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## Race matters

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## Race Matters

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Jane Rhodes

*I*welcome the opportunity to offer my musings on the concept of global citizenship that this occasion demands. First, let me acknowledge Cornell West's important study, whose name I've appropriated for this talk.<sup>1</sup> As we embark on the creation of the Institute for Global Citizenship, we need to unpack the language embedded in this project. In particular, what does *global* mean? Clearly, it suggests the dismantling of older, outmoded categories that juxtapose *domestic* and *foreign*. The term *global* also references the reality that traditional borders of the nation-state no longer have the same salience. Borders are permeable and constantly crossed by bodies, by products and commerce, by words and images. Ironically, at the same time that the notion of national borders has been called into question, here in the United States we live in a political climate that calls for renewed allegiances, resurgent patriotism, and the clinging to a national identity. Indeed, as many scholars have noted in the wake of 9/11, the mechanisms for the production of American nationalism (political discourse, laws, media, and cultural practices among them) have grown exponentially. Multiculturalism—that amorphous, ambiguous, and contentious term—has been used to this end. If jingoism and hyper-nationalism are characterized as an “us against them” mentality, multiculturalism has served to enlarge the concept of who is included within these formations. Multiculturalism has encouraged new categories of American identities and the recognition and celebration of these identities. You can be black, brown, mixed-race, immigrant, or native-born and simultaneously

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American, but only if you are not located within a grouping associated with the “enemy”—Muslim, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Third World fundamentalist, radical. Racial, ethnic, religious, social, and cultural differences can be embraced within our collective acknowledgment of common interests, or so it seems.

The contemporary moment brings with it enormous tensions around America’s global economic influence and the national political impulses that seek to reify an authentic American identity. Hence we must consider the other part of this enterprise at Macalester College: *citizenship*. While this era of globalization destabilizes the notion of citizenship, we are also situated within a political and social environment in which being a citizen has become the political lynchpin that defines who is one of us and who is the *other*; who is entitled to the rights of citizenship, and who is not. Like multiculturalism, citizenship is an ever-changing, politically contested term that can determine one’s life chances. It also becomes the framework through which the privileged may feel emboldened to deny those privileges to the disadvantaged. Is the undocumented immigrant worker from Mexico, Russia, or China, who cleans our houses, mows our lawns, and takes care of our children (and whom we pay under the table), less entitled to becoming a citizen? Should those individuals without legal status suffer in an exilic netherworld while they pay taxes, contribute to our GNP, and uphold our dearest principles of thrift and industry? Thus, when hundreds of thousands of Latino/a immigrants and their allies demonstrated across the country in spring 2006 to assert their rights in the face of a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, they asserted their citizenship and service to the nation as a sign of entitlement. But, if we are truly embracing the idea of *global citizenship*, why should their immigration status matter? That Latinos/as, who are fast becoming the backbone of America’s service and professional classes, are still seen as foreign, demonized by nativism and xenophobia, and considered an economic threat rather than an economic boon, unveils this dilemma.

I would argue that race in America is the overarching factor that calls the national identity of many, but not all, global subjects into question. Race matters. America is caught between its racial past and global present, a paradox that further complicates our already troubled intercultural relationships. Is the Mexican-American man who works as a janitor at the Macalester College Alumni House more or less a citizen after living in the United States for thirty years? If he were “white,” would we so easily question his credentials for citizenship? It is his skin

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color, the certain familiarity of his cultural cues, and his accent that conflate his racial difference with the status of national outsider. He is coded not only as racially different but as an alien invader, although he is a citizen. These representations have been underscored by more than 150 years (since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) of legal wrangling, political rhetoric, and racist invective that reflect Americans' profound anxieties about being overrun by those south of our national border. When I first arrived at the Macalester College campus, we had a long chat during which the janitor told me how he crossed the border as a young man and toiled in southern California until he learned of work opportunities in Minnesota. After making the cross-country trek, he was delighted to find a multigenerational Mexican-American community in the Twin Cities, where he decided to settle. The Alumni House worker is an example of a global citizen, yet many would deny him the category of American citizen and all that that implies because he also belongs to a category—Mexican—that has embedded in it the idea of someone who must be kept out.

Recently, political scientist Wendy Brown, in a lecture at the University of Minnesota, talked about the contradictions presented as new walls go up around the world in an era of "porous sovereignty." In particular, she pointed to the U.S.-Mexico border and asked, "Why the proliferation of physical walls in an ostensibly globally connected world?"<sup>2</sup> That our borders need to be under surveillance in the dangerous world of clandestine warfare makes sense. That we are obsessed with our southern border, the entry point for immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Brazil, Haiti, and China, among other locales, suggests that the border's function has more to do with policing certain "racial" groups than it does with keeping the nation safe from harm. Indeed, these dual projects become the same.

Race matters. And darker skin often—but not always—matters. Race can be a stand-in for the *other* or for some linked category of difference. Members who share a religious identity, Muslim or Jew, can and have been called a race. Individuals who share a culture or historical or linguistic background, such as gypsies, have been referred to as a race. I am not arguing for any biological determinism, but rather for the ways that race haunts our consciousness, our sense of identity, and our ideas of nation and sovereignty. I want to suggest that despite the widespread celebration of the flow of global capital and de-territorialization as a process that breaks down barriers and opens up opportunities, the era of globalization has within it a backlash culture, in which racial

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ideologies allow us to keep ourselves separate and apart from those we perceive to be a threat. Global media has played a significant role in disseminating racial ideas. How many people born outside of the U.S. have formed ideas about African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos based on the repetition of images they consume in film and television? Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explicitly links media and migration as embodiments of the global flow that governs contemporary life. He notes that media offers new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds. Potential migrants use the media to rearticulate who they are and to prepare themselves for the world they encounter.<sup>3</sup>

Race matters in all aspects of global politics. Let us look at the African slave trade, which is a starting point for making Britain and the United States global empires. In 2007, the United Kingdom marked the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade through a wide array of exhibits and programs. This has sparked considerable controversy because some of the observances have highlighted the British abolitionist movement and celebrated the fact that slavery ended there some twenty-five years before it did in the United States. Some critics of Britain's commemoration point out that the anniversary makes it appear that white people liberated black; that British abolitionists were the heroes of the struggle against slavery. This slant reinforces the idea of African dependency on whites and the Western civilization that rationalized slavery in the first place. In reality, slaves rose against the trade from its inception, and the specter of rebellions led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti or Nat Turner in Virginia inflamed whites' fears of black insurrection.

By 1820, more than ten million Africans had been transported across the Atlantic. Some estimates suggest two million or more died in transit. The British have debated whether this early global trade in bodies warrants an apology from its leaders. Meanwhile, British educational and cultural institutions have insisted that this episode in the nation's history be recognized and interrogated. More than two hundred years since the slave trade, issues of race and citizenship continue to plague the United States and Britain, a direct legacy of the "peculiar institution." Global formations shaped the African-American freedom struggles of the mid-twentieth century, for example. Black Americans became increasingly cognizant that their efforts to overthrow legal, social, and political discrimination were echoed in anti-colonial struggles around the world. From the 1930s, figures like Paul Robeson and

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W.E.B. DuBois were central members of the Council of African Affairs, and in the 1960s, African-American activists met their counterparts in Bandung, Indonesia, to demonstrate their solidarity with global freedom movements. The abolition of the slave trade was not only a British phenomenon; it included the United States as its main traditional partner. Yet there is little national introspection here about the national complicity in slavery, as there has been in Britain. Instead, many Americans claim to be weary of references to slavery and have dismissed demands for reparations. Yet data makes it clear that the legacy of slavery in the United States remains profound. This is starkly represented by the disparities in the criminal justice system.

According to a 2006 report by the American Civil Liberties Union, African Americans make up an estimated 15% of drug users, but they account for 37% of those arrested on drug charges, 59% of those convicted, and 74% of all drug offenders sentenced to prison. While politicians and social scientists debate how to interpret these trends, most agree that race is a factor in these differences. The U.S. has 260,000 people in state prisons on nonviolent drug charges and 183,200 (more than 70%) are black or Latino. Overall, while African Americans comprise 12% of the total population, they are 50% of the jail and prison population. This is one million black men and women whose life chances have been profoundly altered and circumscribed. It is more likely that a black person of college age is in prison than in school. Despite the national resistance to affirmative action programs and other strategies that have been derisively called "reverse discrimination," there are no economic indicators showing a black advantage. Black median income is significantly less than whites' while black poverty rates are higher. Black unemployment rates are typically double white rates. For example, on average, black workers with the same education, the same experience, working in the same industry, and living in the same region of the country as whites still earn less money. Race clearly matters.

These racial inequalities reflect the dual forces of economic disadvantage and institutional discrimination. A common argument made by whites is that there has been more than enough time for blacks to catch up with whites economically because more than 150 years have passed since the end of slavery. However, economists have shown that economic (dis)advantages are inherited across generations. As economist Austan Goolsbee puts it, "The recent evidence shows quite clearly that in today's economy starting at the bottom is a recipe for being

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underpaid for a long time to come.” The processes of social mobility that have made it possible for earlier generations of European immigrants to succeed are dramatically slower for descendants of slaves. A substantial body of research finds that at least 45% of parents’ advantage in income is passed along to their children, and perhaps as much as 60%. If your great-great-grandfather was a slave or the child of former slaves, the opportunity to catch up is daunting. Indeed, rather than viewing the black underclass as morally deficient, we should acknowledge that the modest achievements of the black middle class are remarkable.<sup>4</sup>

Race in America matters: it is a primary determinant of life chances. Yet the current vogue is to deny that race matters and to suggest that we live in a post-racial, color-blind culture. No one embodies this more than Senator Barack Obama, who seeks to craft himself as the ideal global citizen. As most of you know, Senator Obama claims a mixed race, transnational identity—with black and white parentage and an upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia. I have been fascinated by Obama’s political strategy to distance himself from the baby-boom generation by arguing that the issues that divided America in the twentieth century—race, class, and gender among them—should be transcended with a new political vision. I view this with great irony since Mr. Obama trades on the very racial terrain that he seeks to avoid. When he announced his candidacy, none of the national news media seemed to remember that he was mixed race as they openly wondered whether he could be the First Black President. Senator Obama offers us the classic racial paradox; no matter what you may call yourself, what matters is how others see you and define you. This was most eloquently captured by W.E.B. DuBois in his essay *The Souls of Black Folk*, when he wrote that black Americans endure, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>5</sup>

Race has no biological relevance when considering Senator Obama’s identity, but it has everything to do with whether or not he will become the next President of the United States. In his memoirs, Obama recalled that he felt his status as a global citizen left him ill prepared for the politics of race as they are played out in the United States. He talks about being overwhelmed by racist comments from high school classmates and he was forced to tolerate a coach who called black opponents “niggers.” “I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt, a

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self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect," he wrote.<sup>6</sup>

As I close, I want to suggest that we not take the concept of global citizenship blithely; that we not embrace it as a marker for multicultural "progress" on a world stage. Rather, we need to remember that race, ethnicity, and other categories of difference have not disappeared; they stubbornly remain embedded in history, politics, and culture. Race still matters. ●

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### Notes

1. Cornell West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). Reissued in hardcover with new introduction, 2001.
2. Wendy Brown, "Porous Sovereignty/Walled Democracy." Lecture at University of Minnesota, 26 March 2007.
3. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
4. *New York Times* (25 May 2006); and *Wall Street Journal* (13 May 2005).
5. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), p. 215.
6. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Books, 2006).