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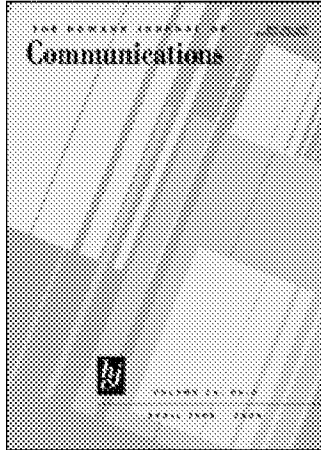
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Metonymy in Black and White: Shelby Steele's Revelatory Racial Tropes

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Metonymy in Black and White: Shelby Steele's Revelatory Racial Tropes

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Inspired by Henry Louis Gates's observation that race is "the ultimate trope," the author analyzed the metonymies used in an essay on American black–white race dynamics: Shelby Steele's "The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual." Steele used tropes that unintentionally yet convincingly reveal a worldview at odds with his socio-political self-identification and his stated positions. While Steele's essay as a whole ostensibly calls for an end to programs treating people as masses rather than individuals, his tropes belie his overt arguments, reflecting an exceedingly binary, essentializing, and reductive vision.

KEYWORDS *metonymy, race, racism, Shelby Steele, trope, figurative language*

Kenneth Burke (1945) opened "Four Master Tropes" with this bold explanation of his essay's title: "I refer to metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. And my primary concern with them here will be not with their purely figurative image, but with their role in the discovery and description of 'the truth'" (p. 503). In making this statement, Burke aligned himself with what had been, for most of recorded history, an unpopular position regarding the power of tropes, or figures of speech. Yet Burke was far from the first to recognize that a trope—from the Greek word *tropos*, meaning "turn" or "style"—represents more than mere linguistic decoration. Aristotle, Cicero, and most other thinkers before (and during) Burke's time may have dismissed tropes as exclusively ornamental, but some early philosophers, most notably Quintilian, Ramus, and Vico, argued that "a great deal of our conceptualization of experience, even the foundation of human consciousness, is based on figurative schemes of thought" (Gibbs, 1993, pp. 252–253). As it

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has turned out, it is Quintilian's position, and not Aristotle's, that has received robust empirical support, as contemporary cognitive scientific research into metaphor and other forms of figurative language has provided powerful insights into the workings of human thought.

Far from being purely academic exercises, discourse analyses explicating the use of tropes have dimensionalized the power wielded by those members of society, individual and institutional, who determine the metaphors, metonymies, and conceptual categories used to frame sociopolitical issues (Gates, 1986; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1991; Said, 1978; T. Turner, 1991; Van Dijk, 1987, 1991, 1993; Van Teeffelen, 1994). As Van Teeffelen (1994) has observed, "it has become common knowledge in cognitive and cultural studies that metaphors do not only embellish a pre-constituted reality for rhetorical purposes, but also contribute to the construction and understanding of social reality itself" (p. 384). Among the more visible, if not always directly addressed, of the everyday American social realities constructed by such tropes are racism and race relations. The purpose of this article is to analyze the figurative expressions used in "The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual," a *Harper's Magazine* essay written by Shelby Steele (2002) that expressly critiques the current state of black-white race dynamics in the United States—a nation in which, as Henry Louis Gates has observed, race is the "ultimate trope" (1986, p. 5).

COGNITIVE SCIENCE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

While Aristotle and Cicero saw tropes as mere embellishments, extraordinary flourishes tacked onto ordinary language (Foss, 1996; Ortony, 1993; M. Turner, 1995), contemporary cognitive science has confirmed that figurative language plays a central role not only in speech but also in cognition, conceptualization, comprehension, and childhood language acquisition.¹ As Mark Johnson wrote in 1987, "vast domains of our experience, understanding, reasoning, and practice are metaphorically structured" (p. 137). Much research done since Johnson made that assertion has been devoted to determining and confirming just how vast those experiential and conceptual domains truly are.

Metaphor, the trope discussed most extensively by rhetorical critics from antiquity to the present day—and, not incidentally, the form of figurative language most studied by cognitive scientists—has long been viewed as a comparison, a likeness, or an analogy.² Most cognitive linguists, psychologists, and philosophers of language, however, now eschew this characterization. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999; also, Johnson, 1987, 1992; Lakoff, 1987, 1993; and Johnson & Lakoff, 2002) and the many scholars whose work builds on theirs have shown that conceptual metaphors do something other—and

more—than merely comparing. Metaphors are (metaphorical) *mappings* across conceptual domains, structuring reasoning, experience, and everyday language, and thus not only reflecting but actually constituting the organization of our conceptual worlds, serving as the very means by which it is possible “to ground our conceptual systems experientially and to reason in a constrained but creative fashion” (M. Johnson, 1992, p. 351). Metaphors and other tropes, then, are not simply expressions of language but are among the foundations of thought itself.

While metaphor has been the “star” trope for millennia, in the past decade a number of leading cognitive scientists have turned their attention to metonymy (Gibbs, 1999; Kövecses & Radden, 1998; Pauwels, 1999; Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Seto, 1999; Warren, 1999). Overturning yet another traditional conception—that metonymy is merely a subclass of metaphor (Genette, 1968; Levin, 1993; Searle, 1993)—the new wave of metonymy research has elucidated signal differences between metaphor and metonymy, two trope types now seen as “generated according to opposite principles” (Gibbs, 1993, p. 258).³ Whereas in instantiations of metaphor, two conceptual domains are operating, one understood in terms of the other (in *prices are rising*, for example, the abstract domain of economics is understood in terms of the physical domain of vertical movement), in instantiations of metonymy, by contrast, only *one* conceptual domain is involved, meaning that the mapping between two ideas or experiences takes place within the same domain, usually on the basis of part-whole, controlled-controller, or contiguity relations (Gibbs, 1993; Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2000; Radden & Kövecses, 1999). As Kövecses and Radden (1998) helpfully defined it, *metonymy* is “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain or idealized cognitive model” (p. 39).⁴

While metaphor and metonymy can usually be neatly distinguished in terms of their defining criteria, their occurrences in language and thought are not so cleanly segregated. Belgian cognitive linguist Louis Goossens (1990) coined the handy, if clunky, term *metaphonymy* to refer to conceptual/linguistic expressions in which metaphor and metonymy interact, either as “metaphor from metonymy” or “metonymy within metaphor.”⁵ Cognitive anthropologists (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1991; T. Turner, 1991; Van Teeffelen, 1994) have shown that analysis of such metaphor–metonymy combinations can be critical to “the general understanding of racism” (Van Teeffelen, 1994, p. 386). In fact, Van Teeffelen defined racism as “the accentuation of a contrast between the self and the other along ‘racial,’ ethnic, or cultural lines” (p. 384); consequently, metaphor and metonymy come into play in its explication: “In its metaphoric meaning, racism compares and contrasts the domains of the self and the other, while its metonymic meaning refers to the border threat emanating from the other’s domain perceived as contingent to the domain of the self” (Van Teeffelen, 1994, p. 386).

The timelessness of the inquiry into the revelatory role of figurative expressions suggests that even the most highly charged contemporary socio-political issues and the thinking surrounding them may be made clearer through an analysis of their framing tropes. The subject of the present article, an essay by Stanford professor Shelby Steele (2002) on the (d)evolving status of African Americans in the post-civil-rights era, thus provides an opportunity to explore a leading scholar's current thinking on a topic that remains an exigency long after its controversies were expected to be resolved: race relations in the United States. If it is true that "the most fundamental *values* in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental *concepts* in the culture" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 22), then an analysis of the tropes in an artifact concerned with such "fundamental values"—attitudes around race, equality, and privilege—should cast light on the broader cultural context in which such values are developed and articulated. Tropes, as Van Teeffelen has noted, "organize the understanding of cause and effect, symptom and essence, and especially praise and blame" and thus "can be employed to serve political aims or interests . . . [A]s ideological devices, they privilege, and, when turning into common sense, naturalize particular accounts of reality" (1994, pp. 384–385).

In this article, then, I apply the taxonomies of contemporary cognitive science to the exploration of an ancient scholarly concern: how the analysis of tropes can aid in "the discovery and description of the truth" (Burke, 1945, p. 503), as instantiated by the following research question: How do the metonymies, both conscious/thematic and unconscious/individual, in "The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual" reveal Shelby Steele's worldview, attitudes, and values relative to the current state of U.S. race relations?

ARTIFACT: CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

"The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual" by Shelby Steele was published in the November 2002 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. It is the cover story and featured essay of that issue, as evidenced by its length (10 pages, the largest component of the 92-page issue), placement (the first of the five articles in the magazine's feature well), and purity of layout (its 10 pages are uninterrupted by advertising).

Steele's essay argued that the dynamics of American racism have changed radically since the end of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s and that, in certain ways, things actually may be worse now for black⁶ people—specifically, for black *individuals*—than they were before. One of the successes of the movement was its denial of the legitimacy and propriety of racism; overt discrimination, Steele claimed, is no longer socially acceptable. However, the ostracism and ostensible elimination of white racism created

a vacuum in black–white relations, a gap since filled by the “black protest identity,” “black identity grievance,” and “white guilt.” These elements, Steele argued, are enmeshed, creating a culture of black “victims” who are not actually victimized by racism and white liberal institutions that must perpetually profess their guilt, legitimize their own existence, and attempt to prove a negative (“we’re not racist!”).

The tragic consequence of this new white-guilt-based world order is that blacks have ceased to be recognized or valued as individuals, a “fall” that came by blacks’ own hand. By “allow[ing] ourselves to see a greater power in America’s liability for our oppression than we saw in ourselves . . . we were faithless with ourselves just when we had given ourselves reason to have such faith. We couldn’t have made a worse mistake” (p. 35). This “mistake,” according to Steele, has been perpetuated over the last three decades as blacks have allowed “conjure words”—*tolerance*, *diversity*, and *inclusion*—to take precedence over individualist principles of freedom, privileging not individual liberties but rather the social good, a force “imposed from above out of a kind of moral imperialism by a well-meaning white elite” (p. 41).

Since post-1960s black political and social movements and white institutions have colluded in this priority shift away from individual liberties, racial reform is now based on “a totalitarian model where schemes of ‘the good’ are imposed by coercion at the expense of freedom” and the essential humanity of the person. The black individual, Steele (p. 41) claimed,

lives in a society that needs his race for the good it wants to do more than it needs his individual self. His race makes him popular with white institutions and unifies him with blacks. But he is unsupported everywhere as an individual. Nothing in his society asks for or even allows his flowering as a full, free, and responsible person. As is always the case when “the good” becomes ascendant over freedom, and coercion itself becomes a good thing, the individual finds himself in a gulag.

Steele’s own use of metonymy, I will show, betrayed and undercut the intention of his essay. “The Age of White Guilt” is, on its face, an urgent reminder of the damage done to the individual when the demands of the group to which s/he belongs are made primary. But in its tropic representations of the very people it aims to liberate, Steele’s essay unintentionally inflicts some of the same disindividuating damage it seeks to illuminate and denounce.

ARTIFACT: METONYMIC CONTENT

In his essay, Steele (2002) used metonymy and metaphonymy extensively.⁷ In so doing, he both consciously created and unconsciously revealed a rhetorical vision. In order to provide a meaningful analysis of Steele’s essay

and the worldview it represents, I will consider the tropes he used not as isolated or individual utterances, but as networks of associated expressions that create meaning through their interactions and interconnections. As Philip Eubanks (2001) pointed out, a problem common to works of metaphoric criticism is the tendency to consider metaphors singly,

as if a metaphor amounts simply to a projection of one or more features from one discrete domain onto another. But metaphors do not work alone . . . Conceptual metaphors operate most commonly as part of larger conceptual systems. We cannot, therefore, gain important insight into a single metaphor without also considering the metaphors that support it and to which it responds. (pp. 93–94)

I contend that Eubanks's observation holds true for metonymy as well, thus the metonymies in "The Age of White Guilt" must be considered in terms of both the individual and the systematic contributions they make to the construction and revelation of Steele's worldview.

While Steele (2002) used metaphor frequently, metonymy is his essay's ruling, and far more revealing, trope.⁸ The article's very title, "The Age of White Guilt and the Disappearance of the Black Individual," not only contains four metonymic words or phrases—*white*, *black*, *individual*, and *the black individual*⁹—but is itself a metonym for the themes the essay explores. Steele's metonymies can be grouped into three major clusters: "Black/White," "Race," and "Self." Additionally, Steele uses specific people—James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and an anonymous black Harvard student—as thematic metonyms.

"Black/White" Metonymies

Given the topics and title of Steele's essay, it is not surprising that metonymic uses of *black* and *white* dominate. While Van Teeffelen (1994, p. 385) commented that *metaphor* has "become a key subject in studies of racism," David Lloyd (1991) noted three years earlier that "it is a frequent characteristic of racism that . . . the apparently neutral ascriptions of difference depend on relations of contiguity and therefore on metonymic usages; for example, skin color for race—black, yellow, white" (p. 74). Steele's uses of *black* and *white*, either as adjectives (*black individual*, *white guilt*) or plural nouns (*blacks*, *whites*), are not necessarily racist, but they are certainly metonymic in the sense that Lloyd and others have suggested. Radden and Kövecses (1999, p. 35) who have even offered "*blacks* for 'black people'" as the exemplar of the metonymy class "Defining Property for Category," held that "categories typically evoke, and metonymically stand for, one of their defining or otherwise essential properties and, conversely, a defining or essential property may evoke, or stand for, the category it defines."

Many of Steele's "Defining Property for Category" metonyms are simple constructions such as *blacks* and *whites*. In an essay about the shifting status of groups identified by skin color, the frequency of such terms is not necessarily worldview-revealing. More interesting are Steele's expressions in which what I call "double metonymies" operate. The black- and white-headed phrases in sentences such as "I was passing out of the *white Chicago suburb*" (p. 33), "I was born in the hospital's *black maternity ward*" (p. 33), and "I grew up in a *black neighborhood*" (p. 33) each contain a two-layered metonymy. In *black neighborhood*, for example, *black* is metonymic for "black people," while *neighborhood* (when modified by *black*) is either a "Whole for Part" metonymy (a salient part of any neighborhood being its human population), a "Container for Contents" metonymy (a neighborhood can be conceived of as a container in which its inhabitants, or "contents," are contained), or a "Place for Inhabitants" metonymy. The most important of Steele's double metonymies headed by *black* are *black intellectuals*, *black identity*, *black power*, *black life*, *black protest*, *black protest identity* (all of the "Defining Property for Category" type), and *the black individual*, the central "Specific for Generic" double metonymy that appears not only in the essay's title but also repeatedly in its body. The *white*-headed double metonymies of greatest importance to the essay are *white racism*, *white liability*, and the title trope, *white guilt*, all "Defining Property for Category" metonymies.

"Race" Metonymies

In addition to *black* and *white*, Steele used the word *race* metonymically throughout his essay. If we can take the literal meaning of *race* to be "a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1993, p. 961), then we can classify many of Steele's *race*-containing tropes—that is, phrases in which *race* is not being used in its group-of-people sense—as "Salient Property for Category" metonymies (Radden & Kövecses, 1999) or "Salient Quality for Person" metonymies (Jäkel, 1999). Steele's metonymic uses of *race* serve a variety of purposes. When discussing the ethos and culture of pre-civil-rights America, Steele claimed "the Negro world of that era believed that whites used our *race* against our individuality" (p. 34). Similar constructions appear in Steele's lengthy discussion of the 1961 movie *Paris Blues*, which starred Sidney Poitier, Diahann Carroll, and Paul Newman as a group of American expatriates seeking refuge in France from the roiling race relations of their home. In describing the flirtation between Newman's (white) character and Carroll's (black) character, Steele noted that Carroll's "*race* means no more to [Newman] than the color of her coat" (p. 35). In laying out the moral dilemma the (black) Poitier character confronts, Steele claimed "if whites don't use his *race* against him, they will use it for him" (p. 36). In all these examples,

race is used metonymically to mean *group identification* rather than merely *group*. At other times, Steele used *race* as an “Abstract for Concrete” metonym (Seto, 1999); for example, in sentences such as “White individuals and American institutions must perpetually prove a negative—that they are not racist—to gain enough authority to function in matters of *race*, equality, and opportunity” (p. 39); “Of course, almost nothing having to do with *race* is rational” (p. 39); and “I saw the way *race* inflated people like us back in those Great Society programs” (p. 42).

“Self” Metonymies

While Van Teeffelen noted that metaphor as a figurative device in race-related discourse “activate[s] common-sense notions of self versus other” (1994, p. 385), it is not the only trope to do so. Indeed, since one of Steele’s (2002) central themes is the tension between the individual and the group, it follows that many of his most revealing *metonymies* also hinge on conceptions of the self, either as an autonomous agent or as a member of a larger, societal entity.

One metonymic key to Steele’s essay can be found in his discussions of the personal choices made by two of the most important black writers of the mid-20th century. Like Sidney Poitier’s fictional *Paris Blues* character, real-world personage James Baldwin, too, moved to Europe to “escape America’s smothering racism” and then returned to the States to “join his group’s . . . pitched battle for its freedom” (p. 37). Baldwin’s post-exile actions inspired what Steele called the “Baldwin model,” the goal of which is “to link one’s intellectual reputation to the moral authority—the moral glamour—of an oppressed group’s liberation struggle” (p. 37). The result of adhering to this model is that one “ceases to be a mere individual with a mere point of view and becomes, in effect, the embodiment of a moral imperative” (p. 37). The “embodiment of a moral imperative” is itself a metonymy: a person standing in for an idea within the same conceptual domain. Elaborating the drawbacks to such metonymic embodiment is a, if not the, primary goal of Steele’s essay: Steele argued that the (metonymic) post-civil-rights era black person has ceded his or her individuality precisely in order to become a metonym, a mere *representative* of a cause with which (individual) people can be associated. By becoming a mere representative, Steele averred, one’s own idiosyncratic identity is sacrificed.

One textual device Steele used to underscore this idea is the employment of *selves* compounds to metonymically suggest public face. He argued that “inflation from the moral authority of protest . . . provides an irresistible incentive for black America’s best minds to continue defining *themselves* by protest” (p. 38).¹⁰ He stated that James Baldwin left the de-individuating forces of the civil rights movement “to find *himself* as a writer” (p. 37); here, the metonym *himself* refers to Baldwin’s authorial “voice,” not his bodily

essence. Extending the metonymic *self* usage, Steele wrote that when Baldwin returned to America, “on some level [he] knew that he had lost *himself* to protest . . . Did he again need France in [his last] years to be *himself*?” (p. 40). Obviously, James Baldwin never stopped being his literal, corporeal self. What Steele suggested by his metonymic question is that Baldwin downplayed or ignored some essential trait or talent, (metaphorically) surrendering some part of his essence.

Thematic Metonymies: Baldwin, Ellison, and an Anonymous Harvard Student

Steele used three specific individuals as metonymies, literal embodiments of different varieties of the metonymic 20th-century black individual. James Baldwin, as one of a number of black American expatriates of the 1960s, is both an individual figure and, for Steele, a thematic trope. As Steele saw it, the central tension involved in living as an expatriate during the civil rights era—stay abroad and enjoy individual freedom, or return to America to help the cause at the price of autonomy?—was painful both for Baldwin and other black exiles of his time. Because Baldwin (unlike the Poitier character in *Paris Blues*) was an actual person who grappled with the stay-or-go dilemma, the lesson Steele wished to impart by discussing Baldwin’s struggle is not “metaphoric.” Rather, Baldwin’s experiences were representative—and therefore metonymic—of a generation and, as such, formed the prototype for Steele’s “Baldwin model” (p. 37), a behavior pattern that troubled Steele deeply.

The writer Ralph Ellison, by contrast, metonymically represents the other possible response to the individual-versus-collective conundrum, one representing something nearer to Steele’s own stated ideals: Ellison “rejected the black protest identity . . . By insisting on his individual autonomy as an artist . . . [he] was neither inflated with the moral authority of his group’s freedom struggle nor positioned in the pathway of America’s redemption” (p. 38). Because Ellison made the choices that he did, his work, as Steele read it, “showed a far deeper understanding of black culture than Baldwin’s.” But by “insisting on his individual autonomy as an artist,” Ellison effectively denied himself the “access to high places” that Baldwin enjoyed. Steele set up Ellison’s choice—and, by extension, Ellison himself—as a cautionary metonym, a stand-in for all black intellectuals who privilege their own individuality over solidarity with the group: “Professors who resist the Baldwin model risk the Ellisonian fate of invisibility” (p. 38).

Finally, there is the anonymous Harvard student in a story Steele features in his essay:

Not long ago, C-SPAN carried a Harvard debate on affirmative action . . . During the Q-and-A, a black undergraduate rose . . . to challenge

[a conservative reformer] who had argued that the time for racial preferences was past . . . Consider what this Harvard student is called upon by his racial identity to argue in the year 2002. All that is creative and imaginative in him must be rallied to argue the essential weakness of his people. Only their weakness justifies the racial preferences they receive . . . The young man must *not* show faith in the power of his people to overcome against any odds; he must show faith in their inability to overcome without help . . . must find a way, against all the mounting facts, to argue that black Americans simply cannot compete without preferences . . . He is a figure of pathos because his faith in racial victimization is his only release from racial shame. (pp. 34–35)

Assuming that the nameless undergraduate is a real person, he, too is a central thematic metonym in “The Age of White Guilt.” In his role as challenger to conservative black intellectuals—Steele among them—who would dismantle affirmative action, the student serves as a “Member of Category for the Entire Category” metonymy (Radden & Kövecses, 1999, p. 27). As such, he represents the majority of educated young black people (and perhaps even all black liberals, regardless of age) who, in Steele’s worldview, are blind to the ramifications of their own behavior: the nurturance of “the idea of a black psychological woundedness that is baroque in its capacity to stifle black aspiration” (p. 35).

ANALYSIS

Steele used metonymy throughout “The Age of White Guilt” to address a variety of issues. Yet despite their seeming diversity, the most evocative and frequently occurring of the tropes share a salient characteristic: They are inescapably *binary* and, moreover, *oppositional*. In Steele’s figurative language as, presumably, in his conceptualization of the world, actions, events, relationships, and, most important, people, are either progressive *or* regressive, group-oriented *or* individualistic, dominant *or* submissive, winners *or* losers, above *or* below, black *or* white. Moreover, the world painted by Steele’s tropes is, despite Steele’s overt prizing of the individual, one that appears to be constituted of groups. It is a world of winning and losing sides, powerful and powerless masses, good and bad forces, collective progress and collective regress.

The predominance of dichotomy in an essay’s figurative language and concepts is perhaps not surprising when that essay is written with the very purpose of analyzing the vicissitudes of the relationship(s) between *two* groups of people: those who are in this country most commonly—and metonymically—described as either *black* or *white*, the words used to denote the opposite ends of the color spectrum. Given the definitional opposition of the literal correlates of these terms in the domains of chromatics and visual

perception, it may well be near impossible for any writer, regardless of persuasive intention or political or racial background, to use metonymies structured around *white* and *black* to convey anything other than opposition. Still, the relentlessly binary nature of Steele's tropes in "The Age of White Guilt" is striking.

Indeed, Steele's metonymies reveal a worldview *constructed* along the lines of binary opposition. Metonymies, particularly those of the Part for Whole, Specific for Generic, and Defining Property for Category varieties, are by their very nature reductive. In synecdochic and other metonymic expressions, people and concepts are identified or framed in terms of one salient attribute. It is nearly impossible, in other words, to use a metonymic expression *without* stripping an individual person, thing, or idea of its distinctive traits. Yet in an essay written by a scholar whose primary stated goal is to draw attention to the importance of the individual, an importance that has either been forgotten or downplayed by advocates of group-identity politics, such reductionism is all the more troubling and revealing.

Black and White

By repeatedly reducing individual persons to metonymic representations of *black protest identity*, *white guilt*, *black aspiration*, and *white racism*, Steele unwittingly perpetuated some of the effects of the "totalitarianism" of group politics that his essay is written to renounce. Much of this is due to Steele's frequent use of "Defining Property for Category" metonyms headed by the words *black* and *white*. Doubly metonymic phrases such as *black neighborhood*, *white suburb*, and *black maternity ward* appear throughout the essay. In and of themselves, they are not necessarily indicative of an attitude or a rhetorical vision; indeed, in an essay about the shifting status of groups societally defined by their skin colors, the use of such terms is only to be expected. Further, such expressions serve a commonly employed stylistic "shorthand" function: Why say *a neighborhood occupied predominantly by black people* when the more efficient *black neighborhood* will do?

Yet metonymies of this sort do something substantive as well as stylistic: They present simplified, reductive, and often monolithic pictures of the ideas and people they denote. The unmodified phrase *white guilt*, for example, implies that all whites share a specific variety of guilt; *white liability* suggests that all whites are indeed liable for the oppression of (all) blacks. The phrase *black life*, meanwhile, suggests that there is only one type of life lived by (all) black people; *black identity*, similarly, implies that there is but one identity that (all) blacks claim. Steele's frequent use of such double metonymies paradoxically epitomizes the very racial bifurcation his essay is designed to denounce.

Unfortunately, such tropic usage undercuts the purpose of Steele's essay. For it must not be forgotten that it is the sacrifice of the (metonymic)

autonomous *black individual* to the overriding demands of the group (and, by extension, its *black identity*) that is, for Steele, the defining tragedy of the post-civil-rights era—and that this is the central message of his article. The poignant paradox revealed by analyzing the use of such metonymic expressions, then, is this: Through the reliance on such tropes, Steele himself reduced the individual—the societal component that he argued deserves primacy over the group—to the very secondary status his entire essay is constructed to critique.

Clearly, Steele is not the first, or the only, scholar to so reductively if unwittingly reduce depictions of individuals to their skin colors, nor is such race-based reductive thinking limited to observers of the American sociopolitical scene. Indeed, Radden and Kövecses (1999) even used the phrase “*blacks* for ‘black people’” as their example of a “Defining Property for Category” metonym in an otherwise politically neutral analysis of metonymy types. And while it may be off-putting for a white German (Radden) and a white Hungarian (Kövecses) to characterize black(ness) as a person’s “defining or essential property,” it is somewhat more surprising—and revealing—to see this characterization in the writing of a black American social scientist. While Steele’s intention for his article was clearly not to suggest that race (or, metonymically, skin color) is essential to personhood, the ubiquity of “Defining Property for Category” metonyms based on the words *white* and *black* conveys a rather different message.

Race

Steele’s use of the word *race* in metonymic expressions is also worth analyzing. In his *race*-centered metonymies, Steele extended the word beyond its literal sense—a type of categorization of people—and, whether consciously or not, reifies its greater importance as a word/concept that does more than merely classify groups of humans. This can be seen in his “Salient Property for Category” and “Salient Quality for Person” metonymic phrases (“whites used our *race* against our individuality”; “whites don’t use his *race* against him”) as well as his “Abstract for Concrete” phrases (“*race* was not a talent that falsely inflated them”; “I saw the way *race* inflated people like us”). In such metonymic expressions, *race* assigns societal status, reflects institutional and personal prejudices, and eradicates individuality. In an essay about the social ramifications of race, such metonymic illustrations are, arguably, motivated.

Yet the paradox of Steele’s metonym-laden essay is that it is his rare use of *race* in the word’s literal sense—as a non-metonymic expression meaning merely “group of people”—that is his most powerful. Steele began the final paragraph of his essay with this assertion: “Restraint should be the watchword in racial matters. We should help people who need help. There are, in fact, no *races* that need help; only individuals, citizens” (p. 42). The very

contrast Steele set up between *races*, a noun that even in its singular form refers to a multitude of people, and *individuals/citizens*, nouns that in their singular forms refer to unitary persons, telegraphs his thesis: We must not lose sight of the individual in our quest to elevate a group's status. Yet in the very next sentence, Steele returned to his more frequent "Salient Property for Category" use: "Over time maybe nothing in the society, not even white guilt, will reach out and play on my *race*, bind me to it for opportunity" (p. 42). Whether using *race* literally or figuratively, Steele revealed the word's essentializing centrality to American social class structure and, inevitably, the structure of his own worldview, even as it is manifested in an essay whose ostensible intention is to revalidate properties of the individual often lost to the homogenizing force of group identity.

Self

Steele's metonymic use of the word *self*, most notably in "Whole for Part" metonymies, further reveals his (presumably unconscious) tendency toward totalizing. Steele notes that black America's best minds¹¹ "continue defining *themselves* by protest." He also asserts that James Baldwin had to flee America to "find *himself* as a writer" and that upon his return he "knew that he had lost *himself*." Such metonymies eloquently support Steele's portrayal of the loss of the individual as tragic. But they also do much more.

Using reflexive pronouns in a "Whole for Part" metonymic sense is fairly common in spoken English and thus not necessarily revealing by itself.¹² But Steele's "Whole for Part" *self*-metonymies say more than he may have intended. When discussing blacks' post-civil-rights "fall," Steele argued that "we allowed *ourselves* to see a greater power in America's liability for our oppression than we saw in *ourselves*. Thus, we were faithless with *ourselves*" (p. 35). It also troubled Steele that "to go after America's liability we had to locate real transformative power outside *ourselves*" (p. 35), meaning beyond the black community. Such *self*-centered tropes raise a number of questions: Have *all* black Americans been faithless? Who is included in or excluded from the *we* in these sentences? What is lost in Steele's argument, and in a multi-racial society, when such blanketing metonymic expressions are used so frequently and freely? Such metonymic *self* uses reveal Steele's totalizing view of the people he described, those whose individuality he repeatedly claimed to be of paramount importance.

Baldwin, Ellison, and the Harvard Student

Steele used specific individuals as contrastive metonyms, illustrating different choices contemporary black Americans can make to either maintain individuality or identify with the larger societal group and its aims. Steele made

James Baldwin the avatar of the undesirable group-identity-at-the-cost-of-individuality option and thus the prototype of the “Baldwin model.” Ralph Ellison, by contrast, represented the individual-over-group option, the superior choice even though it inevitably results in invisibility. It is clear that Steele would prefer that black intellectuals resist the Baldwin model and instead follow the Ellisonian path, even with its inherent risks. Individuality is the greater good, Steele suggested, even if it must be achieved at the price of visibility. As a black conservative, Steele himself has chosen this path—privileging individuality rather over group identity—and, we may assume, grapples with the consequences of that choice on a regular basis. And so while it is not surprising that Steele decried the “Baldwin model”—that is, that he denounces Baldwin’s submission to the primacy of the group—the irony of his denunciation, itself a core objective of his essay, is that Steele himself reified the messages of that model through his own metonymies.

Finally, his attitudes toward the anonymous Harvard student, and his use of the student as a metonym, further fleshed out Steele’s worldview. Indeed, much of Steele’s essay comes into focus when Steele revealed that the young man is symbolic—albeit as metaphor, not metonym—of Steele himself. “I used to feel empathy for students like this young man, because they reminded me of myself at that age” (p. 34). Steele admitted, crucially, that he now sees such young people as “figures of pathos” (p. 34). This metonymic Harvardian is an affront to Steele’s position. Can such a person be anything but a figure of pathos?

CONCLUSION

An analysis of figures of speech can provide unique insights into a writer’s rhetorical vision. Perhaps even more revealing than those metonymies purposely structured to serve thematic or stylistic purposes are those individual or clustered tropes that a writer deploys unself-consciously. While the revelatory nature of tropes was merely an arguable—yet unproven—position in much early rhetorical criticism, contemporary cognitive science now allows us to verify what had always been little more than a reasonable assumption. Quintilian and Burke may have *hypothesized* that tropes have a “role in the discovery and description of the truth” (Burke, 1945, p. 503), but cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology have provided empirical support: Metaphors and metonymies not only let us discover or describe the truth; they are crucial to its construction, or, as Gibbs (1993, p. 253) has argued,

Tropes do not merely provide a way for us to talk about how we think, reason, and imagine, they are also *constitutive* of our experience... Speakers can’t help but employ tropes ... because they conceptualize

... their experience through the figurative schemes of metaphor [and] metonymy, ... [their] thinking constrained by figurative processes.

Yet despite the advances of cognitive science, the assumption that metaphor and metonymy are no more than rhetorical flourishes—and optional ones at that—prevails. This assumption must obviously be reconsidered. While a crafted artifact such as Steele's "Age of White Guilt" is expressly designed to meet specific goals—chief among them, to provide an alternative black-originated view on issues of black individualism and group identity—it is the uncrafted, even unconscious, use of tropes that may be more revealing of the creator's underlying objectives.

Steele, in advancing a nuanced argument for the reclamation of the value of the individual and against the proliferation of preferential programs such as affirmative action, overtly and unapologetically aligned himself with classical American conservative thought and its values: the primacy of the person, the importance of self-discipline, the freedom to succeed or fail without outside intervention, and the call for the removal of all impediments to competition (Lakoff, 2002). Steele's arguments in support of the autonomous Ellisonian path rather than the Baldwinian group-identity model made clear where he positions himself sociopolitically as well as where he would like to see (black) America headed. His argument's surface structure is clear, compelling, and consistent. Yet the tropes he used paint a picture at odds with his stated purpose, essentializing individuals as "blacks" or "whites" as reductively as the guilt-ridden liberal white institutions and social-movement-oriented black political leaders who advance positions and policies he rejects. The African American individual and the European American individual are thus reduced by Steele, lost in tropes that are all too starkly black and white.

NOTES

1. The contemporary literature on the cognitive centrality of metaphor and other figurative language is vast. Among the many recent studies are Boroditsky, 2000; Dirven, 1993; Eubanks, 2001; Fernandez-Duque and Johnson, 1999; Gibbs, 1993, 1994, 1999; Grady, 1997; Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2000; C. Johnson, 1997; M. Johnson, 1987, 1992; Johnson and Lakoff, 2002; Kövecses and Radden, 1998; Lakoff, 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakoff and Núñez, 2000; Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Lee, 2001; Narayanan, 1997; Panther and Radden, 1999; Papafragou, 1996; Radden, 2001; Radden and Kövecses, 1999; and Turner, 1995, 1996.

2. As Ortony (1993) noted, Aristotle "believed metaphors to be implicit comparisons, based on the principles of analogy, a view that translates into what, in modern terms, is generally called the *comparison* theory of metaphor" (p. 3). Far from being a discarded relic, the Aristotelian view is still on display in current dictionaries; see *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1993, p. 730) for a typical definition of "metaphor."

3. In fairness, it should be pointed out this crucial contrast was suggested by the work of earlier theorists such as Bredin (1984) and Jakobson (1971).

4. In the sentence "*Wall Street is in a panic*," for example, the locative phrase *Wall Street* is metonymically connected to the people who are literally/physically at that location and, by further metonymic

extension, to the functionally similar institutions located at or near that location, and even to other institutions that are physically nowhere near Wall Street (or even New York) but serve similar or identical functions. All of these entities are part of the same conceptual domain, which might be described as *the world of finance*. Another trope-related debate in cognitive linguistics concerns the relative status of synecdoche and metonymy. As do many others, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) defined synecdoche as “a special case of metonymy . . . where the part stands for the whole” (p. 36); examples they offer include “*I’ve got a new set of wheels*” (where *wheels* stands for “entire automobile”), and “*We need some new blood in the organization*” (where *new blood* stands for “new people”). Seto (1999) took issue with this view, instead proposing that synecdoche and metonymy can and should be distinguished; such a distinction, he claimed, must be based on the usually overlooked difference between taxonomy and partonomy. Whereas taxonomies involve purely conceptual, categorial, “kind of” relations (e.g., a sandwich is a kind of food), partonomies involve actual, essential, “part of” spatio-temporal contiguities in the physical world (e.g., an arm is a part of the body). Seto (1999) reserved *synecdoche* for tropes based on the former relations type and *metonymy* for tropes based on the latter type.

An alternative distinction is offered by Fraser (1993), for whom synecdoche involves “one referring term replac[ing] another that is either more general or more particular than the actual term itself,” and for whom metonymy “involves a replacement of term where the relationship of the first to the second is felt to be more functional: cause/effect, actor/action, container/contained and the like” (p. 332). For the purposes of this article, however, I will use *metonymy* in the broader sense, encompassing part-for-whole, whole-for-part, cause-for-effect, actor-for-action, container-for-contained, institution-for-people, place-for-institution, and other contiguity-based, taxonomy-based, and partonomy-based relationships.

5. Examples of metaphonymic expressions include “*Your nose is running*” (*nose* is a “Container for Contained” metonym standing in for mucus; *running* is a metaphor for dripping) and “*I was completely tongue-tied*” (*tongue* is an “Instrument for Action” metonym for the general speech capacity; *tied* metaphorically expresses inability to speak; cf. Radden, 2001). Japanese linguist Ken-ichi Seto (1999, p. 103) called such multi-trope expressions “metaphor-metonymy complexes” (or “MMCs”), as exemplified by the sentence “*The lecture hall burst into laughter*”. In that MMC, *lecture hall* is a metonym for the people in the hall, while *burst* is a metaphorical description capturing the suddenness and forcefulness of their laughter’s inception.

6. Throughout the present article, I will adopt the rhetor’s use (and lower-case spellings) of “white” and “black” to (metonymically) denote European and African Americans, respectively.

7. Steele also used metaphor extensively in his article. An analysis of the use of that trope, however, is beyond the scope of the present article.

8. To simplify the present analysis, I will treat examples of metaphonymy as metonymies (*pace* Goossens).

9. *Disappearance*, as it is used in the essay title, is actually both a self-contained metaphor as well as the central part of a metonym. Black individuals are not literally disappearing, of course, but they are (Steele argued) becoming less important or less individuated; *disappearance* in this sense, then, is metaphorical. Simultaneously, the complete noun phrase *the disappearance*—with the crucial inclusion of *the*—is a metonym of the type “Specific for Generic”, similar in structure to examples that Radden and Kövecses (1999) provide. Their sample sentences “The spider has eight legs” and “A spider has eight legs” are instantiations of “generic reference”, in which “the definite article *the* or the indefinite article *a* is used to refer to spiders in general” (1999, p. 34). As Norrick (1981) noted about such phrases, “any specific instantiation of a class calls forth the whole class” (p. 35) and is therefore a special application of the “Part for Whole” metonymy type (or synecdoche, as some linguists would have it). The phrase *the disappearance*, then, is a metonym for the “whole class” of disappearances. Similarly, *the black individual* is a metonym for the “whole class” of black individuals.

10. The word *minds* in “black America’s best minds” is also metonymic, of course; in this case, a standard “Part for Whole” metonymy to refer to “black people” (who have “good” minds). *Black America*, too, is metonymic.

11. A phrase that is itself metonymic, for “scholars” or “intellectuals,” presumably.

12. In an utterance such as “*I cut myself while shaving*”, for example, it is clear that *myself* refers only to a specific part of the self—the chin, say—rather than the entire body; such a usage is not necessarily revealing. Or consider a more-abstract usage such as “*I can’t trust myself around chocolate*”. In this case, the word *myself* can be metonymically interpreted as “my behavior,” “my self-control,” or perhaps even “my hands and mouth”—rather than “my entire being”—and while more interesting, is not necessarily revealing of a worldview.

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