall, a highly regarded German physician, argued in 1796 that the inner workings of the brain could be determined by the shape of the skull. For example, he associated an arched forehead with a penchant for metaphysical speculation; a skull arched at the rear with love of fame; and a skull large at the base with a criminal disposition. In the nineteenth century, when racist ideology was systematized, this new discipline took on a life of its own with Johann Kaspar Spurzheim, Anders Retzius, Carl Gustav Carus, and others; it also aided in allying modern racism with nationalism and repressed sexuality in bourgeois morality.

#### THEORETICAL CONSEQUENCES: RESTRICTIVE POWERS IN MODERN DISCOURSE

A major example of the way in which the restrictive powers of modern discourse delimit theoretical alternatives and strategic options in regard to the idea of white supremacy is seen in writings of radical environmentalists of the period—those one would expect to be open to the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity. Yet even these progressive antislavery advocates remain captive to the "normative gaze."

The major opponent of predominant forms of a hierarchic ranking of races and the outspoken proponent of intermarriage in the United States during this era, Samuel Stanhope Smith, illustrates this captivity. In his day Smith stood at the pinnacle of American academia. He was president of Princeton University and an honor-

ary member of the American Philosophical Society. He was awarded honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale. In his well-known *Essays* of 1787 (and revised in 1810) Smith argued that humankind constituted one species and that human variations could be accounted for in reference to three natural causes: "climate," "state of society," and "habits of living." He believed "that colour may be justly considered as an universal freckle."<sup>24</sup>

The "normative gaze" operative in Smith's viewpoint is located, as in Buffon, in the assumption that physical, especially racial, variations are always degenerate ones from an ideal state. For Smith, this ideal state consisted of highly civilized white people. As Winthrop Jordan notes, "Smith treated the complexion and physiognomy of the white man not merely as indication of superiority but as the hallmark of civilization."<sup>25</sup> Smith justified this ideal standard and legitimized his "normative gaze" by appealing to the classical ideals of beauty. In a patriotic footnote he wrote:

It may perhaps gratify my countrymen to reflect that the United States occupy those latitudes that have ever been most favourable to the beauty of the human form. When time shall have accommodated the constitution of its new state, and cultivation shall have meliorated the climate, the beauties of Greece and Circasia may be renewed in America; as there are not a few already who rival those of any quarter of the globe.<sup>26</sup>

Smith's radical environmentalism (along with his adherence to Greek aesthetic ideals) led him to adopt the most progressive and sympathetic alternative which promotes the welfare of black people permissible within the structure of modern discourse: integration which *uplifts* black people, assimilation which *civilizes* black people, intermarriage which *ensures less Negroid features* in the next generation. For example, Smith wrote:

The great difference between the domestic and field slaves gives reason to believe that, if they were perfectly free, enjoyed property, and were admitted to a liberal participation of the society rank and privileges of their masters, they would change their African peculiarities much faster.<sup>27</sup>

This theoretical alternative was taken to its logical consequence by the distinguished American antislavery advocate, publicizer of talented black writers, and eminent physician, Benjamin Rush. This logical consequence was the elimination of the skin color of black people. In a paper entitled "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition that the Black Color (As it is called) of the Negroes

is Derived From the Leprosy," Rush denounced the idea of white supremacy, then stated: "Is the color of Negroes a disease? Then let science and humanity combine their efforts and endeavor to discover a remedy for it."<sup>28</sup> In one bold stroke, Rush provided grounds for promoting abolitionism, opposing intermarriage (who wants to marry diseased persons!), and supporting the Christian unity of humankind. In his opinion, his viewpoint also maximized the happiness of black and white people:

To encourage attempts to cure this disease of the skin in Negroes, let us recollect that by succeeding in them, we shall produce a large portion of happiness in the world. . . .

Secondly, we shall add greatly to their happiness, for however well they appear to be satisfied with their color, there are many proofs of their preferring that of the white people.<sup>29</sup>

### RACISM IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The intellectual legitimacy of the idea of white supremacy, though grounded in what we now consider marginal disciplines (especially in its second stage), was pervasive. This legitimacy can be illustrated by the extent to which racism permeated the writings of the major figures of the Enlightenment. It is important to note that the idea of white supremacy not only was accepted by these figures, but, more important, it was accepted by them *without their having to put forward their own arguments to justify it*. Montesquieu and Voltaire of the French Enlightenment, Hume and Jefferson of the Scotch and the American Enlightenment, and Kant of the German Enlightenment not merely held racist views; they also uncritically—during this age of criticism—believed that the *authority* for these views rested in the domain of naturalists, anthropologists, physiognomists, and phrenologists.

Montesquieu's satirical remarks in *Spirit of the Laws* about black people (and his many revisions of these remarks) may seem to suggest an equivocal disposition toward the idea of white supremacy. Yet his conclusion leaned toward support of the idea:

It is impossible for us to suppose that these beings should be men; because if we supposed them to be men, one would begin to believe we ourselves were not Christians.<sup>30</sup>

Voltaire's endorsement of the idea of white supremacy was unequivocal. In his essay "The People of America," he claimed that black people (and Indians) were distinct species from Europeans:

The Negro race is a species of men as different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds. The mucous membrane, or network, which nature has spread between the muscles and the skin, is white in us and black or copper-colored in them. . . .

If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seemed formed neither for the advantages nor the abuses of philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

Hume's racism was notorious; it served as a major source of pro-slavery arguments and antiblack education propaganda. In his famous footnote to his essay "Of National Characteristics," he stated:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. . . .

In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.<sup>32</sup>

Jefferson arrived at mildly similar conclusions in his *Notes on Virginia*. Regarding the intellectual capacities of black people, he wrote:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior . . . and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous. . . . Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Kant, whose views were based heavily on Hume's claims, held that "the negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling." In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant noted:

Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a simple example in which a negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference

between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.<sup>34</sup>

Kant further revealed his racist views when, in reply to advice that a black person gave to Father Labat, he wrote,

And it might be that there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.<sup>35</sup>

### THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN RACISM: INEVITABLE OR CONTINGENT?

The emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse seems inevitable in that, besides the practical need to justify nonwhite domination (especially in the early nineteenth century), the only available theoretical alternative for the unhampered search for truth and knowledge in the modern West consisted of detailed observation, measurement, comparison, and ordering of the natural and human kingdom by autonomous subjects in the light of the aesthetic and cultural ideals of classical antiquity. Given the Enlightenment obsession with criticism, especially criticism of the church and religion, the past was divided into four major epochs:

... the great river civilizations of the Near East; Ancient Greece and Rome; the Christian millennium; and modern times, beginning with the "revival of letters." These four epochs were rhythmically related to each other: the first and third were paired off as ages of myth, belief and superstition, while the second and fourth were ages of rationality, science and Enlightenment.<sup>36</sup>

The implications of Frank Snowden's thesis in his book *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* call into question the notion that the Enlightenment recovery of classical antiquity—its aesthetic and cultural ideals—inevitably required, on the discursive level, the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse. Snowden's thesis is that racial prejudice did not exist in classical antiquity. He claims that in the first major encounter in European records of black people in a predominantly white society the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity was seriously entertained. In regard to ideals of beauty, he notes that Herodotus called Ethiopians the most handsome people on earth; Philostratus spoke of charming Ethiopians with their strange color; Pseudo-Callisthenes held the black

Queen of Meroë (visited by Alexander the Great) to be of wondrous beauty; and the poet Martial, though pursued by a woman whiter than snow, sought a "super-black" woman.<sup>37</sup> Snowden goes as far as to state: "On the whole . . . the number of expressed preferences for blackness and whiteness in classical literature is approximately equal."<sup>38</sup>

If Snowden's viewpoint is correct, two noteworthy issues arise. First, it permits us to accent the crucial role that the advent of modern science played in *highlighting the physical appearances of people in relation to what it is to be human, beautiful, cultured, and intelligent*. In this regard, the primacy of observation—the "gaze" character of scientific knowledge—may be as important as the classical ideals which are latent in such observations at the inception of modern discourse. Second, Snowden's claims require that I provide an account of why the Enlightenment revival of classical antiquity ignored or excluded black statues and the proportions and measurements of black figures as part of classical aesthetic ideals.

Snowden's thesis is highly plausible and extremely provocative, but I find it neither persuasive nor convincing. His claims are too exorbitant, but they do contain kernels of truth. Race indeed mattered much less in classical antiquity than it does in modern times. But race did matter in classical antiquity, as can be seen from the evidence meticulously gathered by Snowden, Sikes, Westermann, and others.<sup>39</sup> The crucial difference seems to be that racial differences were justified on cultural grounds in classical antiquity, whereas at the inception of modern discourse, racial differences are often grounded in nature, that is, ontology and later biology.

And even if race prejudice did not exist in classical antiquity, the minority status of black people in Greece and Rome still rendered black statues, proportions, and measurements marginal to cultural life. Hence, the black presence, though tolerated and at times venerated, was never an integral part of the classical ideals of beauty.

The emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse seems contingent, in that there was no iron necessity at work in the complex configuration of metaphors, notions, categories, and norms that produce and promote this idea. There is an accidental character to the discursive emergence of modern racism, a kind of free play of discursive powers which produce and prohibit, develop and delimit the legitimacy and intelligibility of certain ideas within a discursive space circumscribed by the attractiveness of classical antiquity.

Yet even such claims about the contingency of the emergence

of the idea of white supremacy in the modern West warrant suspicion. This is so because, as we noted earlier, this genealogical approach *does not purport to be an explanation of the rise of modern racism, but rather a theoretical inquiry into a particular neglected variable, i.e., the discursive factor, within a larger explanatory model.* This variable is significant because it not only precludes reductionist treatments of modern racism; it also highlights the cultural and aesthetic impact of the idea of white supremacy on black people. This inquiry accents the fact that the everyday life of black people is shaped not simply by the exploitative (oligopolistic) capitalist system of production but also by cultural attitudes and sensibilities, including alienating ideals of beauty.

The idea of white supremacy is a major bowel unleashed by the structure of modern discourse, a significant secretion generated from the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, and classical aesthetic and cultural norms. Needless to say, the odor of this bowel and the fumes of this secretion continue to pollute the air of our postmodern times.