

***Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past.*** By David R. Roediger. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 323 pages. \$19.95 paperback. ISBN 0-520-24070-7

***Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity.*** By Vijay Prashad. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001. 216 pages. \$17 paperback. ISBN 0-8070-5011-3

Reviewed by Crystal Lorentzson

While greatly differing in style and content, the common themes that run through Vijay Prashad's book and David Roediger's collection of essays about race make important contributions to the discipline of critical race studies and the development of an antiracist politics. Working from the assumption that race is an impermanent and socially constructed concept born out of the imperatives of capitalist production, Prashad and Roediger criticize mainstream, neoliberal ideologies of race. Neoliberalism, as the term is used by most political writers and as it is used by these authors, refers to a set of political and economic policies focused on fostering a free market economy. Features of this highly criticized social order include deregulation of business, expanded property rights for corporations, and less government support for public goods and welfare, all driven by a philosophy that assumes equal access to resources and free choice for all individuals. Under neoliberalism, race and racism are either seen as a non-issue (colorblindness), or are sidestepped through an emphasis on diversity (multiculturalism). These authors criticize both of these approaches, putting race back into its political context and articulating alternative frameworks for the struggle against racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In his book of essays, David Roediger looks at the presence and the history of white identity as a departure point for both the critical study of white supremacy and for effective antiracist action. Taking on the neoliberal assumption that “race is over,” Roediger forcefully argues against colorblindness, demonstrating that systematic racism is far from a thing of the past and that the U.S. is “still white.” He covers a range of issues, invoking the past to show that “the sway of whiteness is not inevitable, unalterable, or simple” (25). The essays are broken into chunks, the first of which uses historical treatments of present-day fixtures like Rush Limbaugh, Rudolph Giuliani, Bill Clinton, and O.J. Simpson to show the way that white identity operates in the present. The second section goes back in history to take a different look at abolitionism, the early white labor movement, the “inbetween” status of white immigrants around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the themes of terror, national expansion, property, and contact with Native and African-Americans in the shaping of white identity around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>. In the last section, Roediger concludes by examining some locations in recent history which show possibilities for new ways of thinking about race in the past, present and future. He uses examples like the labor movement's support for Mumia Abu-Jamal and the racial crossover of “wiggers” (white kids imitating African Americans) to bring his insights

on race back into the present and show how they can be used to better negotiate today's landscape in the fight against racism.

In the most important chapter of the book, "Inbetween Peoples," Roediger and James Barrett skillfully examine the Americanization and "whitening" of Irish, Italian, and eastern and southern European immigrants around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They argue that these immigrants were at the same time considered to be *below* "white" people and *above* African and Asian Americans. Roediger and Barrett use this unique racial positioning to show the instability of white identity as they explore both how this group was viewed in racial terms by others and their own response to learning what it meant to be "white" in the United States. They argue that the ambiguous, "inbetween" racial status of these immigrants resulted at different times, and sometimes simultaneously, in their desire to be separate from nonwhites *and* in their solidarity with them.

Partly because Roediger's book is a collection of essays that were written over several years, it can be difficult for the reader to get a sense of where he is at any point, and where he is going. His essays cover a wide range of topics and events, which Roediger often fails to explicitly connect to one another or to his overall thesis. Even after going back to the introduction several times throughout, I still found myself asking, "what is this book about, anyway?!" Quite like a mini-essay of its own, his introduction could have been much more useful at providing a solid explanation of where he intended to go in the book. It is in "Inbetween Peoples" that the reader finally gets a more complete sense of Roediger's overall project: reexamining the present and past history of racism through challenging its most basic assumption--the neutrality and stability of whiteness. Unfortunately, this highly clarifying chapter comes nearly two-thirds of the way through the book. As I read the book a second time, I was able to use insights from this chapter to better understand the purpose of some of his earlier topical tangents, but it seems that with better organization and some careful introductions to the sections, Roediger could have assured that the reader would follow him the first time around.

In *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, Vijay Prashad probes the instability of racial boundaries from an entirely different angle. Ignoring whites altogether, he too pins down racial identity as a cultural experience, showing its formations through a discussion of the connections between Asians and Africans. He chooses these two groups as the center point, he explains, "not only because they are important to me, but because they have long been pitted against each other as the model versus the undesirable" (x). Prashad rejects multiculturalism, which locates cultural experience along bloodlines and seeks to "manage" cultural difference, in favor of polyculturalism, a paradigm which assumes that people's lives are coherent and made up of many different lineages. This is a concept, he clarifies, grounded in antiracism, not the maintenance of the status quo through the management of difference.

Prashad uses a range of examples of this cultural and racial boundary-blurring to demonstrate to the reader what polyculturalism looks like in practice. After he walks the reader into his argument with a chapter on the history of xenophobia and one on neoliberal ideologies of race, he shows how the exchange of cultural practices and intertwining of experiences between Africans and Asians began with shared laboring conditions in the Caribbean and United States, and

continued on through to Asian support for Black nationalism in the 1960s, as well as Black nationalist support for Vietnamese nationalism. He takes us into urban areas full of ethnic tension, violence, solidarity, and resistance, putting peoples' *experience* of race at the center of our studies into racism and antiracist activism, using the example of Afro-Asian connections to draw a picture of the polycultural nature of the working class [which is] not syncretic (two discrete entities melding with a consciousness of difference), but forged together from the beginning... among people who are forced to live among one another and who ultimately work together toward freedom" (71). By exposing the blurred, polycultural nature of race with a focus on how race is lived on a day-to-day basis, Prashad states that he hopes not only enhance the solidarity among Africans and Asians, but among *all* people.

While the specific content of these two books seems on the surface to be vastly different, Prashad and Roediger share some important assumptions and themes. Most broadly, both authors depart from the standard scholarship which traces racism specifically to chattel slavery in the United States and posits the race problem as *fundamentally* one of black oppression under white supremacy. Roediger, though his critical study of whiteness and white identity, and Prashad, though his examination of conflict and coalition between Africans and Asians, aim to blur the rigid boundaries of race and culture present in this black/white dialogue.

The distinctness of experience assumed between different racial groups, as Prashad effectively argues, forms the backbone of the neoliberal project of multiculturalism. Insisting on the separateness of cultures not only restricts space for realizing common experiences and oppressions, it serves the interest of global capitalism by carving out distinct niche markets. Difference is maintained only as long as it aids consumerism. Prashad and Roediger see recognizing the fluidity, malleability and construction of race as essential to the antiracist goal of its transcendence. *However*, it is important to note here that neither author is arguing that we *ignore* race, or assume the sameness of all people. This is the ideology of colorblindness, which reduces inequalities to individual prejudices and institutional oppression to the observation of differences among races. With colorblindness, the state claims neutrality in "cultural" issues such as racism, even while it supports racist policies, leaving institutionalized racism totally intact. Both authors direct a seething critique at this neoliberal approach to race.

Another thing that gives the two works a similar flavor is their concern with expanding and effecting antiracist activism. More exploratory than argumentative, Prashad and Roediger's books are useful tools for activists because they themselves are coming at their topics from activist ideals. For these two, the point of studying history is not for its own sake, but to better act in the present. While tackling different subject matter, both are determined to understand racism in the still-unfolding terrain of neoliberalism; to move beyond liberal rights-seeking activism; to seek commonality in struggle; and to locate intersections of race and class. "The arguments being made here thus imply not that struggles for racial justice must continue on the same terrain, but only that they must continue" (15), writes Roediger. Prashad is straight to the point, "This is a movement book, so move along..." (xii).

With that in mind, it is clear that Prashad and Roediger aren't writing to the same audience. Roediger, who places his views in opposition to colorblindness (a

more conservative ideology), doesn't memorably go into a similar deconstruction of multiculturalism (a more liberal theory). In fact, he hardly mentions it. This is probably because Roediger imagines himself to be writing to a less radical audience than Prashad, or at least one that is as willing as he is to sidestep a direct discussion of the connections between race and global capitalism. In the plus column, the reader receives the benefits of a fleshed-out argument as he actively defends his work against imagined conservative critics, which at times makes up for his topical meandering and poor organization.

Prashad, on the other hand, seems to be speaking to an already liberal or radical audience and gives much more attention to capitalism. Unlike Roediger, he uses his argument against sharp racial distinctions to criticize the rigid boundaries inherent in multiculturalism, making the connection between the politics of diversity and consumerism and the management of race. I wish Roediger had seized the opportunity to follow his discussion of neoliberalism and the instability of race through to this discussion.

One source of disappointment for both of these reads was the authors' failure to acknowledge gender as an important mode through which race is lived. By neither addressing the distinct experiences of women nor mentioning the choice to omit the issue, Prashad and Roediger have each written studies that assume to speak about the experiences of *all* white people, Africans, and Asians, but are mostly about the lives of white, African and Asian *men*. Each book contains a few asides, however, I am not satisfied with books that parenthetically mention the experiences of women as though they are a tiny side issue. If there is to be no major discussion of gender in a scholarly work, I prefer for the author to at least acknowledge that their default case group is approximately one-half of the population, so that I can pursue the book accordingly.

Ultimately, the biggest thing that I took away from both of these books was a powerful challenge to binary thinking about race. An important part of my framework for resisting the oppressions and breaking down the barriers of class, race, gender, and sexuality in my activism and academic work has been rejecting the dualisms present in mainstream thought around these issues. Getting beyond men/women, gay/straight, and black/white to find the places where these categories are created, interact, overlap, and inform each other for me has been the richest starting point for thinking about the nature of oppression and social justice, and the most sustaining place to continue. It is at those moments in the past and present where the boundaries laid out by dominant groups blur--where the Irish are not considered white, where Muhammad Ali acts in solidarity with the Vietnamese by refusing to fight an unjust war, where we can pinpoint the malleability of race and racial identity--that we can question the categories themselves, and where all the inequities and injustices based on those boundaries subsequently come into question.

Students of race and political economy, activists, and other interested people can expect *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting* and *Colored White* to provide two engaging views that dovetail to challenge the reader to move beyond the rigid racial boundaries of black/white present in traditional scholarship and neoliberal ideology. I highly recommend these works for anyone in search of new tools for resisting racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.