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UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMATIC OF RACE THROUGH THE PROBLEM OF RACE-MIXTURE

ABSTRACT

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This paper frames many of the issues this conference is intended to address. “Does the destruction of racism require the destruction of what we commonly understand to be racial identities?” “And is state power, by omission or commission, inevitably implicated in determining this issue?” More fundamental still, one might ask: “What is race?” “What is ethnicity?”

The paper approaches the long history of the race concept, via a part of the whole, the phenomenon of race-mixing. This approach is justified, I think, by the fact that the very possibility of the mixture of races frames—indeed has always framed—the larger problematic of race as such. That possibility forms one of its essential components, at once enabling and destabilizing racial thought and racial regimes. All of the things taken for granted about race are brought into question when races mix—not least of them the physical-biological reality of race itself (i.e., what is race?); as well as whether and to what extent race is best understood as biology or culture; and, indeed, what motivates racism (i.e., the relation between racial identification and racism). Moreover, the phenomenon of mixture complicates what is often assumed to be the uni-dimensional, asymmetric trajectory of racial thinking, that is, one of unmediated antipathy, hostility, and distance. I would argue, in fact, that the idea that racial purity and racial mixture stand at diametrically opposite ends of a continuum needs revision. Historically, they too are more likely to be interactive and mutually constitutive. Race mixture has been—and continues to be—viewed as a source of cultural regeneration as well as degeneration, and sometimes by the very same persons. Indeed, from the first, putatively superior groups have often sought to appropriate aspects of, even assimilate members of ostensibly inferior racialized groups. For their part, the subordinated groups generally find it difficult to respond to their racial proscription without recourse to the fundamental paradigms encoded in their own racial differentiation. Given conditions of life in the modern world, which puts a premium on self-identification, they often find

themselves racializing the group experiences that ground their identities, and thus lending perhaps inadvertent support to the racial project.

The paper will address three different historical moments, with the hope of providing through these concrete histories material for exploring some of the questions posed for this conference. Among those are the historical origins of the modern race concept and the internal contradictions that have been present from its beginnings; the problem of defining race, especially of distinguishing between biology and culture; and finally, the conundrum posed by contemporary invocations to abandon the race concept altogether.