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Queering Race

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Queering Race

by

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I develop a feminist critique of three features in contemporary views of race: the meaning of race is essentially biological; each of us has exactly one kind of racial identity; and our racial identities are permanent. Having revealed each of these features to be confusions about the language of racial identification, I contend that our racial concepts currently permit a wider range of racial identifications than we currently acknowledge. Finally, I critically evaluate the political and ethical ramifications of treating race as a unified, permanent identity. Resistance to systems of racial and gendered oppression should challenge our identities as unified and permanent.
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CHAPTER 1

*Queering race* borrows on a notion developed in the theories and practices of sexual politics referred to as Queer Theory. Though the term “queer” was once, and in some contexts still is, used degradingly, the word has been taken on as a positive self-identity in resistance to gender and sexual oppression. “Queer” refers to a sexual and gender identity that defies the rigid boundaries of heterosexual/homosexual and male/female boundaries, where everyone must fit into those categories. In opposition to that, a queer identification is used to criticize those identity options—that is, gender and sexual binaries are not desirable options to choose from and are far from an exhaustive list of identity options. “Queer” affirms the contingency and fluidity of our sexual and gender identities. As such, queer theory argues for the possibility of creatively constructing one’s sexuality and gender. I aim to queer race in the sense that I will argue that race is not pregiven, that our current racial classifications do not exhaust our options, and that our current ways of inhabiting racial identities are not desirable.

In these essays, I investigate our racial identities. I consider several aspects of how we commonly conceptualize race—namely, that race is essentially about biology, that everyone possesses exactly one racial identity, and that the identity does not change. The conceptual features I discuss are more often implicit assumptions than explicit premises, so it is sometimes difficult to locate these components in the wide-ranging discussions of race. Nevertheless, I believe that most people will grant that my characterization fairly describes their own understanding of race. As such, I claim that
this picture has captivated us and limited our theoretical and revolutionary visions. In response, I contend that the prevalent notion of a fixed, unified racial identity is wrong. It misrepresents the meaning of racial identities by capturing only a fraction of the ways that racial concepts are used in the process of identification. A negative result of our captivation with the notion of a fixed, unified racial identity has been that we neglect to explore how our racial concepts can be used to racially identify in alternative ways. I believe that my analysis will reveal that we actually inhabit multiple racial identities and, to some degree, have a choice in whether to retain or alter the ways we currently understand and inhabit them.

Given my focus on race, one might ask a rather pressing question regarding this thesis: why does a philosophical investigation of racial identities fall within the domain of Women's and Gender Studies? A defense of this topic area should begin with a discussion of the interpenetration of race and gender.

Gender norms prescribe meanings and treatment based on a complicated interaction between gender and other identities. That is because identities intersect, rather than exist as discretely differentiated from one another. For instance, the gendered meanings attached to particular bodies are interpenetrated with racial meanings, and vice versa. This means, for one thing, that if we were to think of identities as consisting of many features or meanings that a body takes on when ascribed an identity, we go wrong to think that we are simply the sum of those individual features. In other words, our lived experiences are misrepresented if we describe them as just the sum of the discrete racial and gendered meanings. For instance, a black woman will often be oppressed in ways
that cannot be described as entirely gendered or racial. Instead, she may find that being a woman affects how her blackness is treated, and vice versa. And, of course, the picture is complicated further when we consider all the other relevant identities she may possess—lesbian, sister, mother, wife, student, business executive, laborer, citizen, non-citizen, and many others.¹

Third-wave feminists, particularly women of color, leveled a powerful criticism against the feminist movement. Their criticisms are grounded in the intersectionality of gender and racial identities. These critics argue that white women have long dominated feminist discourses, projecting their own race- and class-specific experiences and interests as universal. Not all women, however, experience so-called womanhood or gendered oppression in the same ways. As such, no set of experiences or interests can truly be said to define the feminine/feminist subject.

Scholars and activists of color have written much on their experiences in feminist organizations and academic departments. Many report being marginalized, their voices ignored and silenced, by white women, sometimes under the justification of a need for political solidarity at all costs. But as bell hooks, Linda Martín Alcoff, and many others have borne witness, the particular circumstances of gender-based oppression that women of color (not to mention, poor, queer, M-F transsexuals, and lesbian women) experience differs from that of white women; so to theorize feminine subjectivity or patriarchy merely based on how white women inhabit their identities and experience masculine

¹ For a clear explication of the basic notion of intersectionality, a survey of arguments offered in support of that view, and a helpful bibliography for additional reading on the topic, see Mikkola, Mari, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/feminism-gender/>.
oppression is to ignore the particular insights and needs of many people.

To overlook the complicated and intersectional nature of identities is, according to Alcoff, a failure to fully understand others. She argues that

In a climate in which one cannot invoke history, culture, race, or gender for fear of being accused of playing, for example, 'the race card,' or identity politics, or 'victim feminism,' our real commonalities and shared interests cannot even begin to be correctly identified. When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are. But without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed (6).

Important differences, actual commonalities, and truly shared interests are obfuscated when we overlook our particularities. Having a conception of women that merely mirrors the conditions of socially powerful women actually marginalizes those who do not fit that conception (Mikkola). Therefore, we enact a kind of violence against non-white women when we formulate political strategies and conceptions of feminist interests according to a narrow, white model of patriarchy. This marginalizes and polices those who do not fit that conception (Mikkola).

The point is that the intersectionality of identities is a common tenet of feminist theorizing and politics that entails the interpenetration of questions of race and gender. A feminism that neglects race, not to mention the myriad of other relevant identities, marginalizes important voices in the act of universalizing a white, economically elite female subject. We must recognize and respond to the need to incorporate racial issues and frames into our academic work. Scholarship in Women's and Gender Studies ought to meet the need for racial analysis. Otherwise, I think we compromise the intellectual merit and political significance of our work. At a minimum, this intellectual and ethical
obligation necessitates that we make space for enquiries into race within feminist discourses and, not least, within Women’s and Gender Studies departments.

This investigation of race also relates to women’s and gender studies via deep substantive connections. My arguments about race are largely feminist in nature. For instance, many of the authors I cite are feminists of color, whose own feminist viewpoints inform their philosophies on race (and vice versa). Even more telling, though, is that this thesis consists of the extension of two influential arguments in Women's Studies to race: the sex/gender distinction and, ironically, the arguments for the social construction of sex that blur that very distinction.

In earlier works, the thought was that gender is the social interpretation of sex. Accordingly, “sex” is often used to refer to biologically determined features, like genitals. In contrast, “gender” refers to the meanings society attaches to those biological facts. For example, we say that a human with a penis is a male—this is the ascription of a sex to that body. In attaching the label, “male,” we also associate that body with a host of gender norms that govern the appropriate behavior and treatment of men—this is the ascription of a gender to that body. ²

The sex/gender distinction was introduced to argue that whatever intractability sex may have, gender is culturally constructed. Gender then refers to culturally varied interpretations of sexual differences. Distinguishing between a biological sex and a

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² I have treated this account of the sex/gender distinction as unproblematic, though it is far from being so. As we will see, the thought that gender is imposed on an already sexed body is mistaken. Sex, I will follow others in arguing, is socially constructed. Though this blurs the distinction between sex and gender, I hope to show that it is nevertheless useful to employ. For a clear explication of the distinction between sex and gender, a survey of arguments offered in support and against it, and a helpful bibliography for additional reading on the topic, see Mikkola, Mari, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/feminism-gender/>.
cultural gender serves to open up new possibilities for how a sexed body can be interpreted (that is, what possible genders a person of that sex could choose to perform). And so gender, as interpretations of sexual differences, may stand in a many-to-one correspondence to a particular sex. This multiplicity of genders suggests that sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders are radically discontinuous. In other words, nothing about the concept of gender necessitates that exclusively male bodies will be constructed as “men” or female bodies as “women” (Mikkola).

Feminist scholars deployed the sex/gender distinction to specify gender as the target of criticism. The distinction served as a conceptual framework that helped render intelligible sophisticated challenges to oppressive gender norms. The thought here was that if gender can be revealed as culturally constructed, then gender norms may be contested and gender identities transformed. Though the sex/gender distinction helped illuminate the culturally contingency of gender, sex was assumed to be a natural and permanent identity. However, the notion that sex is a pregiven identity has been subsequently challenged.

Judith Butler has influentially argued in attempts to problematize in order to clarify our understanding of sex. She argues that sex is not a natural, biological identity, but instead a socially constructed one. Thus, rather than leave the sex/gender distinction firmly in place, Butler challenges conventional understandings of sex as biological and fixed, which she characterizes as “prediscursive.” Instead of thinking of gender as merely the inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex, she argues that “gender” must also designate the apparatuses or techniques that establish sexes. “Gender” must encompass
those apparatuses because sex is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, Butler suggests, “perhaps [sex] was always already gender” (Butler 9).

Several arguments have been made that compellingly defend the claim that sex is socially constructed: first, the immutable character of sex is itself contested. To quote Butler, “is [sex] natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us?” (Butler 9). Her reference to anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones calls attention to the varied criteria for applying the scientific terms, “male,” “female,” and “intersex.” We use different and sometimes conflicting criteria for ascribing the “right” sex to a body. And when two parties apply conflicting criteria, their dispute over which is the “correct” sex will often consist of arguing about which of the competing criteria is most important. Of course, there is no “right” and final answer to what it is to be male, female, and intersex. Like many things politically significant, the meanings of sex identities vary and continue to change as we endlessly dispute how to use those concepts. Those contestations over the meanings of “male,” “female,” and “intersex” are therefore part of the discursive production of those identities. Therefore, sex is a socially constructed, rather than pregiven identity.

Second, given the various features that go into determining a person's sex, it is not always possible to neatly divide people into the categories of “male” and “female.” In reality, these varied features need not, and in fact often do not, perfectly cohere in an individual.3 So sometimes we assign someone a sex even though that person satisfies

3 As the Intersex Society of North America attests to in their definition of “intersex,” “a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types—for
some criteria of ascription while failing others. So rather than the binary of sex being something we encounter as a culturally-independent fact in the world, we impose the binary schema on the world and, by forcing everything into one category or the other, we make reality mirror that schema. In fact, as long as this attitude prevails, individuals act as if that attitude were true. That very attitude helps ground medical practices that surgically assign intersex infants to “male” or “female.” Sexual dimorphism, then, turns out to be medically instituted and, thus, socially constructed (Bettcher).

Third, we represent sex in culturally specific ways with every attempt to discuss the identity. For instance, we may speak of the body as biologically sexed and, thus, conceptualize the body as somehow prior to all particular discourses. However, when we do so, we “nonetheless ironically speak about it within some particular discourse and hence to represent in some way” (Bettcher). Since we speak about it within a discourse, the concepts employed will be selected from those available and, therefore, the representation of sex will bear the marks of the culture in which that discourse is situated. So what are cultural imprints in our representations of sex? Sex identities represent the body as the “natural container of some inner, gendered self” (Bettcher). Sex represents

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4 The Intersex Society of North America makes this point in continuing to explicate the notion of an intersex identity: “nature presents us with sex anatomy spectrums. Breasts, penises, clitorises, scrotums, labia, gonads—all of these vary in size and shape and morphology. So-called “sex” chromosomes can vary quite a bit, too . . . So nature doesn’t decide where the category of “male” ends and the category of “intersex” begins, or where the category of “intersex” ends and the category of “female” begins. Humans decide. Humans (today, typically doctors) decide how small a penis has to be, or how unusual a combination of parts has to be, before it counts as intersex. Humans decide whether a person with XXY chromosomes or XY chromosomes and androgen insensitivity will count as intersex” (“Frequently Asked Questions” section).
the body as gendered, and so one may say that sex is a gendered concept. And since
gender is culturally constructed, sex is not prediscursive but culturally constructed.

Notice that these arguments for the social construction of sex involve two
implications: there is a metaphysical critique against the notion of a prediscursive sex
identity—the implication here being that sex is culturally constructed. And second, sex is
culturally constructed as a gendered concept, such that the meanings of “sex” cannot be
entirely extricated from the concepts of gender. None of these arguments should lead us
to completely rid ourselves of the sex/gender distinction, that is, we should not think that
these arguments for the cultural construction of sex also justify the equivocation of sex
and gender. The distinction between “sex” and “gender” may nevertheless still be helpful
for illuminating differences between various gendered meanings that emerge from our
ordinary uses of both terms (i.e., “sex” and “gender”). For instance, some words have
come to be ordinarily associated with the meaning of “sex,” including male, female,
penis, and vagina. Other words are now more closely associated with “gender,” including
emotional, rational, handsome, beautiful, delicate, weak, strong, aggressive, and passive.
By contrasting the uses of “sex” and “gender,” one renders intelligible two kinds of
identities that are often hidden by a fictitious, unified gender. I refer to those two kinds as
visible and practical identities.5

I suggest we see “sex” as referring to a certain set of gendered meanings that I
follow Linda Alcoff in calling a visible identity. The phrase visible identity highlights the
fact that some identities are visibly marked on the body itself and these determine, or at

5 Unless specified otherwise, I use “sex” to mean those gendered meanings that deal with visible
characteristics, including bodily features and clothing. As such, “sex” and “visible gender identity” will
be used interchangeably.
least guide, our perceptions and judgments of others (Alcoff 5). It is because visibility plays this role in guiding our behaviors toward others that we can say identities constitute part of our reality (Alcoff 5). So a visible identity is one that we ascribe largely according to visible characteristics. This phrase also suggests the particular kind or sense of identity that we are dealing with—what we identify with is a visible, bodily sense of identity. That is, something we are by virtue of bodily markers, including ways we may decorate our bodies with piercings, tattoos, clothing, and hairstyles.

Alcoff calls race and gender visible identities to relate them in several ways:

The truth of one's gender and race, then, are widely thought to be visibly manifest, and if there is no visible manifestation of one's declared racial or gendered identity, one encounters an insistent skepticism and an anxiety. Those of who are of mixed race or ambiguous gender know these reactions all too well (7).

The visibility of gendered and racial markers is treated as a manifestation or sign of deeper, inner truths about a person. Alcoff locates the source of this epistemic significance in the role that the visible plays in legitimating our knowledge claims. So the visible sign invites us to interpret what lies beneath the visible surface—the visible identity is thought to accord with non-visible features that evidence our inner selves.

Furthermore, the visibility of both gender and race is connected to the
naturalization of those identities. They have been, and sometimes still are, treated as biological identities. This treatment is no doubt the result of the fact that many commonly used visible markers for race and gender are biological features, like skin color and genitalia. These markers, which supposedly determine our racial and gender identities, appear to be beyond our control precisely because they are biological features. We thereby come to believe these identities are fixed and determined at birth. However, that does not necessarily mean that sex and race are equally rigid.

In contrast to the visible sense of a gender identity, I suggest we also talk about gender in terms of *practical identities*. In *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard defines a practical identity as, “a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (101). Korsgaard connects this notion of identity to an account of reason giving: “Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what the identity forbids” (101). Practical identities gain political and ethical significance via their role in grounding reasons for belief and action, and their ability to generate obligations. Gender can be described as a practical identity, insofar as it refers to norms that govern behavior, values and life projects, as well as gendered conceptual schemes. To say that gender is a practical identity is to say that the meanings of gender can and do prominently factor into giving accounts of what makes one's life meaningful.7

While the sex/gender distinction was used to fracture a unified sex/gender identity and, in so doing, to illuminate their conceptual differences, it did not initially involve a

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7 Kwame Anthony Appiah calls these “life-scripts.” Since I discuss his views at length in chapters 2 and 3, I will put off further comments until then. For now, it is enough to draw tentative connections across the wide range of works that influenced my thoughts.
challenge to the prevailing view of a prediscursive sex. As I argued, the subsequent criticisms that sex is culturally constructed do blur the semantic boundary between sex and gender, since sex is to be understood a gendered concept. Given this, I suggested we understand the separation of sex and gender as a distinction between two ways that we use gendered concepts to identify. On one side of the distinction, we have a visible gendered identity that I said corresponds to the gendered meanings that emerge from our use of “sex” and related terms, like “penis” and “vagina.” On the other side, there are practical gender identities. My goal is to extend the metaphysical critique of sex and my account of the sex/gender distinction as a visible/practical distinction. My aim is to fracture our understanding of racial identities to reveal two kinds of racial identities—visible and practical—and to argue that both are culturally constructed and separable from one another.

For the remainder of this thesis, the structure will be as follows: chapter two pursues two objectives—develop a framework for answering the question of what race means and to then deploy that methodology to refute the popular myth that “race” is essentially biological in meaning. Mine is an ordinary language framework that treats our everyday uses of racial concepts as constituents of racial identities in the sense that how someone is treated, understands herself, cognizes her relationships to others in the world, and what racial identity is properly applied to her are all determined by the racial norms that emerge from our ordinary uses of racial concepts.

In chapter three, I again deploy my ordinary language framework to interrogate and dispel two additional myths about racial identities—that racial identities are
permanent and that we exist as singularly raced subjects, that is, that each of us inhabits exactly one racial identity. I will argue that the rigidity of racial identities has been long overstated. In fact, our racial identities have proven to be quite fluid. They are affected by classification schemes that are historically variable, as well as interpretive problems that make for inconsistent racial judgments even when those schemes remain unchanged. So people are sometimes raced differently depending on the context. People also racially identify in different sense of that term and sometimes that will mean different racial classifications for the same person. The second objective of chapter 3 is to use the notions of a visible and practical identity to distinguish two ways in which we ordinarily and meaningfully use racial concepts to racially identify others and ourselves.

Having criticized as misguided the claims that racial identities are essentially biological, fixed and unified, I continue on in chapter four to further develop the implications of my arguments for future research and activism: principally, my aim in that concluding chapter is to unpack the political and ethical implications of our contemporary views of race, which for the most part fail to distinguish visible and practical racial identities. I will argue that our continued treatment of race as essentially biological, fixed, and/or as a unified identity produce dire consequences for social justice movements. Currently, identity-based politics mobilizes political actors around a visible racial identity and, collectively, the group politically engages in defense of practical racial identities. Against this model of resistance, I suggest an alternative vision of identity politics in which practical racial identities are featured more prominently. In short, I defend the need for an identity politics whose treatment of race challenges the naturalness
of visibly white people performing white practical identities. Such an orientation to political mobilization and critique would involve the demand that whites begin to divest themselves of their white practical identity and begin the work to cultivate identifications with oppressed peoples. Though it is difficult to imagine how to bring about this fundamental change in world-view and self-conception, I will argue, that transformation is necessary if one is to be truly antiracist.

I must admit that these normative arguments are bound to provoke a plethora of questions that this thesis is ill equipped to answer, namely what are the limits to our capacity to transform in such fundamental ways. And, to whatever degree this self-transformation is possible, what is required to bring it about and what, once the transformation is complete, is required of a visibly white person with a non-white practical identity in the service of resisting oppression? These questions are beyond the scope of this thesis—I hope only to raise them and gesture in the direction I think will prove helpful in answering them. So chapter four will also pose a series of questions that my arguments give rise to.

Since some of the issues that I think deserve more attention are in fact currently researched, I will end with a look at several texts that engage questions of race and gender in ways that are consistent with my own position. The authors of those selected texts are thinkers who write on the frontiers of race. Hence, a look into their works gives us a sense of where the limits imposed by the prevailing conception of race are currently being illuminated, expanded, challenged, and transgressed. Their work should inspire and inform our future contestations and reconstructions of racial identities.
CHAPTER 2

Race means __________. We expect a coherent and concise answer to fill that blank. Not only do we expect that such a thing is possible but also that our answer should actualize that possibility. After all, race plays such a pervasive and significant role in our lives that we suppose our experience should allow us to speak with competence and sophistication. I will contend, however, that we often end up giving nothing but confused replies. Our confusions about the racial dimensions of our social lives are tied to the unreasonable notion that one can accurately define the complex concepts of race in succinct and final terms. Or, at least that is part of what I aim to show—good accounts of race cannot fit under the constraints we tend to impose on them. My project in this and the subsequent chapter is to consider what several influential scholars have written about the meaning of race, and along the way provide my own answer.

First I will frame how to develop an answer to the questions of what race and racial identities mean. I argue that we should investigate how the concepts are used, not in technical, specialized, scientific discourses, but rather in ordinary language. That is, I will consider how people use these concepts in a range of ordinary contexts. With that as the framework, I turn to investigate one of the many pictures of our racial identities that have held us captive: the notion that our racial categories demarcate in a biologically significant way. Once a dominant theme in the meaning of race, it still remains a salient though less prevalent feature of its current meaning. Princeton Professor of Philosophy Kwame Anthony Appiah has a well-crafted criticism of this explanation; for our
purposes, I will mostly focus on his claim that race is essentially a biological notion as it plays a central role in motivating his ethical objections to racial identities. I argue that Appiah's argument insightfully dispels the delusion that our racial categories are biologically significant and illuminates how deeply rooted that assumption is in our lives. But I reject his central claim that race is essentially a biological notion. Instead, I urge that race is a much more complicated concept, whose meaning is far too oversimplified if reduced to any one of its past or present features, like biology. Though my attention for now will focus on race as a biological notion, in the subsequent chapter I will pursue the specter of essentialism into the views that embrace a more varied and fluid understanding of race and racial identities.

I prefer an ordinary-language approach to investigating concepts, especially when the concept is one that, like race, plays important roles in the foundational norms of our communities. When we investigate how concepts like race are used, we are investigating the practices that constitute the norms which structure society in ethically and politically significant ways. And for me, philosophy and theory in general are worth engaging in largely due to the insights they offer concerning those concrete situations that make real differences in how people experience their lives, both in the present and their aspirations for the future. How we understand the racial and gendered phenomena that affect us—in fact, what we even take to be an example of such phenomena—is determined by the meanings we ascribe to the key concepts in our philosophical investigations and theories.

For now, I will avoid explicating those normative arguments or the reasons why I believe they are largely dependent on his view that the meaning of race is essentially biological. However, these issues will be discussed at length in this chapter. Also, to do the degree that his normative arguments are not premised on this biological notion, the next chapter develops criticisms that would apply to Appiah’s objections to racial identities.
In other words, how we choose to define race and gender for our philosophical work will determine what we pick out as relevant to that work. It may also determine how we experience, for instance, racial ascriptions and inhabit our racial identities. Therefore, I stand committed to politically engaged scholarship, which calls for a framework that preserves and emphasizes the connections between our concepts and our actual lives.

We could, as others have done, define race and gender as technical, or semi-technical, terms, seeking clarity, economy, and internal coherence as the measure of good operational terms. This attempt to purify our language, to idealize out of the mess and confusions of our ordinary discourses, might very well produce terminological precision and ease, but that so-called operational superiority comes at too steep a cost: our concepts will not reflect the meanings that emerge through use—which are often quite messy—such that the view we gain of the racialized and gendered aspects of our social lives cannot reflect the racialized and gendered reality in which we live and care to change. Theory ceases to be about the real, ceases to be practical, and, thus, cannot be politically useful.

Instead, I use a method advocated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, a prominent 20th century philosopher of language. This method calls for an immersion in ordinary language, since that is where we encounter these concepts and is the medium through which they continue to affect our individual and communal lives. Rather than bracket away the heterogeneity and possible internal contradictions in our concepts of race and gender, we should begin by embracing them as constitutive parts of the very social reality we seek to better understand, to interrogate, and potentially intervene against.
Now that I have outlined why to endorse this approach, let's see what it means for our philosophical investigation of race: together with associated concepts, the concept of race constitutes a system of signs, a language, that gives each of the signs their significance (*Blue and Brown Books* 5). So to understand the meaning of race (or, better yet, what racial concepts like “white” and “black” mean), we must understand the *language* of racial identification. Race talk—that is, the uses of racial concepts, including racial identification—is a *language-game*. An investigation of our ordinary racial concepts involves describing the grammars that govern our use of those terms, which requires that our attention be focused on the various ways we *use* these terms and, thus, constitute the racial norms that shape our lives. After all, “if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign,” Wittgenstein says, “we should have to say that it was its *use*” (*Blue and Brown Book* 4).

This ordinary language framework will rely on insights of the later Wittgenstein. For clarity, I will explicate these insights as we apply them to investigate race. Much of this chapter will be spent examining one of the two major camps in the debate over racial identities: *eliminativists* argue that we should eliminate the practices of racial identification because they are at least skeptical about the usefulness or applicability of racial concepts (Taylor 11). On the surface, the debate between eliminativists and those who want to preserve practices of racial identification is a dispute over whether racial difference is exclusive or inclusive, oppressive or emancipatory. But below the surface, grounding those clashes, is a dispute between competing meanings of *race* and racial

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9 Wittgenstein explains this possibly odd phrase: “the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations* 23).
identities. So in this chapter I will develop Kwame Anthony Appiah's well-known eliminativist position, with special focus on extrapolating the linguistic arguments that justify his conception of race. Our primary aim is to unpack Wittgenstein's theory of meaning in the course of using it to evaluate a prominent eliminativist definition of race.

Kwame Anthony Appiah claims “race” is essentially a biological term, in that it purports to distinguish groups according to biologically significant differences. More specifically, Appiah's argument is that the concept of race is essentially racialist, in that many characteristics—including moral and literary endowments—ascribed to people are thought to be inherited along with a person's racial identity (Color Conscious 56). As we will see, he argues that this biological notion is not simply the most prominent of many meanings, but is foundational to our race concept. We will unpack a more detailed account of this biological notion of race soon but for the moment it is enough to say that race is regarded as a natural identity; it distinguishes subspecies of humans; and all humans belong to at least one race or subspecies—black, white, yellow, etc.

For races to exist in the formations we currently conceive, then racial categories must demarcate biologically significant populations. They do not. The populations that we identify as distinct races do not in fact differ in biologically significant ways. Thus, Appiah concludes, the only race we belong to is the human race.

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10 Racialism is the view that race determines human capabilities. Although racist views are racialist, not all racialist views are racist. From a racialist point of view, race may determine human capabilities but this need not commit one to ascribe value to those capabilities or in any other way judge a person’s worth based on race. A common objection to racialism, one that Appiah embraces, is that historically racialist theories of race have been racist and racist interpretations of races is an always present possibility as long as we continue to think that race determines human capabilities—that is, as long as hold on to racialist understandings of race.

11 For Appiah's arguments against our races being biologically significant categories, see Color Conscious, p. 68 and 72-74.
Political and ethical arguments against racial identities proceed quite smoothly once we stipulate that this biological sense is the meaning of race. Individuals are falsely identified as members of such-and-such racial group. And racial identities come with norms governing those identities. In other words, ascribing a racial identity consists of imposing, or trying to impose, on someone a life script—a narrative or list of options appropriate for a person of that kind (“The politics of identity” 16-17). And these scripts are imposed regardless of whether the person wants to treat her skin color as a personal dimension of the self (Color Conscious 99). Appiah argues that the imposition of racial life scripts is oppressive because it violates the individual's autonomous choice over how to construct a meaningful life for herself.

It is important to remember that these life scripts not only include racial norms that prescribe proper ways for a person of that race to behave, but also proper ways for others to treat her. In societies marred by racial hierarchies, the treatment prescribed by dominant racial norms will often be oppressive and be a means of enacting those hierarchies. Treatment prescribed by those life scripts is also meant to enforce racial norms on others. In other words, there are prevailing norms about how to treat people who fail to live in accordance with the norms appropriate for their race. At points in American history, that treatment has involved lynching blacks who are perceived to “step out of line” and harassing or killing whites who are sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed12. And prevailing racial norms may be also prescribe any number of other

12 Countless examples could be provided of people being killed by whites for violating racial norms. Most examples involve blacks and other people of color as the victims of that violence, but there have been white victims too. I mention several examples throughout this thesis, but it might be helpful to include a fairly well known case here too: three young civil rights workers were killed in 1964. James Chaney (black), Andrew Goodman (white), and Michael Schwerner (white) were murdered by the KKK.
tactics used to enforce the racial code, from disparaging glares to verbal assaults to refusing someone access to needed resources. Racial life scripts need not be like this, but for much of history they have. So Appiah's concern is certainly reasonable: The more central we make ascribed identities to our self-understandings and to our understanding others, the more seriously we take the racial life scripts that have determined that understanding. The more seriously we take those life scripts, the more we take them to be appropriate norms to govern others and ourselves. We expect people to live up to those life scripts and believe it correct to enforce those norms on others. This disciplinary judgment can also turn inwards as we internalize the life scripts for our own racial identity.

To clarify, it is not that Appiah thinks these life scripts cannot enable some meaningful experiences, but rather that the centrality of these identities and scripts eclipse our other important identities (*Color Conscious* 103). We ignore the norms and duties that define those eclipsed identities in favor of embracing a specific view of ourselves that overshadows the rest. In other words, the more central being white is to my sense of self the less significant are the other identities I inhabit—student, teacher, uncle, son, vegan, and so on. Suppose being white was quite fundamental to how I understand myself. When I perceive my interests as a white person conflicting with other interests I might have, those grounded in my white identity will generally take precedence.

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for registering blacks to vote in Mississippi. From the point-of-view of the KKK and many of those in the racist society of the time, these three men “stepped out of line” and were punished appropriately for not adhering to racial norms. For James Chaney, his “sin” was being black and confronting white supremacy. For Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, their offense was, as likely understood by their murders, “turning their back on their own kind.” In short, the tree men were killed for challenging white privilege.
Emphasis on racial differences, taken to be fundamental to one's sense of self, undercuts identifying across other shared identities to find ways to empathize and come together with those outside our racial groups.\(^{13}\)

I argue Appiah’s normative criticisms of race are dependent on the biological notion of race to varying degrees. He objects that racial ascriptions involve the imposition of life-scripts on people who may not want their lives determined by that set of norms. It is possible to impose unwanted racial life scripts on someone precisely because the criteria of ascription are facts about us (skin color) rather than something we choose. If racial criteria were instead things people choose to satisfy, his objection that people have undesired life scripts imposed on them would be largely mitigated, if not completely resolved.\(^ {14}\) Appiah’s second argument, that race eclipses other important identities, is also bolstered by his claim that race’s meaning is essentially biological. Though the objection is not contingent on his semantic view of race, it is nevertheless more plausible as long

\(^{13}\) One can find a plethora of such cautionary points in Appiah's works, here is one that I think is particularly well-crafted: “In social life, too, it's equally important not to pursue a politics of recognition too far. If recognition entails taking notice of one's identity in social life, then the development of strong norms of identification can become not liberating but oppressive. There is a kind of identity politics that doesn't just permit but demands that I treat my skin color or my sexuality as central to my social life. Even though my 'race' or my sexuality may be elements of my individuality, someone who insists that I organize my life around these things is not an ally of individuality. Because identities are constituted in part by norms of identification and by treatment, there is no clear line between recognition and a new kind of oppression” (“The politics of identity” 20-21).

\(^{14}\) We could imagine a situation arising similar to one we already have: a person might choose to satisfy the criteria of an identity while detesting and contesting the life scripts associated with it. This parallels a common strategy of oppressed groups—appropriate those dominant, oppressive life scripts and in the process redefine them in ways that challenge that oppression. It is the imposition of that undesired life script that makes possible the act of resistance in which the oppressed group articulates an alternative narrative of their identity. All that to say, even in a case like this in which people object to the life scripts that are imposed, Appiah’s criticism seems misplaced: if the racial criteria are things a person chooses, then the imposition of an undesired life script is objectionable because of the particular life script, not because the person’s autonomy was violated—in a sense, the person who choose to satisfy the criteria of an oppressed identity chooses to have a life script imposed that she will contest as the appropriate life script. Appiah’s criticism of race cannot be premised on the specific content of the imposed life scripts because that only justifies challenging particular racial life scripts, not the very imposition of any.
was race is thought to be biological. That is because our racial features would simply be part of our biological nature—their relevance determined by biological necessity, that is, prior to and independent of anything culturally specific.

My point is that Appiah’s claim that race is essentially biological is an important link in his ethical criticisms against racial identities. Thus, before Appiah can justify his normative conclusion that we should stop or, at least, minimize our identification based on race, he must convince us that our concept of race is a biological notion. And that requires advancing a framework for interpreting the concept, so let us begin there.

Appiah argues that the current meaning of race is historical: “current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak of earlier ways of thinking about race” (Color Conscious 38). Concepts are passed on from person to person, generation to generation. We inherit, then project in subtly or radically new ways, and thereby pass on our concept to others. The meanings we pass on and that others inherit certainly do bear the marks of these historical processes: new uses are added while older ones, neglected; past semantic themes inspire new ones. So the meanings of racial identities are historical in the sense that they are produced over time such that semantic artifacts will be present in each racial term’s current meaning. And since the meanings of race reflect the racial norms that govern us, we must attend to the genealogy of race if we

15 I admit that this objection need not be premised on the biological notion of race because the follow strikes me as plausible: Even if we uprooted the biological notion from the concept of race and instead treated it as, say, a political identity, we might still find that race tended to eclipse our other identities. Regardless, in the case that race’s meaning is not essentially biological, Appiah’s argument would justify a weaker implication: we should not allow race to eclipse other important identities. Unless there is something about a non-biological view of race that inevitably leads people to make race much more central to their lives than it ought be, Appiah’s argument does point to an inevitable problem. Our tendency to over emphasize race does not demonstrate our inability to regard race as having a more moderate significance. And if race indeed is significant, then Appiah’s concern should lead us to rethink the weight we place on racial identities, but certainly not that we should cease identifying racially
hope to better understand the nuances of the racialized way of life we currently inhabit.

However, while I do agree that historical analyses can produce insight into the meanings of contemporary racial concepts, I disagree that our concepts can be properly understood as merely the residue of earlier conceptions. While it is true that we inherited these concepts and that their meanings in our form of life bear the marks of those past uses, we use our racial concepts in ways that are not captured under older definitions. Our racial concepts are not the degenerate derivatives of old ones. Instead, contemporary conceptions of race are dynamic and unique, though nevertheless descendent of earlier conceptions:

According to Appiah, the notion that race is a biological identity came under fire at least as early as 1876, when Ralph Waldo Emerson published *English Traits*. Appiah quotes him as arguing that racial traits vary continuously such that our racial borders are arbitrary. Contestations like Emerson's had the effect of dislodging the biological underside of racialized traits like intelligence and moral virtue. I can imagine at least two competing descriptions of those contestations. On the one hand, they could be described as challenges to the very notion that race is biological; on the other, they could be described as challenges to purportedly racialized features that turn out to be non-biological.

Notice the subtle differences between those two accounts: the latter takes as a given that race is biological, such that the challenges to race's biological significance really operate to expunge non-biological components from race's meaning. Those contestations would leave us with a coherent concept of race—one that consists of only
those racialized features that are biologically determined—though we will likely be left with a conception of race that does not refer to anything in reality. In contrast to that latter description, the former one portrays those contestations of race as specifically targeting the notion that race is biological. Those contestations would leave in place much of the old racial meanings—all those that in fact are not biologically determined—while making it possible to offer an alternative (e.g., cultural) account of the source of racialized features, like intellectual and moral capacities. All this to say, if Appiah is right that race's meaning is essentially biological, then I think we should expect the second of the two descriptions to best fit the contestations in which race is challenged as a biologically significant category. Put differently, my thought is that the validity of Appiah's claim that race is essentially biological can be judged based on an examination of the aftermath of the biological critiques of race.

So how did Emerson's and other contestations of race's biological significance affect our understanding of racial identities and use of racial concepts? Oppressed racial groups are still ascribed meanings of disvalue, even by those who admit that race is not a biologically significant. Non-white peoples are now said to be intellectually and morally inferior, not because they are genetically destined to be, but because their cultures make them so. These communities' individual and collective behaviors and values are judged guilty, sometimes just as their genes are finally acquitted.

For one of the more pernicious and effective examples of blaming the cultures of oppressed communities for their inferior social positions, see the Moynihan Report which is officially known as “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The U.S.
Department of Labor’s Office of Policy Planning and Research published this report in 1965. Simply put, the report argues that the black family is pathological. One of the key arguments developed in the report is that

the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well (Chapter 4 of the Moynihan Report).

The black family, rather than the broader social context in which it is placed, is the source of the problems for black Americans because, its structure is matriarchal.

Though the report acknowledges that there is no special reason to prefer patriarchal over matriarchal arrangements, it notes that our society presumes male leadership in both private and public affairs. Therefore, the report argues, “A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage” (Chapter 4 of the Moynihan report). Putting aside the questionable assertion that black families were mostly, let alone all, matriarchal, notice that the report makes room for posing the question of whether (white) mainstream family structures should be preferred to (or at least recognized as equal to) matriarchal structures at the very same time that it concludes that the black family structure (and not mainstream white America) must be changed. My main point in referencing this example is to show that oppressive interpretations of black identity were still offered after the biological component of race was being minimized—the purported inferiorities of non-whites were simply rearticulated in cultural terms.

Note that in both biological and cultural accounts, attempts are made to explain
the inferiority of a non-white racial group. Skin color was linked to intelligence, moral capacities, aesthetic value, etc., such that these secondary features were thought to be inherent characteristics either caused by or correlated with “natural facts” about the person, like skin color and ancestry. And although these intangible features might have been thought to be inherent racial features, alongside skin color and ancestry, shifting emphasis from biology to culture did not expel the meaning of racial identities. The meaning of racial concepts did change, but not enough to expunge many of their previous meanings.

Intellectual and moral deficiencies were and are still part of the meaning of non-white racial identities, and this is not, of course, to concede that people to whom those identities are ascribed are truly intellectually or morally deficient: racial oppression includes defaming and devaluing through the meanings the dominant group attaches to another group's racial identity. The only thing that has changed then is that these racial inferiorities are explained as cultural rather than biological.

As one can see, race changed semantically but not radically. The moderateness of that alteration should not surprise us, given the rigidity of our racial norms and how strongly some people are invested in their racist world views: For example, suppose a man believes that other racial groups are inferior to his own and once believed that race was a biological identity but now knows that to be false. Where he had once believed others' inferiority to be linked to their genetic makeup, what is he to believe now? He could, of course, be inspired to further doubt his belief in the superiority of his own race or even the salience of race itself. But another intelligible and more likely reaction, if he
is deeply committed to those racist beliefs, is to treat the racialist component as the given, a criterial feature of the meaning of race. He might, as many did, turn to narratives about cultures as the obvious alternative to his lost ability to give an account of biology's role in producing inferiority. Narratives like the Moynihan Report attribute the inferiorities to the cultures of the marginalized identities. And, of course, other complex and competing cultural narratives were told: some redescribed the “inferiorities” of non-whites as knowledge and ways of living that are valuable but under fire and in yet other cases the inferiorities were attributed to the oppressive conditions produced by systems of white supremacy.

My point is this: characteristics that were once purported as biologically determined were reinscribed as cultural when people began to use race in subtly different ways. And so race still encompasses many of the old meanings, including some oppressive ones. But now many people have come to see these features as embodied in individual members for non-biological reasons. Given that, I reject Appiah's crucial claim that our concept of race is “the pale reflection of a more full-blooded race discourse that flourished in the last century” (Color Conscious 38). Ours might be as confused, oppressive, or even misguided as those earlier race discourses; and they surely do bear similarities, given we inherited a conversation that others had already taken part in. But whatever our race discourse is, it is a vivid, full-blooded something of our own. Crucially, Appiah mutes these differences: different eras have used racial concepts in varied ways. To be sure, there are similar themes that recur across eras, but there are also differences in what meanings are most salient at any given time. But our concepts are not replicas
Although genealogical analysis can be valuable, we should not leave out of our description the unique ways we inhabit the concepts we have inherited. The implication is that Appiah's historical focus undercuts its usefulness in describing our own racial meanings.

Alas, one might nevertheless refuse me this last point. In that case, let us continue to critically explicate Appiah's position to consider other objections. Suppose our concept of race is far more determined by its past uses, particularly the notion that it is a biological identity. Then to better understand just what we mean now, we must attend to what they meant in the distant past.

Appiah traces the foundations of our concept of race to America's founding and argues that an ordinary language approach to the meaning of race requires we, counter-intuitively, privilege the understandings of political and intellectual elites in the United States and United Kingdom because, in ordinary usage, race came to be increasingly regarded as a scientific term (*Color Conscious* 41). Appiah means that though *race* was used by more than simply scientists, “scientists and scholars were thought to be experts on how the term worked” (*Color Conscious* 41). These experts included, “the medical doctors and anatomists, and later, the anthropologists and philologists and physiologists, all of whom together developed the scientific idea of race” (*Color Conscious* 42).

Ordinary people were far less familiar with the scientific discourse over race than scientific experts were, so they can only be said to have partially possessed the concept. They used racial words whose exact meanings they could not express—*that* expectation
and authority was deferred to the relevant scientific experts.

In other words, Appiah's argument is that by the nineteenth century ordinary people had adopted a practice of semantic deference when it came to race. So a group of specialists were regarded as experts on the meanings of concepts that people used but did not fully understand. Appiah draws a helpful parallel to other instances in which semantic deference produced similar linguistic divisions of labor: both theology and the law are specialties that have long underwritten concepts, like the Trinity and landlord respectively (*Color Conscious* 42). Ordinary people used “Trinity” and “landlord,” but they understood their own possession of the concepts as partial and subordinate to the understandings held by religious and legal experts. Similarly, they understood race as a scientifically examined, technical term. Therefore, while Appiah embraces ordinary language, he argues that we need to focus on the opinions of scientific experts to fill out the concept that ordinary users only partially grasped.

Neither the prevalence of semantic deference nor those old prevailing scientific views of race are enough reason to only consider the biological dimension of racial concepts to be semantically significant. That people thought races were natural kinds and scientists had privileged access to knowledge about them does not entail that people did not also use race concepts in non-biological ways that constitute part of its historical meaning. In other words, a people's actual use and expressed understanding of a concept frequently diverge. And one obvious example of this is that non-biological features infiltrated the biological notion of race. As noted earlier, Appiah argues that what turn out to be non-biological characteristics, like “moral, literary, or psychological characters of
human beings,” were first linked to biology and then to culture. This demonstrates that even with a great deal of semantic deference ordinary and specialized uses of racial concepts were never entirely biological, precisely because those uses of race included false ascriptions of biologically determined intelligences and other characteristics. Though people might have once thought these to be biological components to the meaning of race, we know them to not be biologically relevant. So as we reflect back on these historical uses of racial concepts, equipped with different sets of beliefs, data, and conceptual criteria, we intelligibly conclude that past understandings of race wrongly described meanings as biological in origin/nature. In other words, as we look back on past uses of racial concepts we judge those uses to include more than biological meanings. At most, Appiah can argue that biology has been a rather salient feature or prominent theme in uses or, at least, the understandings of race reflected in the definitions people explicitly offered. It is probably also true that biology is still a somewhat salient theme in our understandings of race. But this is far from making their or our concept of race essentially biological.

And even if our account should keep semantic deference in mind, we go too far if we let it lead us to focus entirely on explicit understandings of experts, at the expense of the plethora of uninterpreted, ordinary applications of racial concepts. Instead, I suggest

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16 Some scholars, including Appiah, object to defining races as cultural groups (see Color Conscious, p. 90 and Taylor, p. 57, 100). Regardless of where we stand on whether race should be understood as a cultural identity, the point remains that much of the past meanings of racial identities are preserved despite successful challenges to the meanings that are most prominent at the time.

17 For those, like me, who want to challenge the appropriateness of semantic deference, Appiah says we should “probably offer some criteria—vague or strict—for applying the term” because, “the arguments against the use of ‘race’ as a scientific term suggest that most ordinary ways of thinking about races are incoherent” (CC 42). I think it might be the case that to understand race, as we currently inhabit racial identities and as they contemporaneously affect our lives, we should embrace some degree of incoherence as evidence of accuracy. Or, at least, we should come to see what Appiah calls incoherency
a fuller consideration of ordinary language users instead of privileging the definition
offered by specialists.

According to Appiah, we want to know what race meant at America’s founding
and into the twentieth century, which is to say we want to know how the concept was
used. And we want to know that because we want to know how norms and institutions
were shaped such that they constituted oppressive systems of white supremacy.
Therefore, we want to know how this partially grasped concept was used in a wider range
of language-games. Even though the ordinary user “would have urged you to go to the
experts” if questioned as to whether 'race' really referred to anything at all, they still used
racial concepts in a number of meaningful ways. We should, I think, be much more
concerned than Appiah seems with how those ordinary uses were conducted. So it strikes
me as misguided to emphasize how the non-expert answers when asked a question for
experts. Most of the time ordinary people use racial concepts without being prompted to
reflect on their knowledge of race or to speak as a specialist of any kind. In fact, this
point relates to our use of language more generally:

We cannot always formulate explicitly, of course, the rich and subtle set of
rules we tacitly follow in making these delicate distinctions. But make
them we do . . . People do, after all, draw subtle distinctions in practice
between concepts of guilt and shame, conflict and competition,
manipulation and persuasion, inadvertent and negligent acts, without being
able to formulate upon request the complex rules governing these
distinctions (Connolly 37).

For those familiar with Wittgenstein's later work on rule-following, Connolly's point

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as instead evidence of the open texture of racial concepts—that open texture makes possible radical and
creative engagement with these identities. In the next chapter I attempt to deconstruct some of these
“incoherent” views and begin to suggest a coherent albeit fluid set of criteria for applying racial
concepts.
should be familiar: we apply many of the concepts we have mastered without need of an interpretation of the rule; indeed, we might be incapable of articulating the rule that governs many of the concepts we do know how to correctly apply. We could, for instance, offer a number of examples of correct application, but might not and, in fact, need not be able to formulate an explicit rule that works for all those examples.

While Appiah seeks to define race according to “what people believe about what they call ‘races’” (Color Conscious 37-38), William Connolly draws an opposite conclusion, which I believe we should keep in mind in our investigation of race:

> when it is asserted that the investigator's understanding of the rules of ordinary discourse must enter into his explanations of political practice, it is not the definitions the participants explicitly give that must be privileged in this way, but the rules they actually follow in their actions and appraisals of action (Connolly 37).

Since the “rules of ordinary language” are rules in the sense of being conventional practices, Connolly's point is that it is people's actual actions and appraisals of actions that manifest (and help constitute) those rules, not whatever definitions the participants in the language-game explicitly give. An analysis of political practices that requires explicating the rules of ordinary language must turn to people's ordinary actions and appraisals rather than simply settle for how those people explicitly describe their participation in language. Consider what Connolly's insight means for our purposes: if Appiah is right that semantic deference best explains how people would respond when queried about something thought to require scientific expertise, I suggest it is more significant to ask, how did people use racial concepts in all those other interactions that did not involve such queries, which include many interactions that constituted the actual
norms of a racialized society?

Appiah does speak to this question, implicitly, when he offers one of the implications of the division of linguistic labor—ordinary users of 'race' operated with vague criteria in applying it (Color Conscious 42). Elsewhere, Appiah says of the vague criteria of ascription that, “These criteria need not be the same for everyone. Indeed, people will rarely agree on exactly which properties X's must have” (“The politics of identity” 16). The vague criteria of ascription means the boundaries of various racial groups are not rigidly fixed, which makes it possible to negotiate those boundaries and, thus, membership in those groups (“The politics of identity” 16).

To see why they are vague and how this linguistic feature leads to the boundary negotiations Appiah mentions, we will need to travel a bit from our main topic to consider the views on meaning and language that frame my approach to the philosophical investigation of race: “if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign,” Wittgenstein says, “we should have to say that it was its use” (Blue and Brown Books 4). It turns out that we use words in diverse ways and 'race' is certainly no exception. Unlike artificial languages, like those involving technical terms whose definitions are stipulated and thereby constrained to specified and limited criteria, ordinary language involves such a diverse range of uses that the notion of necessary conditions simply does not fit with the reality of our meaningful behaviors.18

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18 I am tempted to say that in ordinary language we rarely if ever encounter terms whose uses can accurately be described as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions because many words are used in a wide variety of ways. However, in the least, concepts that have become politically contested do not have meanings that can be reduced in that way. Whether the terms’ political contestation is made possible by a preexisting heterogeneous set of meanings or the political contestation involves the introduction of these varied uses, essentially contested concepts are misrepresented if their meanings are formulated into necessary and sufficient conditions.
So if meaning is use and those uses are varied, how are these heterogeneous uses of a single concept related to one another? Sometimes we are tempted to say that a word's meaning can be reduced to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, as Appiah has done; if those conditions are satisfied in a particular instance, then it is justifiable to apply the word in that case. But when we accept the possibility and the reality that we use our words in radically different ways, the claim that we can extrapolate necessary and sufficient features from each of those uses is clearly revealed as a grand delusion.

Wittgenstein famously makes this point against strict-criterial theories of meaning with the example of “game.” Which criteria must be satisfied for something to be considered a game? In other words, what does it mean to be a game? We could imagine that someone answers, “It is an activity one does with others to have fun.” But solitaire is a card game that can be played alone. And take baseball, a prime example of one of our games. Imagine a baseball team on a terrible losing streak. Night after night, they are crushed by opposing teams—neither players nor fans have fun; yet, baseball remains a game. We could go on, proposing additional criteria, but no matter what conditions we stipulate some example will prove the exception. This is because, unless we artificially impose strict criteria for the application of a word, our uses tend to be so varied that no single set of conditions will turn out to be necessary. So instead of having a specifiable essence, the meanings of words consist of some looser collection of diverse applications. What unites these different uses, according to Wittgenstein, is that they bear a *family resemblance* to one another.\(^\text{19}\) This, then, is the structure of meaning: each use bears some large set of similarities with other uses, that we have deemed correct applications of the

\(^{19}\) For more on Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance see p. 32 of the *Philosophical Investigations.*
A number of philosophers and activists have erred by specifying some essential feature of race in order to ground a definition and, then, to stake out a stance on the political-ethical import of this kind of identification. As we have seen in this chapter, Kwame Anthony Appiah privileges racial experts in order to define race as essentially demarcating (false) biological distinctions between groups of people. As we shall see in the next chapter, not so dissimilarly, some advocates for a politics of difference postulate a non-biological essence to a racial identity. In either case, the family resemblance structure of meaning permits us to say this: the move to specify an essence to racial concepts is artificial, so that the philosopher's technical, operational term is purchased at the cost of failing to capture the plurality of meanings and, thus, the depth of our racialized norms.

So two major claims have been advanced in this chapter. First, our racial concepts should be understood in terms of how those important concepts are used in ordinary, everyday interactions. And second, a philosophical investigation into our use of those terms shows their meaning to be plural and heterogeneous. So rather than mean something essential, these diverse uses are related via a family resemblance. This loose structure means that most of the terms in our ordinary language cannot be accurately analyzed into a set of necessary and sufficient conditions—and racial concepts are exemplary in that respect.

Though the meaning of all words have this family resemblance structure, some are more obvious about it. Cluster concepts, like politics, are related to a host of other
concepts, including: institution, decision, viable option, motive, outcome, interest, wishes, values, intention, issue, consensus, and tradition (Connolly 14). These and other concepts are implicated in our understanding of politics. Thus, to make something like politics intelligible, we must display its complex connections to a host of associated concepts. And so to clarify a cluster concept, we must elaborate the broader conceptual system within which it moves. Therefore, we cannot specify an invariant set of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper application because broad ranges of criteria apply. Instead, an act or practice need only have some large set of these criteria grouped together to qualify as an instance of that concept (Connolly 14). So cluster concepts are internally complex.

I argue race is a cluster concept because, again, its meaning cannot be accurately captured in an invariant set of features precisely because the range of our actual uses involve a broad range of criteria that are variously involved. Race is also internally complex. We speak with and about race in such a variety of ways. Here are just a few of the associated concepts that one might invoke to explain the meanings of race: beauty, power, culture, privilege, oppression, emotion, knowledge, rationality, gender, class, sexuality, intelligence, education, opportunity, equality, inequality, superiority, inferiority, and intersectionality. There is some use or some context in which race is used, in which each of these associated concepts appear, either on or below the surface of our grammar. But in each case, the criteria that govern the application of race are slightly different.

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20 But cluster concepts are also open-textured in a second way: “each criterion itself is relatively complex and open” as they make reference to new concepts and can be interpreted in subtly different ways. Chapter 3 argues that racial concepts are open-textured in this dimension too. Therefore, while I will also continue to bolster the claim that racial concepts are internally complex in the first sense, I will also take on the task of showing that the various criteria are themselves relatively open.

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Certainly we might choose to close the concept, that is, codify specific uses and thereby narrow down what a word can mean when used in specific contexts. But to purchase a concise, let alone “exhaustive,” definition, we have to give up robustness. Do this with race, as Appiah and others have done, and our definitions and social analyses will produce pictures of race that lack a large number of features present in our norm governed activities. In other words, definitions that misdescribe how concepts are used distort how we understand our social reality. At least two conclusions follow from this:

First, when we speak of race, whether philosophically or not, we should describe our concepts so we capture the heterogeneity and even the contradictions that might be found in ordinary uses. At least, that is what we should do if we aim for our theoretical and practical understandings to empower us to critically engage our racialized social norms. After all, the meanings of our racial concepts is constituted by a lose connection of different uses, different meanings. And racial concepts play a variety of roles in our form of life—such as guiding how we relate to others—and are used in richly diverse ways. Only when we acknowledge this fact can we orient ourselves to effectively alter the racial dimensions of reality.

Professor Appiah’s criticisms of the biological notion of race are both insightful and potent counters to a mistaken view of racial identities that has long held us captive—that they correctly mark biologically significant groupings. However, we err if we take this biological notion as an essential feature of our concept of race given that we have already considered some instances in which our use of racial concepts lack this biological meaning—in this chapter, those instances involved racial meanings whose biological
underpinnings were being contested, like intellectual and moral capacities. Next chapter we consider a plethora of other uses that also lack a biological meaning. Since one of Appiah's central claims is that the meaning of race is essentially biological, I think we must reject his definition and question the ethical conclusions he reaches. To summarize our problems with his view: though biology may still be a salient feature, its significance has largely diminished not merely from our theories of race but also our ordinary understandings. And underneath past and present understandings, our ordinary uses of racial concepts have never been entirely biological, and I suggested that they are even less so now. In the next chapter, we will consider a number of alternative conceptions of race that evidence the semantic changes from a biological notion. These views also share a virtue that makes them preferable to the one Appiah offered: their descriptions of race embrace a plural, fluid view of semantics.

Before we proceed to consider those other views, I want us to conclude our pursuit of the implications of what has been said in this chapter. To that end, I will finish up with some further insights into what the family resemblance structure of meaning implies for race, which I hope will both illuminate the virtues of a politics of difference and the shortcomings in their conceptions of race. Like Appiah's, these views hold tremendous insight that I have found personally and academically inspiring, but which I think overlook some matters of importance.

I suggest that whatever description of race we accept, it should not merely represent meaning as fluid and heterogeneous, but also embrace the essential possibility and contingent reality of struggles over the meaning of our racial concepts. Struggle is
essential to their meanings. Racial identities are *essentially contested concepts*—terms that “essentially involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Connolly 10; Connolly quotes W.B. Gallie's 1956 article “Essentially Contested Concepts”).\(^{21}\) To see why we should regard racial identities in this way, I will discuss how the notion of an essentially contested concept follows from our ordinary language framework:

Even though people in the community share the same concept, they may still disagree over how to properly understand it. Classic examples include democracy, morality, and fairness. These are called *partially shared concepts* because, we agree over a good deal of their uses, but not all of them. That is, we do not completely agree on the norms that govern these words (i.e., their meanings). Sometimes fellow community members will judge an application differently\(^{22}\). When this happens between disputants who agree over enough applications of a word, then the divergent uses are a dispute over the same concept.

What more can be said to explain the fact that we partially share some concepts with others? Our concepts are rooted in traditions with branching development and that remain open still to further modification. Since people may participate in different traditions, we sometimes understand a concept differently. So they differ in at least some

\(^{21}\) My claim is our racial identities are now essentially contested concepts. One interesting question is whether they have always been so. While I am not prepared to fully answer that question in this thesis, the next chapter does develop several arguments that suggest racial identities have long been essentially contested.

\(^{22}\) This might be because we disagree over the whether something should be a criterion for applying the concept or because we weight the criteria differently. While we've already established that this arises because of the first way in which cluster concepts are open-textured, the occurrence of the later is also evidence that we're dealing with a cluster concept as they're open-textured in a third way: “We often find that various people jointly employing such a cluster concept weight the importance of shared criteria differently (Connolly 14).
of their uses of the concept. That is, their traditions involve in some cases different judgments about how to follow the rules that govern the concept they partially share. These alternative interpretations of the rules are to be expected given that a concept might play a role in one tradition that it does not in others. And since a tradition can be modified, participants of the same tradition may also find that they sometimes construe the rules differently. So whether between traditions or within one that can still be modified, many of our concepts “are capable of being construed legitimately in different ways by bitter opponents, who are nevertheless acting in good faith” (Janik 105). Such interpretations are legitimate in the sense that two people could both appeal to different norms that govern a concept to justify each of their competing projections.

These “good faith” but contrary interpretations of the rules lead to disputes over the term that are essential in the sense that they are rooted in the basic nature of that concept. Janik argues that, “our ability to 'follow the rule' in new and unexpected ways leads to a situation where the referents of terms form families, only loosely and indirectly related to one another” (105). His claim is that it is the fact that we can construe the rules differently that gives rise to the family resemblance structure of meaning. I agree with Janik's point but would also like to invert his statement to clarify the connections between these semantic disputes and the nature of the rules that govern our use of concepts. Recall that rules governing a concept are extrapolated from the wide range of examples that constitute the concept's meaning: not only are we often only given specific examples of how to use a word when we first train to master our language, but at bottom all we ever really have to justify our use are those judgments we share with others over how the
concept should be applied in specific examples. The plurality of examples grounds the plurality of interpretations we can provide for how to follow the rules governing the application of a concept. So I think Janik's point could also be put thus: the family resemblance character of concepts leads to situations in which we can 'follow the rule' in new and unexpected ways. And since these new and unexpected applications may be both similar and contrary to other uses of the concept, there may be debate about whether a particular use of a term is intelligible or not. Such disputes emerge because of the complicated meanings that emerge from our varied uses of concepts. And since those complicated meanings are essential features of many concepts, the disputes over those meanings are themselves essential to those concepts.

Race is another example of a partially shared concept, evidenced by the various and divergent conceptions proffered in ordinary conversation, not to mention academic and activist discourses. These conversations involve disputes over how to understand our ordinary concept of race. So, once again, whatever account of that concept's meaning that we accept, it should describe race as only partially shared and essentially contested.

However, from all this talk of fluidity, heterogeneity, and essential disagreement, it does not follow that all understandings are equal. Some are prominent uses or dominant themes in a concept's meaning, but this kind of prominence is contingent rather than necessary. A particular theme’s dominance—that is, its salience as a major theme—is continuously vulnerable to challenge and reassessment. Prominent uses reflect and make possible relations of power. That is because to use a concept is to sanction certain judgments: consider the difference between calling something “euthanasia” versus
“assisted suicide,” or “pro-life” rather than “anti-choice.” These words appraise as well as describe. To be clear, the fact that different words used to offer different appraisals is only incidental. Words like “gay” and “queer” are both used to appraise differently in different contexts: when the heteronormative frat boy refers to hugging another male friend as “gay” he expresses disapproval and, thereby, attempts to discourage the physical intimacy of a hug between other males. On the other hand, “gay” and “queer” are also sometimes used to positively appraise behavior that challenges the oppression of heteronormativity. For example, one can self-identify as “queer” to express a fluid conception of one's own sexuality, a desire for (or, at least, a desire to desire) sexual partners of any gender, and even a political commitment to resist the normalization of heterosexuality. Therefore, the choice of terms is significant since to use a concept is to sanction certain judgments. So not only the choice of terms but also how we use them is politically important.

Prominent uses reflect and communicate dominant appraisals, which have the real consequences of affecting how people are allowed to live their lives. Thus, in some cases when the use of a word is tied to how oppressed people are treated, the relationship apparent in the prevalent use is one of domination. This points towards the second sense in which Connolly describes these as essentially contested concepts: the issue of how to properly use racial concepts is regarded as important by those involved. These disputes matter to us because, as Connolly argues, the choice of definitions reflects and extends one's political commitments:

In political inquiry, too, the multiple criteria of cluster concepts reflect the theory in which they are embedded, and a change in the criteria of any of these concepts is likely
to involve a change in the theory itself. Conceptual disputes, then, are neither a mere
prelude to inquiry nor peripheral to it, but when they involve the central concepts of a
field of inquiry they are surface manifestations of basic theoretical differences that reach
to the core. The intensity of commitment to favored definitions reflects intensity of
commitment to a general theoretical perspective; and revisions that follow conceptual
debates involve a shift in the theory that has housed the concepts (Connolly 21).

Connolly's point, which I echo, is that the meaning of these concepts reflects a wider
range of judgments a person has committed herself to, so our conceptual choices are
important to us and others because, “To apply those concepts is to sanction the judgments
they incorporate” (3). The significance of these judgments gives rise to our investment in
disputes over a word's meaning and the recognition that others will disagree with us over
how to use it. Not surprisingly then, groups range themselves around essentially
contested concepts. And when they do, “politics is the mode in which the clash is
normally expressed” (Connolly 40). Therefore, the political significance of the judgments
we sanction in our disputed uses of a concept undergirds its status as an essentially
contested concept. 23

Race, again, easily qualifies as essentially contested. People are very much
invested in disputes over how racial concepts are to be understood, which is no surprise

23 Janik observes that something of import is obscured in the sentence I quoted: Connolly claims that
politics is the mode by which groups express clash over essentially contested concepts, but “groups
must have already in some sense ranged themselves around it, since a concept has no existence outside
of human actions” (Janik 109). He goes on to argue that how this happens in the normal course of
events is an emphasis in Wittgenstein's notion of rule following. One can see how the family
resemblance structure of meaning, which permits varied and conflicting interpretations of how to follow
semantic rules, ensures the possibility of groups ranging themselves around essentially contested
concepts. For more on the connections between Connolly's project and Wittgenstein, read Janik’s
insightful essay.
given how much rides on which racial meanings are widely affirmed. The meanings of
racial terms concern how people are labeled and because how one is labeled will
determine how others treat her, this label is politically significant for us. Ours is a white
privileged, patriarchal, heteronormative, and classist society. Deviance from these
violently policed norms is systematically condemned and punished. So how we
understand and ascribe racial identities determines a number of politically significant
facts, like whether someone suffers the conditions of oppression or enjoys the privilege of
being white, male, heterosexual, and/or wealthy. And so the contestations over the
meaning of our racial concepts are themselves politically significant activities because
they are struggles waged by and against emancipatory resistance movements to determine
how racial labels are allocated and what they mean. Such significances qualify our racial
concepts as being terms of our political discourse. Therefore, once again, whatever
account of race's meaning that we accept, it should describe race as politically significant
and essentially contested.  

In the next chapter, we turn our attention to theories that share these ambitions,
broadly referred to as a politics of identity, difference, or recognition. Under this kind of
viewpoint, we pursue the specter of essentialism even further in the form of other

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24 As far as I know, Connolly has not written about race as an essentially contested concept. However,
interestingly enough, he does discuss the political contestation of a related concept—race: the notion
of institutional racism has been introduced to contest the meaning of racism as discriminatory acts done
by individuals. That prevailing view conceptualized responsibility—moral and legal—very narrowly;
the model of an individual racist is one where a simple and direct causal connection must be found
between the racist and the harm inflicted. Institutional racism captured the responsibility that systems
have for inflicting harm while also making sense of the responsibility of individuals who make those
oppressive systems function. Those who sought to criticize systemic and complex techniques of racism
defend the notion of institutional racism. Not surprisingly, those who operated and benefited from the
prevailing social structure argued against the appropriateness of that application of race: So we see
from such disputes that race is a politically contested term. See Connolly, p. 200-201.
(wrongly) assumed necessary features of our racial identities. As was the case in this chapter, my aim is to rupture our common conceptions of the meaning of racial concepts and better situate our understanding of them with respect to what these concepts mean in actual practice.
CHAPTER 3

Racial identities are essentially contested concepts. Activist-scholars working within a so-called politics of difference have long recognized this point and incorporated it into their academic and personal politics. They contest the dominant disvalues attributed to non-white racial identities by charging that racial differences—those between the meanings of our various racial concepts—have been misjudged as insignificant or, even worse, dangerous. People have variously expressed the supposed danger posed by racial differences. Some claim that differences from white norms are definitionally deviant and a threat to human ideals. People who exhibit those differences deserve to be treated as inferior to whites. This way of emphasizing racial difference reinforces the racial hierarchy and thereby maintains white privilege.

Racial difference, or rather emphasis on racial differences, has also been criticized by anti-racists. These critics observe the situation I just described—racial differences are used to exclude and defame non-white peoples. From this fact, some anti-racist critics suggest these harms are the necessary consequences of some inherent feature of racial differences themselves. They charge that emphasis on racial differences is always likely to be divisive, undemocratic, and self-centered. The upshot being that these critics argue that identity-based activism will always be at risk of devolving into mere sectionalism. Identity-based political movements will perpetually struggle to overcome group affiliations in order to build the coalitions between groups that are necessary for resisting and not mimicking systems of oppression. Therefore, we should stop classifying people
according to racial differences—or so says the racial eliminativist.\textsuperscript{25}

Activist-scholars, like Audre Lorde, respond to both the racist and anti-racist devaluation of racial differences with an alternative view: they redescribe and/or embrace the differentiated racial features that are commonly described as subordinate. Lorde argues that the differences in racial meanings that distinguish oppressed identities from whiteness are not merely to be tolerated, but “seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” because only then can we cease to be afraid of our interdependence and thereby gain the power to seek new ways of being in the world” (Lorde 111). Audre Lorde's insight here evidences an important theme in the family of political theorizing and activism called \textit{identity politics}.\textsuperscript{26} Participants challenge dominant meanings of our racial identities and project those racial concepts in ways that resist racial oppression. And if we pull back our view just a bit, these identity-based political projects may also be described as a challenge to the notion of racial difference itself—a reversal of the evaluative component of \textit{that} concept. As you can notice, a major theme in these philosophies is the engagement with the essential contestability of our racial concepts.

These philosophies of difference hold enormous insight into our racialized form of life, but I believe these conversations have nevertheless commonly overlooked some

\textsuperscript{25} Interestingly enough, while the racial eliminativist seems to urge us to ignore difference, they sometimes simply rename the \textit{kind} of difference we are dealing with—racial becomes cultural, ethnic, etc.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Identity politics} refers to, “a loose collection of political projects, each undertaken by representatives of a collective with a distinctively different social location that has hitherto been neglected, erased, or suppressed” (Heyes). An advantage of Heyes' definition is that it encompasses a wide range of projects, including identity-based political movements and theory. One key feature of identity politics is the demand for respect as a person of such-and-such identity group. So for example, rather than demand respect despite one's racial identity, identity politics demands recognition as that race.
shared assumptions that ought be called into question. Though they emphasize the social
collection of racial norms, many activist-scholars are far too
conservative in their depiction of what is possible with race. They often inscribe the
essential contestability of racial identities in a narrow outer shell of inflexible, “natural”
conceptual components. Our political options are determined, in part, by how we
understand race. So we ought ask ourselves, do we understanding the concept of race in a
way that permits it to be deployed in resistance to oppression? To answer that question,
we should interrogate any conception we consider endorsing to see whether it overly
limits our actual options. Therefore, in this chapter, I describe and attempt to dispel a
picture of racial identities that I believe has held too many of us captive:

I think it a fair characterization to say that most Americans tend to understand our
racial identities as permanent and singular. Against this view, I will argue that our racial
identities are much less stable and in fact plural, by which I mean we may each have
more than one kind of racial identity. Obviously then, this chapter indicts common sense.
What we have taken for granted as the cornerstone of our racialized identities is in truth a
mere confusion generated by misunderstandings of our language. Or at least, that is what
I hope to demonstrate. Though this conclusion implies that our particular racial reality is
contingent—that is, it could be otherwise—we should be attentive to the limitations of
what can be derived from that revelation: racial identities are socially constructed, but to
say that, in yet another way, is not yet to answer the further question of whether we
should retain our racial norms or alter our behaviors to constitute/conform to different
ones. Put differently: we should be wary of thinking that any particular prescription
follows from proving that racial identities are socially constructed in such-and-such a
way. Instead, we will need to consider what alternative ways of being are possible, how
they can be brought about so as to constitute a change in our conceptual scheme, and then
decide which of the available schemes we comparably prefer.

We might combine these considerations into the question, how does one
effectively resist white supremacy through alterations in the most fundamental features of
our shared form of life? Answering that takes us beyond this project, but it is precisely
because we want to better answer such political and ethical questions that we must
dedicate ourselves to fleshing out the contingencies and reveal the possibilities of racial
identifications. So this chapter is but the initial contribution to that grander project: the
first step is to rupture the prevailing picture of our racial concepts so that new
possibilities will become intelligible and regarded as viable options that we can begin to
discuss. And that is precisely what I aim to do here, starting with the first myth of a racial
identity—our race is fixed at birth.

Previously, I argued against the notion that race essentially means a biological
identity; thus, whatever does characterize membership in a race is not biologically
significant. So what then is the basis of grouping people together as members of a race?
In other words, what kinds of things do members share? Well, as I argued in the last
chapter, the meaning of these identities cannot be reduced to any set of necessary
features, which suggests a counter-intuitive and, admittedly, absurd conclusion that a
member need only bear a family resemblance to other members, though the specific
features they have in common will change with each new comparison. I say this is
counter-intuitive and absurd because it so utterly diverges from the logic of our ordinary understanding of race and racial identities. To be sure though, I do not regard this as a defect, but rather as evidence of the need to closely interrogate common sense to see whether that absurdity appears more reasonable.

So with that in mind, let's turn to an analysis that explicitly aims to accommodate the variety of meanings attached to racial identities while still preserving the cogent and simplified set of criteria that common sense demands. In “The Ordinary Concept of Race,” Michael Hardimon investigates our concept of race as it used in everyday, ordinary situations. But rather than take any and all ordinary uses of “race” or racial identities as constitutive of the concept, he employs a familiar notion in analytic philosophy—the concept/conception distinction. Hardimon argues that the concept of race structurally constrains the various ways one can understand race and racial identities. So whereas the concept consists of the bare minimum of meaning, an infinite variety of competing conceptions or interpretations of that same concept could be articulated to add semantic depth. But what distinguishes the semantic contribution of the concept from that of a conception of race? Hardimon's suggestion is that, “The concept of X specifies what X is. A conception of X indicates how the concept of X is to be understood” (Hardimon 439-440). So what then can we say to describe the concept of race without smuggling in meanings that are actually specific to one conception or another?

Hardimon identifies the concept's “logical core”—a set of criteria or properties that designate different races and which structure our various conceptions. That core consists of “skin color, shape, ancestry, and aboriginal habitat—and nothing more”
(Hardimon 451). Although we ordinarily understand racial identity as determined by key criteria, like bodily characteristics, sharing the same visible physical features is not enough to constitute a race. And neither is it enough for members to share a founding group. The concept of race is fundamentally concerned with both: members of a racial group not only share the same visible physical features, they also share an ancestral founding (Hardimon 447). Thus, conceptually, race lacks all those things that make it matter to us—race is intrinsically unimportant. However, the concept can be used to articulate conceptions of race, which fill in details not present in the concept's logical core; it is these details that gives race its significance in our form of life, for example by linking skin pigmentation to moral character (Hardimon 451).

Hardimon employs this distinction to clarify our perception of the debate over retaining race in our discourse. He observes that, “what is commonly presented in the literature as a discussion of the ordinary concept of race is perhaps better understood as a discussion of the ordinary conception of race” (Hardimon 439-440). That is, writers are actually focused on a conception that corresponds to common sense—i.e., ordinary, everyday—ways of thinking about race. In contrast, Hardimon aims to focus on the ordinary concept of race to argue that it is not racialist.27 Racialism is a feature of the particular conceptions of race that have held sway in our community. But since these are historically contingent rather than essential features of the concept, the eliminativist arguments for eliminating race are best applied to particular conceptions rather than the

27 Remember from chapter 1, racialism is the view that race determines human capabilities. Although racist views are racialist, not all racialist views are racist. From a racialist point of view, race may determine human capabilities but this need not commit one to ascribe value to those capabilities or in any other way judge a person’s worth based on race.
concept of race itself. The upshot is that while we ought resist problematic conceptions of race, we need not do away with race altogether.

From that point of view, it may be unclear how we should respond when asked what race means. Conceptions of race entail one answer, while the concept, another. These are compatible answers to be sure, at least to the degree that for a conception to be a conception of race it must conform to the concept's logical core. But they certainly differ in important respects. Put differently, the concept offers what race must mean, while conceptions show us what race could also mean. Hardimon's insightful suggestion is that we go wrong if we decide the fate of racial concepts merely based on an evaluation of the prevailing, racialist conceptions. Although our ordinary conception of race is racialist, our ordinary concept is not. Given the gap between race and racialism, the eliminativist objections to race are misdirected. So instead of ridding ourselves of race, we may appropriate racial concepts by projecting them in non-racialist applications (Hardimon 455).\textsuperscript{28} Certainly on this point, I concur.

I do not, however, agree with Hardimon’s use of the concept/conception distinction. But before those objections are offered, I will explicate his concept/conception distinction and describe the problem it poses my project: Hardimon divides various racial meanings between those categorized as part of the concept and those that form conceptions of race. Features of the concept are meanings that specify what X is, whereas the meanings that constitute conceptions of X indicate how the concept of X is to be understood (Hardimon 440). The concept specifies a kind of thing

\textsuperscript{28} Though, as Hardimon notes, it would be unrealistic to suppose we could ever completely rid race of its racialist overtones and connotations: “The concept is indelibly stained by its history and associations” (Hardimon 455).
and a conception is of *that* concept if and only if it is an interpretation of that *kind* of thing. In other words, Hardimon treats the concept as a basic structure that various conceptions “fill in” with additional semantic content. In that way, the racial meanings that Hardimon classifies as constitutive of the concept of race act as criteria for determining what is and is not a conception of race. The features of the concept function in this way by partially determining what content conceptions must have. So features of the concept are essential to what race means, in the sense that all conceptions of *race* must be consistent with those features. Hardimon’s concept/conception distinction involves dividing racial meanings between two classes that are then organized into a semantic hierarchy—the essential meanings encompassed by “concept” and the inessential ones by “conceptions.” And it is *this* hierarchy that grounds Hardimon’s claim that skin color and ancestry form race’s “logical core.” If he is right that these racial features occupy this essential semantic role, then I am wrong to suggest we can meaningfully use racial identities as distinct from, let alone completely contrary to, skin color and ancestry. Given that implication, I would like to now consider whether Hardimon’s concept/conception distinction does the conceptual work he thinks it does.

Hardimon’s use of the concept/conception distinction mimics other ways that the meanings of concepts are essentialized and as such it is vulnerable to the line of argumentation I advanced against Appiah’s view in chapter two. Hardimon treats the “concept” as the formal structure in which all legitimate meanings of the word “race” are expected to fit into. His notion of a concept smuggles in necessary but insufficient conditions for the meanings of racial identities, but as I have already argued this reflects a
misguided view of language in general and, specifically, fails to capture a number of our actual uses of racial concepts. (The remainder of this chapter will continue the defense of the former claim that already began in chapter two.)

In fact, by Hardimon’s own account the classification of racial meanings into “concept” and “conception” classifications is not straightforward. Recall that race’s logical core refers to the racial meanings that Hardimon treats as necessary features of race. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, race’s so-called logical core was not distinguished from the racialist conceptions widely held at the time, even from the moment the logical core entered the historical scene, (Hardimon 452). So the racialist conceptions did not develop from the logical core in a temporal sense, though Hardimon argues that acceptance of the logical core can easily support acceptance of racialist conceptions (Hardimon 453). What is significant about Hardimon’s own account is that the essential meanings he refers to as race’s logical core were no more part of the founding of racial identities (i.e., part of their original meaning) than the racialist conceptions were, so it is not clear why Hardimon nevertheless gives the logical core semantic privilege over all other racial meanings.

Admittedly, skin color and ancestry do factor prominently, though not exclusively, in both our explicit understandings of race and our actual uses of racial concepts. For that reason, Hardimon might respond that his “logical core” best describes what all of these varied racial meanings have in common—they are largely about a kind of identity that is determined based on skin color and ancestry. Notice, however, that this does not mean that this description fits all our racial meanings. So appeal to this kind of response would
fail to justify Hardimon’s treatment of the concept’s logical core as a constraint on meaningful uses of racial concepts in the processes of identification. Instead, all he has done is describe a prevalent theme in our racial meanings, but not an essential or universal property that all racial meanings do or must possess. Therefore, the concept/conception distinction can be useful only if we think of it as a way to highlight patterns in our racial practices—that is, to emphasize prevalent themes in the meanings of racial concepts—but we go wrong if we treat it as a distinction between essential and inessential racial meanings.

Race-thinking is interpenetrated with questions of beauty, desirability, sex, reproduction, and much more. Paul Taylor observes that in the West, those conceptual and affective connections are “unavoidable features of an adequate account of race,” especially if that account is meant to describe US history and society (Taylor 103-104). Thus, when Hardimon defines race’s “logical core” in terms of skin color and ancestry, he erroneously attributes an essential meaning to race based on a model that only maps some of the kinds of meanings race takes on. In a later section of this chapter, I will continue to defend the claim that some of our uses of racial concepts are not centered on criteria of visible features and ancestry. So I propose to temporarily put aside the accusation that Hardimon is wrong to refer to physical features and ancestry as the “logical core” of race, if by that he means they constitute the essential features of our racial concepts. Instead, lets assume that Hardimon is right on this point and pursue two questions: do we tend to interpret those “necessary” criteria as implying that our racial identities are fixed at birth and, therefore, permanent? And if so, is that implication actually entailed from the
endorsement of bodily features and ancestry as the criteria for racial identification?

We tend to imagine ancestry and our physical bodies as fixed, facts—givens, if you will—prior to our emergence as individual subjects. Hence, our easy leap from accepting visible and ancestral criteria to the notion that our racial identity is determined entirely for us and effectively set in stone. This logic is manifest in Appiah's treatment of social identities, particularly his discussion of the absence of space for autonomous control over racial identities. When an identity concerns nothing but a set of conventional behaviors, then we can choose whether to adopt the identity. For example, to be a philosopher is to do philosophical work—lecture, read, and write on philosophical topics, among other things. One can opt in or out of that behavioral pattern and, thus, into or out of the identity. But according to Appiah, and certainly common sense, in the case of gender, race, and sexual orientation, the criteria for ascribing those identities include things over which we have no control. Therefore, “whether you identify with that identity . . . is not only up to you” (Ethics of Identity 69-70). But despite the ease and common-sense appeal of that logic, the reality is that visible and ancestral criteria cannot support the picture of a permanent racial identity for at least three reasons:

First, the stability of visible identities depends on the stability of our color judgments, but sometimes a person's hue does in fact change. Imagine all the ways to alter one's skin pigmentation a la Michael Jackson.29 And in a provocative book titled Black Like Me, John Howard Griffin recounts his experiences as he traveled through the

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29 He evidently suffered from a skin condition called vitiligo, which causes the depigmentation of patches of skin. Whether due to this chronic disease, Jackson's attempts to even out those light patches, or whatever other motives, the point is clear: skin changes color more frequently than most people acknowledge.
deep south for six weeks as a black man in the late '50s: Griffin, a white male journalist, darkened his skin with shoe polish and medication, and shortened his hair to take on an alternative visible identity. *Black Like Me* is the story of someone who transforms his racial identity: as he testifies to in this narrative, Griffin's new visible identity ensures he is treated as a black man, both by whites and blacks. Particularly in the beginning of the journey, he feels a tension between the race he presents himself as and a sense of another racial identity hidden underneath; this experience of a radical alteration in his bodily identity is perceived as the emergence of a tension in his racial identification. As his story proceeds, and he spends more time engaged with others as a black man, Griffin conceptualizes white subjects differently:

I learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my qualities as a human individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment. As soon as white men or women saw me, they automatically assumed I possessed a whole set of false characteristics (false not only to me but to all black men). They could not see me or any other black man as a human individual because they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us (Griffin 166).

Griffin not only gives witness to his treatment as a black man, but notice how his language evidences a lingering identification with blackness: “They could not see me or any other black man . . . they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us.” He was regarded as a black man by others and, consequently, came to view himself as a black man too—at least to some extent. He undergoes a perspectival shift that affects how he understands and experiences racialized phenomena. So not only is Griffin newly ascribed a black racial identity, but he also comes to identify as such.

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30 Obviously this is due in no small part to the fact that for the most part people were never aware that he had purposefully altered his look.
Second, for skin color to serve as a determinant rule, our racial groups must be divided into discrete ranges of hues. And indeed if Paul Taylor is correct, common sense holds there is actually four or five racial hues. But common-sense, of course, is far from reality: “so-called white people range from what we used to call 'swarthy' to bronze to alabaster, while so-called black people can range from alabaster to what we used to call 'high-yellow' to coal-black” (Taylor 49). Not only does this mean we can we plot complexion variation along a continuum rather than discrete points, but some members of different races actually have the same or very similar skin color. However, our prevalent understanding of race encourages us to “cleave this continuum into a handful of supposedly distinct types” (Taylor 49). But since the hues vary in the ways they do, and since the same hue can be taken to satisfy the criteria of different races, skin color cannot support the determinativeness that we ordinarily suppose characterizes our racial identities. And other so-called racialized physical features do not fair much better as the basis of determinant racial judgments.\(^{31}\)

Third, the ease by which we seem to make interpretation-free color judgments belies the conceptual room for inconsistent racial ascriptions. To see why, think about how these judgments are often made: we ascribe someone's race, usually without interpreting the rules governing racial color judgments: we do not think, for example, “this person has alabaster skin,” “does 'white' apply to alabaster?” And since in many

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\(^{31}\) Paul Taylor argues that, “the traits that are supposed to define the races fail to present themselves in reliable clusters. The idea is that this skin color goes with that hair texture and with those facial features, consistently. But racial traits just don't hang together this way. Many dark-skinned people have straight hair, aquiline noses, eyes with pronounced epicanthic folds (that is, 'slanted' eyes), or thin lips; and many light-skinned people have full lips, tightly curled hair, and wide noses. And, as is well known, the trait clusters that are supposed to define the modern Races don't work at all well beyond the context of the North American colonial encounter” (50).
cases—everyday in fact—we recognize someone's color without voicing that judgment for others to contest. Other details also play a role in our racial judgments, whether we engage in interpretation or simply apply the rule: her clothing, hair texture and style, bone structure, etc. all have racial associations and are factors in our racial ascriptions. Even the people one associates with could affect our racial ascriptions, if one assumes people primarily socialize with members of their own race. Thus, it should not surprise us to discover a person of color, with light skin and a desire to “pass” as white, choose to avoid markers that suggest a non-white identity. In fact, “passing” as another race is often successful precisely because our racialized color judgments are often immediate and unspoken, since that decreases the chances that others correct our racialized color judgments. Therefore, we can conclude that visible identities can and do change, even when the hue of a person’s skin remains the same.

What this all points to is the well-known fact that people can and do frequently “pass” as a member of a different race. In particular, this potentiality arises from the indeterminacy inherent in the visible criteria of racial ascription: our racial concepts are applied via classifying skin pigmentation into discrete racial categories. But we ascribe these identities without interpretation of the rules that govern those color judgments. And as I noted, that this is how we assign identities means that inconsistencies in our racial judgments will often remain implicit and, thus, unchallenged. Perhaps especially when we do not interpret the rules of color-based ascriptions, other visual features often influence our judgments—clothing and other bodily decorations, etc. People can purposefully pass as different races by taking on the appropriate markers. One
implication is that as far as our visible criteria for racial identities are concerned, skin color and other bodily characteristics are not the only visible criteria used to ascribe races.

Indeed, we must apply these bodily decorations as racial criteria because, color alone is an indeterminate rule—members of different races can, as a matter of fact, have similar hues. But of course, all such criteria are indeterminate since someone's visible features could point in different racial directions. Such ambiguously pigmented and culturally marked individuals are cases where only difficult judgments can be made, in which reasonable disagreement could be had in whether he looks, for example, white. Thus, many people may find themselves ascribed different racial identities at different times, by different observers. These cases make evident that color judgments cannot account for a permanent racial identity, nor can they be the only application of visible criteria.

Let’s now turn our critical investigation to ancestry, since this is where most people turn to resolve a difficulty in judging skin color, etc. And though we can imagine physical features changing, our “real” ancestry is causally linked to us and so cannot change. So we tend to treat ancestry as the more authoritative test of a person's race. For at least two reasons, ancestry turns out to be too unstable to secure the kind of permanence we think our racial identities enjoy:

First, our family histories connect us to individuals who each have some differences in heritage. So our family history should be regarded as a complex network of varied racial histories. What this means for most of us is that we have fairly multicultural
and, yes, even multiracial backgrounds—even though our racial identities rarely reflect this fact. Our identity is derived from the identities of those in our family lineage; thus, given the prevalence of mixed racial identities, we almost always have to consider some questions about how to translate this complicated list of racial ingredients into a single racial identity: how many ancestors need be members of a certain race for that to constitute part of my racial identity? How immediate does my relationship to them need to be? And, of course, we would need to answer similar questions about each ancestor to determine what racial identity they “passed on” in the constitution of my own.

Without the “one drop” rule, there is no simple derivation: although we can generally observe that the weight given to an ancestor's identity reduces in proportion to the relative's genealogical distance, race does not necessitate any particular, definitive metric for calculating that reduction. This is the first problem with ancestral criteria, and the reason I call these difficult questions. There is no right answer in principle or practice. And since our practices constitute the norms of our racial identities, there is no right answer in principle, in part, because there is no single, settled answer in practice.

Second, if we think that racial interpretations of ancestry are straightforward, that is likely because we assume that our criteria have always been the criteria of racial ascription. Otherwise, the racial identity we ascribe an ancestor will not be the correct one for her day. And if her descendent wanted to determine his race, he would need to know

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32 We could respond to these facts by almost universally embracing multiracial identities, but that would certainly involve a much more radical notion of racial identity than most people in the race-debate choose to defend. It would also still mean that our racial identity was permanent via an ancestral criterion. We will hold off on considering this option because a multiracial identity determined by ancestry is still susceptible to other criticisms I will make about ancestry as a criterion capable of securing a permanent identity. In subsequent chapters I will also make arguments that although there is something quite right about the notion of a multiracial identity, one that is thought to be permanent and determined entirely for you is a view that obscures more radical and empowering options.
which identity she contributed to the mixture that constitutes his own racial identity. So should he classify her, as she was in life or as if she lived now? Although some will undoubtedly choose our racial norms, we should not mistake our views as enlightened or as if our racial knowledge demonstrated progress toward some eternal racial truths. When it comes to what the criteria of racial ascriptions are, there are no eternal racial truths. Our criteria are simply different than theirs, not better justified. So if one does choose to apply our racial criteria rather than those of a previous era, it is only because the person choosing is one of us and has simply selected our answer. Ancestry does not provide a definitive answer. Therefore, if criteria of racial ascription have changed, then ancestry cannot guarantee the stability of racial identities.

Consider the history of the American Irish: although the Irish are now raced white and are often thought to have always been so, Noel Ignatiev argues that this was not always the case in *How the Irish Became White*. What were the Irish if not white? People might expect a simple, singular identity in response, but the answer turns out to be fairly indeterminate and the reality much more complicated than usually supposed.

Strong tendencies existed in antebellum America to consign the Irish, if not to the black race, then to an intermediate race located socially between black and white (Ignatiev 89).

The Irish were, in a sense, caught between two racial “locations” in the existing hierarchy: sometimes they were effectively regarded as black, other times, their racial identity could not be specified beyond “non-white.” What is clear, however, and quite

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33 Ignatiev's book is extremely fascinating and well worth the read; I particularly like this description of the book's topic: “This book looks at how one group of people became white. Put another way, it asks how the Catholic Irish, an oppressed race in Ireland, became part of an oppressing race in America. It is an attempt to reassess immigrant assimilation and the formation (or non-formation) of an American working class” (2).
important, was that they were definitively not white by contemporary norms, even if their exact place in the non-white racial categories was far less settled. When we conclude that a white ancestor has and passes down a white identity, we had to overlook (or be unaware of) a lot of complications in order to treat whiteness as unproblematic. Therefore, ancestry fails as a determinant rule because there is no settled rule for how to interpret one's ancestry. Furthermore, if we privilege our views on race to settle the interpretation of someone's ancestry, then ancestry as a criterion of ascription becomes contingent on and subordinated to other criteria. This reverses the order of importance held by contemporary wisdom.

To return to an earlier point, we must decide whether to employ contemporary or older standards to ascribe ancestral identities. The stakes are high because both white and non-white labels invoke the neglect of some aspect of our racialized form of life. If we were to ascribe a non-white identity to an Irish ancestor, we would obscure important details—namely the fact that the descendents of early Irish immigrants have long enjoyed white privileges in the U.S. But we are no better off with a white ascription since it obscures the history of the Irish's racial transformation and any insights that that historical narrative can provide. And as Noel Ignatiev's work evidences, there is too much we should learn from those stories: for one thing, it further evidences the error of thinking that racial identities are permanent and fixed at birth. This naturalization of race would be on its firmest ground if supposedly unchanging features like skin color are sufficient conditions for racial membership. The Irish's racial transformation reveals that skin color was much less pertinent to racial ascription than it is now. Instead, people privileged
other visible and non-visible criteria.

So if skin color was not relevant (or weakly so) to the meaning of whiteness, what did being white mean at the time? Ignatiev offers an important insight that links racial identity to social and economic power: “In American history, 'white' has not meant all scrambled together without regard to religion, language, or country of origin. At every period, the 'white race' has included only groups that did 'white man's work’” (Ignatiev 130). The notion of “white man's work” describes a social relation in terms of the jobs and bodies it excludes: “'white man's work' was, simply, work from which Afro-Americans were excluded. Conversely, 'black man's work' was work monopolized by Afro-Americans” (Ignatiev 130). To be white was to be employed in certain jobs and not others; and it meant being segregated from black people and other oppressed races. To be white involved occupying a certain social position, which was linked more to job and residence than skin color. And in both of those domains, the Irish and Blacks had at one time coexisted, such that “In antebellum America it was speculated that if racial amalgamation was ever to take place it would begin between those two group” (Ignatiev 3). And so long as the two groups continued to occupy these locations, the Irish were seen as too dissimilar from whites to justify their inclusion, since they only shared the pigment but not the other features characteristic of being of the dominant group.

Though Ignatiev is of course right to say that white skin was not sufficient to justify the application of “white” to their racial identity, I think the significance of their white skin in their positioning as non-white is far too underplayed. Although it was not enough to have white skin and European ancestry, “white” was sometimes used to
identify a population who tend to have lighter skin pigmentation and be of European
descent. And certainly it was also the case that another primary use of the word “white”
was to refer to the color white. So there were visible components of race’s meaning,
though they played less central roles than now. Since the Irish are generally light skinned,
these visible components to the meaning of “white” make it intelligible to apply the term
to the Irish. It was a projection of the concept that conflicted with the prevailing standards
of the day and, in that sense, was an incorrect application, but it was certainly not an
unintelligible one. Combined with the performative dimensions of whiteness that Ignatiev
discusses, these visible similarities to white people constituted reasons for ascribing a
white racial identity to the Irish. In practice, these reasons were defeated by other
reasons, or dissimilarities between the Irish and accepted uses of “white.”

I suggest the above account represents an argument in favor of believing that the
Irish were white and that line of reasoning was one that could have been recognized and
taken up by people of that era. That there are many central racial uses to which the Irish
did not fit only shows that there were also reasons for excluding the application of
“white” to include them. It does not deny the fact that some defense could have been (and
was eventually, if only implicitly) mustered for calling the Irish white. So precisely how
was the reason of their pigmentation defeated in deciding which racial identity was the
correct judgment to make? How were the Irish discursively constructed as non-white?

Ignatiev offers a number of examples of speech acts that reflect the prevailing
view, as well as function to produce and then reinforce the understanding of white as not
extending to the Irish. Here is one that undermines skin color as a relevant similarity by
inverting racial identities in a visible registry:

In the early years Irish were frequently referred to as 'niggers turned inside out'; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called 'smoked Irish,' an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be (Ignatiev 49).

“Niggers turned inside out” is a way to say that difference of skin color between blacks and the Irish was insignificant; that underneath the outer covering, they are essentially the same kinds of people. “Smoked Irish” paints a counter-factual picture of the Irish; here too the visible difference is treated as irrelevant by linking the two populations through the explicit application of the label “Irish” to black people. These devices work to bring our attention to non-visible similarities. And as far as speech acts go, these normalized an understanding of these groups that equated their racial identity—effectively making it the case that, in that form of life, the Irish were not white.

Hence, Ignatiev's argument that, “while the white skin made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, it did not guarantee their admission; they had to earn it” (Ignatiev 70). After the Irish repositioned themselves in a social-symbolic matrix of whiteness and chose to defend white privileges, they were granted membership. While Ignatiev describes his work as detailing what the Irish did to earn their new racial title and the privileges that came with it34, these behaviors are also precisely what made the Irish's racial transformation intelligible, so that it occurs as a natural extension of those

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34 To be sure, the rewards for toeing the white supremacist line were immense: “To Irish laborers, to become white meant at first that they could sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later that they could compete for jobs in all spheres instead of being confined to certain work; to Irish entrepreneurs, it meant that they could function outside of a segregated market. To both of these groups it meant that they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, to be tried by a jury of their peers, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire. In becoming white the Irish ceased to be Green” (Ignatiev 3).
older racial identities rather than a complete break from them. In short, the Irish lent support to anti-abolitionists so that they would not have to compete with free blacks in the labor market. As long as blacks were held in bondage, they could not enter the jobs and communities that the Irish intended to inhabit and reinvent as “white” jobs and communities. But free blacks already occupied many of those jobs by the time the Irish emigrated. So the Irish organized, combining threats of strikes with acts of violence, to run blacks out of many job sectors and deeper into poverty. These strategies effectively segregated the Irish and African Americans so that those jobs became improper and impossible for blacks to work. In excluding blacks, the Irish managed to assert the whiteness of their social positions in labor and politics, and, thus, to justify their own whiteness. Supporting the dominant white power was more than a way for the Irish to buy the affinity of the oppressors; it was a way of making the Irish resemble white people. The Irish repositioned themselves socially and economically so that their bodies visibly occupied positions of political power and dominance over blacks. These

35 Though Ignatiev's language sometimes suggests a dichotomy between patterns of group behavior and the meanings of whiteness, there are clear moments where he bridges this gap, treating these group activities as the way in which the Irish as white was made intelligible while simultaneously constituting a somewhat new white identity. Here, I intend to expand on this insight by further unpacking this history under our ordinary language framework, connecting Ignatiev's analysis to the works of Wittgenstein and Connolly. My hope is to more fully illuminate the role norms, concepts, and meaning played in Irish's racial transformation; and, I suppose, better understand what role the Irish's behavior played in the life of the racial norms that we have inherited.

36 “To be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found. Still better was to erase the memory that Afro-Americans had ever done those jobs. Charles H. Wesley described their reasoning: ‘While the foreigners were willing to take the menial places which Negroes had been filling, they were unwilling, as a rule, in the North as well as in the South, to work at the same occupations with Negroes . . .and through the operation of this racial attitude the Negroes were excluded very gradually from many occupations’” (Ignatiev 130). Thanks to Professor Higgins for reminding me of the parallel between this and the case of gender: many men refuse to do so-called “women's work.” And when women do so-called “men's work” they are usually paid less for performing the same job. But since pay is way to recognize that that work was performed and recognize/establish its value, women are not even being recognized for working the same job as men.
similarities are features of the concept of whiteness that one could use to justify the Irish's claim to a white racial identity—an identity, we should recall, that was (is) fundamentally defined in terms of social relations of privilege and dominance.

Racial identities have been changed and are also capable of being so again. This is due to the multiplicity of uses, associated concepts, that constitute the diverse network of meanings for any given concept; and perhaps even more so in the case of an identity like race, so many of those current and historical uses are simultaneously at play. Given the layers of racial meaning and the impassioned contestations over those meanings, racial identities will continue to undergo changes. The implication is that the myth that our racial identities are necessarily permanent, that they do not and, perhaps, cannot radically change is false.37

Earlier, I argued that whatever racial label we choose to apply to the Irish, we commit ourselves to some faulty and misleading view of their identities and the reality lived by their decedents. But notice this problem does not arise from ascription per se, but specifically due to the singularity of racial identities. In other words, ascription appears to be a catch-22 only if we begin from the assumption that racial labels and bodies necessarily have a one-to-one correspondence. On the other hand, if we make room for the appropriateness of multiple racial labels applied to the same person—corresponding to different kinds of identities—then we avoid committing ourselves to the mistaken exclusion of relevant details. Therefore, we have an incentive to interrogate the assumption that most of us only belongs to one race. I will challenge that view by

37 It is certainly not as if we can justify our new criteria as more accurate of the truth of whiteness—as if we made some discovery that changed our understanding. Rather, we changed our understanding and thereby constituted a different fact, which we treated as a discovery.
contesting a notion that supports that common assumption—that there is only a single kind of racial identity.

The Irish identified with an Irish ancestry and culture that they knew excluded their bodies from being labeled white. Nevertheless, they also identified with white social positions, norms, attitudes, and aspirations long before they could properly identify themselves as white—that is, a white practical identity. It was only after they earned the acceptance of elite, especially slave-holding, whites that the Irish were assimilated into the white race. So the Irish worked their way into a new racial identity. Notice that I have not simply argued that the Irish identified with a race that was different than the one ascribed to them. Rather, my main point is something slightly different: The Irish identified with two races, an Irish non-white racial identity and a white one. So they both identified with the identity they were ascribed as well as the white one they were not. My use of visible and practical racial identities has the benefit of illuminating the dual identifications at play in the Irish’s racial transformation.

Feminist of color have long written about race in the sense of, what I have called, a practical racial identity. They argue that our differences are productive and empowering resources. Their arguments often take the form of defending the value of a perspective, tradition, value, or epistemology grounded in the experiences of a racialized group. That is, some cultural component of the group's identity is emphasized in defending the positivity of that racial identity in response to ongoing defamation by dominant discourses.\textsuperscript{38} Writing on these subjects, bell hooks treats black subjectivity as the site of

\textsuperscript{38} This is a point also taken up by Iris Marion Young, who argues that it is similarities in practical rather than visible identities that is most significant in the meaning of races: “Group meanings partially constitute people's identities in terms of cultural forms, social situation, and history that group members
political struggle between, on the one hand, white supremacy's attempts to construct an oppressable black subject and, on the other, resistant efforts to construct an “oppositional liberatory” identity (hooks paragraph 11).^39^39

Perhaps another example will make the issue more salient: imagine a black man who grew up in a black community but has since moved to an all white neighborhood. He works almost entirely with white people and embraces traditionally white values and beliefs. And, in fact, he often supports policies that inflict great suffering on poor black communities. Now imagine that this man runs for public office and courts black voters by appealing to their shared racial identity. And suppose as a result of all this that there is a popular joke that he is really just another white politician who takes power at the expense of black people.

So is this man black or white? Both seem reasonable answers in their own way. After all, our hypothetical politician does bear an awfully strong resemblance to many of the most salient features of whiteness. If we stopped insisting from the start that there be only one answer to this question, we might notice how much sense it makes to admit that he is both black and white. And this is not merely to redraw the ascription/identity division but instead to point out two ways that we can ascribe/identify racially:

know as theirs, because these meanings have been either forced upon them or forged by them or both” (44).^39^39

It would be a mistake to think that talk of a black subjectivity or, in my case, practical racial identities must lead to essentializing those identities, that is, reducing the meaning of a black practical identity to a set of necessary features. We should to construct an “oppositional and liberatory” identity, bell hooks argues, by coupling a critique of essentialism with an emphasis on the significance of “the authority of experience” (hooks paragraph 11). One can deny that there is such a thing as a black “essence,” yet still recognize the “way that black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle” (hooks paragraph 11). That is, we should deny that any specific meaning, feature, characteristic, etc. is a necessary condition for having a black visible or practical identity; however, that does not commit us to overlooking the fact that there are salient features and prevalent themes in the meaning of black subjectivity.
politician identifies with a black identity that fundamentally shaped his lived experiences, but he also identifies with a white identity insofar as he seeks to act characteristically white. Two senses of racial identity can support two different identities. Perhaps that strikes you as an absurd description to choose because we are used to the thought that racial identities are always singular. We allow that identity to be a hybrid—“She's half black and half white” or “He has a multiracial identity”—but it is always thought to be singular. The singularity of one’s racial identity is a widely held, if only assumed, view, but I will argue it is nevertheless not the best account we can offer of racial identities. In contrast, my next argument is that our racial concepts support at least two kinds of racial identifications—visible and practical.40

There are at least two distinct grammars at play in our racial discourses: we do not simply identify as but also identify with “our” race. I have introduced Alcoff's term “visible identity” to capture the former, in which we recognize that others ascribe a certain race to us and that this ascription determines how we are treated, particularly as it

40 Recall from the introduction, that these identities correspond to different ways we use our racial concepts. Alcoff uses the notion of a visible identity to emphasize that race is mediated through the visible, “working on both the inside and the outside, both on the way we read ourselves and the way others read us” (191). She goes on to conclude that this is “what is unique to racialized identities as opposed to ethnic and cultural identities,” which I agree with as long as we avoid taking this to entail a neglect of non-visible meanings or the rejection of those meanings as criteria of ascription (191). And Korsgaard uses the notion of a practical identity to ground an account of normativity in the relationship of the self to a particular identity, and how that provides the basis for endorsing specific reasons for belief/action. Korsgaard explains: "The conception of one's identity in question here is not a theoretical one, a view about what as a matter of inescapable scientific fact you are. It is better understood as a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. So I will call this a conception of your practical identity. Practical identity is a complex matter and for the average person there will be a jumble of such conceptions. You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone's lover or friend, and so on. And all of these identities give rise to reasons and obligations. Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids" (101). One way we racial identify is when we embrace group traditions, values, and ways of perceiving as our own. I suggest we view this as identification with a practical identity.
relates to social privileges and disadvantages. But we also identify *with* a race, in the sense that we embrace conceptual schemes, values, customs, beliefs, etc. that bear racial meanings. Though he overlooks the full significance of his insight, Taylor notes that, “to speak of a racial identity is to speak of an individual's *perspective on* and location in the field of racializing social forces [emphasis added]” (86). In other words, we think, perceive, and act in ways characteristic of some race. I have called this sense of racial identification a practical identity. In race scholarship, as well as in ordinary conversations, the duality of racial identities is clear. Also, we see examples of mismatches between visible and practical racial identities all the time. For instance, Clarence Thomas is visibly black but, arguably, practically white. Although we find ways to “handle” or explain away these problem cases, they make manifest the internal contradiction in our theory that race is a singular identity.

However, despite prevalent counter-examples, we are nevertheless captivated by the delusion that we are really only speaking of a single racial identity; that we only have one way to racially identify. So how is this myth propagated? Part of the confusion might simply be due to a grammatical oversight. We speak of race and employ the same racial concepts without paying close attention to the different grammars involved in those uses. We do not notice the switch from identifying *with* rather than *as* a member of a group, and so we come to believe that we do identify racially in only one way.

Consider Kwame Anthony Appiah's nominalist account of social identities, in which he distinguishes between four necessary components: *ascript*, *identification*, *treatment* and *norms of identification* (“How to decide if races exist” 365-366). Although
they need not be the same for everyone, criteria of ascription are the properties used to sort people into two broad groups, those we do and those we do not label X racial group (“The politics of identity” 16). That label carries with it certain expectations for how one can and should treat members of that racial group. While kindness is the common form of treatment for fellow in-group members, unkindness is an equally common treatment for out-group members (“The politics of identity” 16).

Ascription refers to a classification scheme that treats race as a population, as individual bodies sorted into classes independent of whether they identify as such; however, classification is not enough to constitute a social identity. Instead, there must also be some individuals who are labeled X that internalize that classification, such that “being an X figures in their thoughts, feelings, and acts” (“The politics of identity” 16). In other words, not only must people be identified as white but some of them must also identify with that whiteness. This leads to the fourth and final component: norms of identification, or norms of behavior for members of X racial group. Collective identities, like race, provide life-scripts—“narratives that people use in shaping their pursuits and in telling their life stories” (Ethics of Identity 108). In the process of identification, I shape my life according to the thought that some things are and are not appropriate aim or behavior for a person with my identity. Therefore, which labels or identities are available to me determine the life-scripts that I can choose from and use to construct my self-

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41 It is worth nothing that Appiah concurs with a point I raised earlier about the indeterminacy of visible criteria, which I consider a virtue of his view: “Indeed, people will rarely agree on exactly which properties X's must have. Here is scope for one kind of identity politics: Are F-to-M transgender people men? Are Muslims really French? This form of identity politics involves negotiation (not necessarily by way of the state) of the boundaries of various groups” (“The politics of identity” 16). My disagreement with Appiah's nominalist account of racial identities will mostly focus on a different feature of his view.
understanding and life projects (*Ethics of Identity* 66).

I object to the way Appiah distinguishes the notions of ascription and treatment from those of identification and life-scripts. His explanations of these concepts imply a strict division of semantic labor: ascription involves criteria that refer to the properties that determine racial membership, while *treatment* and *norms of identification* refer to the meanings, or consequences, of fitting into a certain racial schema. This way of conceptualizing social identities divides various uses of racial concepts into discrete sets of meaning, where some are involved in ascription and others are in treatment and norms of identification. Instead, I suggest we view *ascription, identity, treatment,* and *life-script* as different roles that (at least some of) the same racial meanings can be used to fulfill.

Modes of behavior that are usually part of what Appiah means by racial *treatment* or *life-scripts* are also sometimes used as criteria of ascription. For instance, I can imagine a potential employer look over the resume of a visibly white applicant, take notice of her extensive involvement in black political movements and graduate degree in African American Studies, only to reply, “We do not hire black people here. You just would not fit in.” And if I were surprised by the comment at all, it would only be because racism that manifests in explicit comments from a potential employer is a less frequent form of racism now than in days past. But the comment itself is cogent and quite meaningful: a black racial identity has been ascribed. The discriminatory behavior of the employer is the result of that ascription and, perhaps, also exacerbated by the ascription of a white visible identity—a combination that constitutes a threat to white privilege and, thus, something that must be policed. Noel Ignatiev describes the kind of violence
inflicted to (re)produce white subjectivity, “in a small town in Louisiana at the beginning of the century, five Sicilian storekeepers were lynched for violating the white man's code: they had dealt mainly with black people and associated with them on equal terms” (“Immigrants and whites” 17). Not surprisingly then, those with mixed visible and practical racial identities experienced the kind of extreme brutality considered normal for black people at the time. Hence, I suggest we think of ascription as referring to a role that a number of different racial meanings can play, rather than think of it as a set of discrete criteria distinct from other kinds of racial meanings. In other words, sometimes a person may use visible features to ascribe racial identities, while at other times, use behaviors that evidence a practical identity. This account has the benefit of accurately describing some of our actual uses of racial concepts uses that Appiah's view seems to overlook.

Second, remember, “By itself, mere classification does not produce what I mean by 'a social identity’” (“The politics of identity” 16). Classifications are relevant social identities because some people are called X and, for at least some of those people, being an X figures into their feelings, thoughts, and acts. Thus, Appiah's nominalist account binds identification to ascription to constitute a single racial identity—its second objectionable feature. One identifies by choosing an identity and life-script from the available options, that is, from the set of those whose criteria of ascription one satisfies. 42 So identification is constrained by ascription. Especially given that we commonly regard

42 I believe Iris Marion Young similarly conceptualizes racial identities: “What defines Black Americans as a social group is not primarily their skin color; some persons whose skin color is fairly light, for example, identify themselves as Black. Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces, and self-identification that define the group as a group” (44).
visible features as privileged criteria of ascription, this account would erase the
distinction in grammars between visibly and practically identifying. If one becomes
convinced, as I am, that we do in fact use racial concepts in these two distinct ways, and
that each has its own peculiar grammar, then one must reject a view of race that reduces it
to a single, unified social identity.

Some theorists expel the cultural meanings from the concept of race in an attempt
to “clarify” the differences between race and ethnicity. One might doubt relevance of that
distinction to my position on race since I have not defined a practical racial identity, let
alone race in its totality, as essentially a cultural identity. However, the notion of a
practical racial identity does encompass some cultural meanings and the overlap between
a practical racial identity and ethnicity is enough that to defend my conception of race I
need to answer the arguments against conceptualizing race as a cultural identity. Below
are several of those key arguments.

Ethnicity is understood primarily in terms of a shared culture and derivatively
about “blood ties.” In contrast, we have treated race as less about culture than how
appearance and ancestry provide conditions for some social value to be assigned and
modes of treatment prescribed. Given the substantial empirical overlap of the concepts
race and ethnicity, and the role of culture in shaping racial distinctions, some theorists
now speak of ethno-racial groupings; however, although one can ethnicize race and
racialize ethnicity, they are distinguishable notions. It can be useful to draw that
distinction since, “ethnic groups needn't be racialized, and the members of racial
populations needn't have ethnic ties to each other” (Taylor 57). Therefore, Taylor defends
a view of race that is distinguished from ethnicity; that is, he defends a non-ethnicized view of race as the proper way to regard the concept (Taylor 56).

Taylor argues that our common linguistic habits speak against collapsing race into ethnicity: in a well-publicized case of white brutality, Vincent Chin, an Asian American, was killed by men angered by the belief that the Japanese were taking control of the U.S. Economy. Referring to that case, Taylor asks, are you not inclined to say Vincent Chin was a victim of racism, not ethnocentrism?43 I certainly am inclined to answer that it was an act of racism. After all, “he was singled out . . . because he looked Asian” (Taylor 100). But I disagree that this example “[has] little to do with cultural questions” (Taylor 100). In fact, it is not even clear why Taylor believes this given his own reading of the violence: “Chin was killed because his assailants identified him with what was widely perceived as a Japanese hijacking of the US economy, which is of course a cultural matter” (Taylor 100). Taylor tries to explain this cultural feature away by pointing out that it was not some cultural marker, like clothes, or a cultural feature, like religion, that singled Chin out. Instead, it was that his body was read as Asian, as a sign of national origin. This is all true, but the full story is that he was singled out as Asian, ascribed an Asian identity, and then violently assaulted because the assailants were targeting Asians in response to a perceived Asian takeover of the U.S. Economy. Chin was attacked, not simply because he satisfied the visible criteria of an Asian identity, but because being Asian also had these other meanings, which motivated and “justified” the violence. To overlook, as Taylor does, the interpenetration of culture into non-cultural components of

43 See the wikipedia entry on Vincent Chin for a concise account of the racist circumstances of his death: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_Chin
race is to miss an essential part of the explanation of what an Asian identity meant in his own example.

Similarly, when we understand races entirely as (ethnic or political) groups or communities, we fail to accommodate the use of racial concepts to refer to *populations*, and vice versa. *Populations* consist of people sorted by processes even without their knowledge. These processes work by appeal to traits that people in the populations may be unaware of. In contrast, *groups* are the object and result of “we-intentions.” When people act in their capacities as members of a group, their race for example, the racial compatriots act on intentions that they share, with their racial group as their object. In a group, actions are coordinated and the motives behind those coordinated actions are not *my* motives but *ours*—with the upshot that someone cannot be unaware that he or she is in a group. Given that, Taylor and others conclude against conceptualizing race as a group, for example by conflating race and ethnicity (Taylor 104). Doing so would overlook the fact that in many cases members of a race do not see themselves as bound together or, at least, not in the ways “community” implies (Taylor 104).

Taylor is surely right to remind us that races cannot be entirely understood as groups, but we should simultaneously remark that neither can they be entirely understood as populations. Iris Marion Young makes similar arguments when she objects to conceptualizing race as an “aggregate.” Her argument is that “highly visible social groups such as Blacks or women are different from aggregates, or mere ‘combinations of people’ . . . A social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity” (44).

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44 Taylor, who employs them to argue that races are primarily to be understood as populations, endorses these definitions of population and group. See Taylor p. 104.

45 Iris Marion Young makes similar arguments when she objects to conceptualizing race as an “aggregate.”
emerge; insofar as a racial practical identity consists of features that we can choose to change and which are involved in race-based political movements, racial practical identities are coextensive with racial groups. For those reasons, I suggest we view race as sometimes referring to populations and sometimes, groups. This is accomplished by distinguishing between two racial grammars—the visible and the practical racial identifications.

The distinction between race and ethnicity is most persuasive only if we are forced to choose between explanations that entirely reduce race to populations or to cultural groups. But notice that that choice is only likely to emerge if the meanings of concepts are reducible to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Otherwise, we may simply embrace the fact that the sheer plurality of racial meanings will make either explanation—race as a population or group—individually inadequate. Recall that in the last chapter I argued at length for why we should focus on the actual uses of racial concepts rather than the explicit definitions one might be offered. I will only reiterate that I choose to focus on the plural uses of racial concepts because I am interested in how our racial identities are actually inhabited, not simply how we happen to understand ourselves to be inhabiting them.

Following Wittgenstein, I characterized the relationships between the uses of a racial concept as a family resemblance. Each use finds its life in the contextual connections it has to the concepts it is nested with. And within that network of associated concepts, we do find a number of cultural components such that separating race and ethnicity has the downside of excluding many uses that constitute the meanings of our
contemporary, robust notion of race. In other words, we overlook entire categories of behaviors that constitute and enact our racial norms, which means we lose sight of a dimension of our racialized reality and, thereby, the racism that pervades it.

Ethnicity is used to capture the cultural domain in which a good deal of racialized oppression is carried out. If we want to understand how systems of white supremacy work, we cannot settle merely for a description of the unequal distribution of resources. That is, we do not get the full picture if we think of racism merely in terms of the probability that a particular body will be paid less, imprisoned, etc. Instead, racism also works by constructing racial meanings that facilitate these and other injustices. At least one technique involves, “the dominant meanings of a society render[ing] the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other” (Young 58-59). Young refers to this form of oppression as cultural imperialism.

Similarly, Ignatiev and Garvey, as the editors of Race Traitor, argue that people are not socially favored because they are white, but rather they are identified as white because they are favored. Hence, they suggest that we understand the white race as consisting of “those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society” (“Abolish the White Race by any means necessary” 9-10). Their account of race constructs the meaning of whiteness around its position in the social order, rather than relegating that oppressive feature to mere happenstance. Which is why Ignatiev and Garvey can conclude that, “so long as the white race exists, all movements against racism are doomed to fail” (“Abolish the White Race by any means necessary” 10). Under their
interpretation, the white race exists only if there are sufficient numbers who occupy the oppressive social position that defines whiteness. If enough so-called whites defect, white skin will cease to be a reliable determinant of behavior, which will “set off tremors” that lead to the collapse of the white race (see the chapter of Race Traitor entitled “Abolish the White Race by any means necessary” 10). For my purpose, the point to take note of here is that *white* means occupying a certain social privilege, characterized in part by the domination of white cultural expressions. *White* is also understood in terms of the prevalence of a certain culture of dominating non-white people. These are meaningful uses of racial concepts that highlight their relationship to racialized oppression, but these connections and insights are obscured by views of race that reduce its meaning to visible identities and/or populations.

Emphasis on visible identities also obscures how identity-based activism resists systems of oppression. Identity politics is not primarily motivated as an advocacy of the value of a visible, physical feature of non-white peoples. And it does not involve simply a demand for recognition but instead the specific demand to be recognized *as* a particular identity. This form of recognition calls for the affirmation of a group's identity as valuable. Affirmation of that kind sometimes calls for appraising some feature of an identity differently. Other times, recognition requires of people that they disavow dominant meanings ascribed to an oppressed group's identity and replace them with meanings that are constructed and affirmed by members of the oppressed group. The point here is that while the visible meanings of race are rarely the target of coordinated political struggle, practical identities are what those political struggles are often over—
the self-understandings of the group.

Visible identities specify the subject of identity politics (i.e., who constitutes the group that participates in those political projects) while the practical identity is the object of identity politics (i.e., the thing being defended and transformed by the identity group). “Practical racial identities” is a term that distinguishes a collection of racial meanings that are key to understanding identity politics. A semantic analysis of race that does not support a visible/practical identity distinction will obfuscate the operation of identity politics as a form of resistance to race-based oppression. Therefore, to the degree that practical identities must be understood as at least partially cultural, drawing sharp boundaries between the concepts of race and ethnicity has the consequence of misrepresenting the way that identity politics critically engages systems of oppression.

Similarly, we risk overlooking resistance to racist oppression that originates inside whiteness itself: Ignatiev and Garvey distinguish their “new abolitionism” from what we normally mean by “anti-racism.” Whereas anti-racism admits the natural existence of races, the new abolitionists challenge the institutions that reproduce race as a social category through acts of race treason. For example, copwatch programs, which are campaigns to observe and record police conduct will, if properly conducted, “lead to confrontations with the thin blue line of force that defines black people as a criminal class” (Ignatiev and Garvey 3–4). They have in mind a confrontation provoked by police brutality and other misconduct—acts that express and normalize the subservient status afforded non-whites. Not all cops are racist. Not all racist cops are violent. But for the many cops that are racist, they can be said to exhibit white practical identities. Even if
there is reasonable debate about how well brutality characterizes the way police engage with impoverished peoples, violence against the oppressed is common enough that it is needed to explain the racialized experience of many people of color.

Police abuse is a manifestation of white privilege, since white people are privileged by disproportionately not being targets of that abuse. It is also a technique for securing white privilege insofar as police abuse enforces the racist hierarchies of our society. Whites demonstrate their affiliation with a white practical identity by being complicit in police abuse of oppressed people. A white person who joins a copwatch program becomes a judge of sorts. She enacts norms that challenge white privilege by acknowledging that some police have a propensity for racist violence and their culpability for that abuse. With her judgmental gaze and the act of keeping records of police actions, a white person signals to the police that she disavows white privilege and her role in its preservation. This kind of behavior places oneself in a potentially antagonistic relationship with the police and thereby risks confrontations with them. And given the police are those who wield the power of lawful violence, these confrontations can involve substantial risks for the civilians involved—the white citizen risks receiving the oppressive treatment normally reserved for non-whites. As such, the whites involved in these copwatch programs have committed acts of race treason because they repudiate protection of their white skin by stepping out to patrol the police rather than remain complicit in police abuse of non-white people (Ignatiev and Garvey 4). If race is reduced to a single, unified identity, then we lose sight of this resistant use of racial practical identities: a betrayal of whiteness by those who, although visibly white, choose to align
their perspectives and interests with non-white peoples.

I reject a race-ethnicity dichotomy because it would obscure the very phenomena that we want to capture with our race-talk, as it pertains to racialized oppression and resistance. Instead, our explanation of race should embrace the fact that it has both cultural and non-cultural meanings. In other words, some uses of racial concepts are best explained as referring to populations, while other correct uses treat race as a group. Neither is fully sufficient on its own, but both are necessary to tell the full semantic story.

To summarize this chapter, we tested two common myths about race against our actual uses of racial concepts. I rebuffed on several levels the notion that our racial identity is permanent. If the permanence and, thus, naturalness of race was to find support in our form of life, it was most likely to be the consequence of race's visible component since these features seem most stable. However, even visible racial identities fail to justify our common but delusional view that we have a permanent racial membership.46 Ancestry cannot fare any better, since there is no principled way to decide how to judge an ancestor's racial identity or how to weight it in determining the identity of descendents. No matter whether we chose to apply old or contemporary criteria of ascription to an ancestor, something important in our racial norms was left out of the picture. And that is how we first came to suspect the common-sense notion that each of us has precisely one racial identity. In actuality, we use racial concepts to racially identify others and ourselves in two distinct ways. I called these our visible and practical racial

46 This point should not to be confused with the even stranger claim that we all undergo racial transformations. Many people do not transform, but if one's racial membership does remain unchanged for a lifetime, that permanence is a historically contingent fact and not the logically necessitated fact it is commonly purported to be.
identities to highlight the different kinds of racial meanings found in our ordinary language. As I already argued, one virtue of the view I have proposed is that it captures a richer depiction of our racial norms, including both race-based oppression and resistance.

We can draw several implications from this analysis. First, what allowed the Irish to buy their way into white privilege was not merely the conceptual possibility of recasting whiteness as a visible identity that included them; they had to transform themselves into white subjects for whites to incorporate them into their racial group. That is, they created themselves as practically white before their visible whiteness could operate as a criterion of ascription. So the contestability of visible race already makes suspect the claim that practical identities are naturalized or constrained by one's visible identity. In this sense, Ignatiev's historical analysis anticipates the distinction between visible and practical racial identities; it also gives us reason to believe these two racial identities can diverge through conscious efforts.

Second, all of this points to the essential contestability of racial concepts. In fact, I suggest that the criticisms I have offered demonstrate that racial concepts are contestable and already contested in ways that go far beyond the narrow limitations one might have supposed. I suggest that a politics of identity commonly recognizes only a limited range of contestable regions in their racial concepts: the norms of identification, treatment, and whether one racially identifies are all given some attention. However, the notions of ascription and its connection to processes of identification are given scant criticism. The criteria of ascription are usually left defined as properties, that is, visible features, rather than also encompassing a practical identity. Racial identity remains something one can
opt to identify with, but others who ascribe those identities to us determine the options one chooses from. So the differences and disconnectedness of visible and practical racial identities are rarely perceived and even less frequently theorized.

In our philosophical investigation of racial concepts, we continued to encounter instability—the consequence of there being sites of actual and potential political struggle. This essential contestability, as I have already suggested, is a feature of the family resemblance structure of its meaning. Though the meanings of all words have this structure, essentially contested concepts are more obvious about it. For these concepts, we cannot specify an invariant set of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper application. Connolly uses the phrase *cluster concept* to emphasize the fact that broad ranges of criteria apply. He describes cluster concepts as complex in several ways. First, an act or practice need only have some large set of these criteria grouped together to qualify as an instance of that concept (Connolly 14). This internal complexity is only one dimension of its open-texture; a second is that “each criterion itself is relatively complex and open” as they make reference to new concepts and can be interpreted in subtly different ways. So to clarify a cluster concept—like *politics*, *race*, and *sex/gender*—we must elaborate the “broader conceptual system within which it is implicated” (Connolly 14). And cluster concepts are open-textured in yet a third dimension: “We often find that various people jointly employing such a cluster concept weight the importance of shared criteria differently (Connolly 14). It is these characteristics of cluster concepts that provide the “space within which such contests [over the proper interpretation of partly shared ideas] emerge” (Connolly 14-15). What kind of reasons can someone offer for
their “solution” to the question of how to label heterogeneously raced ancestries? And on what basis do we evaluate and choose between these competing reasons?

A person will often link her use to the past uses of that concept. She might integrate her use into a narrative about the concept's life to show how seamlessly it follows from that meaningful past. Picking features and uses of the racial concept to treat as criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of a use, each person will show how her use is justified as consistent with the rules governing that racial identity. But past uses will underdetermine how the concept should be used in this case. So the choice of which of those features to group under the concept's meaning is political—a point of view is taken and a set of norms are thereby endorsed. For instance, the Black Panthers and Aryan Brotherhood might disagree on whether one black grandparent and three white ones makes someone white, but that is to be expected given their different political views and sense of which answer would best serve their group's interests: a high level of racial “purity” might be feasible when there is a sufficiently large population of potential members, but when there is not, do we really expect that a race-based group, vying for power, will not adjust the eligibility standards to include more people?

Importantly, these changes in meaning are changes in norms. We constitute new norms by systematically behaving in new ways. So changes in the meaning of racial identities corresponds to changes in behaviors by us, and I am interested in how those new conceptions and the behaviors they involve are intelligible ways of speaking about race. To build on Connolly's depiction of our political discourse, I have suggested here that a justification for a racial identification amounts to a reason for projecting a concept,
and that will usually involve arguing that your current application sufficiently resembles some other uses of the term on which we do agree. This point, I think, is a clear insight of Ignatiev's book: pigmentation was a much less salient feature in the complex meaning of whiteness than it is currently; therefore, light pigmentation was not sufficient for being white, but skin color was something that whites and the Irish had in common so it was one access point for inclusion into whiteness. But to justify their claim for recognition as white, the Irish needed to bear a greater similarity to those in the dominant group—they needed to satisfy more of the more salient features of whiteness. The solution to this problem turned out to be a change in the Irish's social positions. Through various techniques of excluding blacks from jobs, terrorizing blacks, and supporting the cause of slavery, the Irish inhabited social roles that became increasingly similar to whites, which altered the Irish’s conceptual proximity to whiteness. We can draw at least two implications here: conceptual changes of this sort involve vast behavioral and relational changes. And physical characteristics have not always been, and really are not even now, the primary criteria for racial identities.

A warning should be offered here: though we may feel as though we make progress with understanding race, it is a mistake to think of this as getting closer to some kernel of truth. I do not mean to remove all ground for criticizing a conception of race, but rather to suggest that since these identities are social and thereby malleable, no set of criteria for racial identities can be final. Racial concepts are essentially contested.47

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47 It is worth reiterating that I mean racial concepts are currently being essentially contested, though the arguments I have made at least suggest the real possibility that racial concepts are essentially contestable, that is, have always been essentially contested concepts. My arguments may not be sufficient to demonstrate that race has in fact always been explicitly contested but I do think the arguments strongly suggest that race has always been capable of being contested. In this chapter, I
Critique can take the form of dissolving confusions over these identities by deconstructing assumption—features of the identity that we naturalize—that are in fact contingent and, thereby, alterable. In the next chapter, we consider the ethical and political implications of maintaining our current picture of race. After outlining the harms that that picture poses for contemporary social justice movements, I will conclude with a number of vital question that this critical project should prompt us to pursue.
CHAPTER 4

In summary, race has a complicated history. Once thought to be a biological identity, it is now regarded as socially constructed. Despite compelling refutation of the biological significance of races, the notion that racial identities are essentially determined by biological ancestry still holds sway in our society. Even amongst dedicated social constructivists, there is an imprint of race's semantic past: skin color is mistakenly treated as a necessary and (usually) sufficient condition for racial ascription. I have suggested that this focus on skin color undergirds the common myth of race as a unified and fixed identity that is determined at birth.

To test this myth, I have argued that we should investigate race by attending to our ordinary uses of racial concepts. In doing so, we have not encountered only biological meanings, but rather a fairly heterogeneous set of uses. And some of these uses are involved in political contestations of racial identities. I have tried to make sense of this assortment of contested meanings by distinguishing two ways we racial identify: a visible and a practical racial identity. Each refers to a different kind of identification, governed by its own distinct grammar. And especially in the last chapter, I argued that we could inhabit our racial identities in unconventional ways that could nevertheless be conceived to sufficiently accord with our current racial practices. For instance, a visibly white man

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48 Each kind of identification involves using racial concepts in a particular kind of way. So by “grammar,” I am referring to the rules of application that distinguish the uses of racial concepts between visible and practical identifications. For instance, the grammar of a visible black identity permits the intelligible use of “black” to refer to skin color but not a set of political commitments. And the opposite could be said about the grammar of a practical black identity.

49 Certainly there will also be semantic dissimilarities between new and old meanings, but the point is that these new identities can be made intelligible as racial despite the break from tradition.
may intelligibly identify as black as an expression of his practical racial identity. He may choose to identify in this way as part of an attempt to cultivate an oppositional consciousness or to signal to others that he is an ally of oppressed peoples. The point here is that as essentially contested concepts, racial identities can be intelligibly projected in ways that our contemporary understandings of race would predict as impossible. The distinction between visible and practical racial identities may make it evident that there are alternative ways to inhabit our racial identities, but the full extent of those possibilities is unclear given the limited attention thus far paid to exploring them in theory and practice.

My impression is that most contemporary understandings of race assume the myth of race I have criticized. That is, definitions of race often fail to make the distinction I have suggested between visible and practical racial identities. And insofar as critics of oppression conflate visible and practical racial identities, social resistance perpetuates the equivocation and unification of these distinguishable families of racial meanings—the visible and the practical racial identities. Critical resistance then endorses and, in so doing, normalizes the unification of visible and practical racial identities.

What are the political shortcomings of that resistance? Identity politics currently

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50 Of course, that the identification is intelligible does not make it correct, since the meanings of practical racial identities are essentially contested and, with them, the standards for correctly applying those racial concepts. And although these points will receive more attention elsewhere in this conclusion, I would like to acknowledge here that we should be skeptical of racial identifications like these (visibly white people identifying themselves as a practically non-white identity) because these unconventional racial identifications risk amounting to nothing more than an appropriation of marginalized identities by whites who do not in fact act as authentic allies of those they purport to identify with. There can and, again, should be debates about what behaviors a visibly white male would need to perform to evidence a practical racial identity that ought be labeled “black,” “Latino/a,” or “Native American,” or any other racial term. Performing these practical racial identities may include but is far from limited to donning the appropriate racial label.
involves strategies that leaves the assumption that visible and practical racial identities are causally, or at least logically, linked firmly in place. This strategic implication is ethically and politically problematic: the continued pervasiveness of that assumed unity of visible and practical racial identities enables the fact that someone is visibly white to be a reason for adopting and performing a white practical identity. To see why this implication follows, consider the form of the arguments characteristically made within a politics of difference.

Generally the argumentative strategies employed in identity politics have the following form: norms have sometimes been universalized under the guise of being racially impartial even though they actually reflect a white practical identity; instead of being universalizable, whiteness is simply one of many particular identities and, therefore, ought be regarded as such by recognizing that whiteness is historically oppressive, socially contingent, and epistemologically unprivileged. Under this view, racism is portrayed as the universalization of a particular (white) identity—either by the traditional racist who proclaims whiteness to be ideal or by those who try to universalize white norms that have been coded as racially neutral. According to this notion of racism, inhabiting whiteness is not seen as problematic, as long as the person who inhabits it understands it as merely a particular identity. In fact, contemporary views of race are perfectly consistent with the thought that it is simply natural for visibly white bodies to affirm and enact white practical identities.

The concept of racism is not commonly thought to encompass the performance of a white practical identity. However, the fact of that omission is not sufficient reason
against our now using racism to include that performance—especially given that racism is an essentially contested concept that has been successfully altered at least once already. Recall that while “racism” has traditionally been strictly applied to person-to-person discriminatory acts that are motivated by hatred of another race, the concept now also includes the notion of institutional racism. We should not undervalue the significance of such a conceptual change: as new concepts gain currency with us, we come to see phenomena differently. In the case of institutional racism, the concept of racism is used to illuminate the racial discrimination within social institutions. So the expansion of “racism” to include application on the institutional level permits us to capture the dimensions of racist oppression that take a form unlike the traditional one. I suggest we consider whether to project racism in new ways based upon an evaluation of the limitations of the concept of racism—both in its traditional and institutional senses—for analyzing the perpetuation of white privilege.

My argument is that focus on the institutional level in analyzing race is essential but insufficient. Highlighting racism on the institutional level mutes details of behaviors on the individual level that are neither traditionally racist (i.e., not a discriminatory act motivated by a hatred of another race) nor irrelevant to racial oppression. Specifically, institutional racism does not easily accommodate analysis of white practical identities as ethically and politically problematic. White practical identities, enacted in everyday behavior, pose a central problem for resistance to white supremacy. In Possessive Investment in Whiteness, George Lipsitz argues that public prejudices, manifest on the institutional level, operate in conjunction with the private prejudices of individuals to
create a *possessive investment in whiteness* (vii). He writes that

white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity . . . The term *investment* denotes time spent on a given end, and this book also attempts to explore how social and cultural forces encourage white people to expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness (vii).

Lipsitz certainly does discuss the significance of institutional features; however, one of the major intellectual contributions of his text is the development of the notion of a possessive investment in whiteness. He writes that the concept

stress[es] the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society, to connect attitudes to interests, to demonstrate that white supremacy is usually less a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt and more a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility (*Possessive Investment in Whiteness* vii-viii).

The use of *possessive investment in whiteness* emphasizes the non-institutional, individual attitudes and commitments that undergird systems of white oppression. But Lipsitz's point is not to return us to the view of racism that reduces all racist oppression to the culmination of discrete, hate inspired acts of discrimination. Instead, he describes a contemporary view of whiteness that often expresses itself in the coded language of a benign and, even, anti-racist whiteness.

For instance, whites support tax cuts that devastate the budgets of low-income schools and, thereby, push those impoverished schools even closer to structural and institutional collapse. Simultaneously, white parents mobilize to protect their own children's schools from the effects of those drastic budget cuts. These parents mobilize to raise enormous sums of money so that their children's almost-exclusively white schools
can hire additional teachers, buy equipment, and fund academic programs and extracurricular activities. These behaviors have the effect of preserving the unequal access to the educational privileges enjoyed by their children. Children of color largely attend low-income schools. Because these schools serve communities with less economic power, the schools depend more heavily on taxes than white schools that also have access to significant private donations. So tax cuts spell certain doom for low-income schools, while middle-class and wealthy white schools survive the cuts with the private donations from the parents of their students. This system of funding and tax-cuts ensures that children of color are in a worse position to compete with white children for business, social, and educational opportunities.

Additionally, white parents bequeath their wealth to their white children, who thereby inherit privilege. Over their lifetimes, the children will sometimes add to that inherited wealth, then pass it on to their white children, and so on. The comparative advantage this offers white people is significant: one-fourth of white families receive a bequest compared with one in twenty black families (Lipsitz 108). Of the white people who inherit money, more than half receive more than $10,000, while half of black people who inherit get less than $1000 (Lipsitz 108). As a result, whites inherit seven times more money than blacks do, per capita. Greater inheritance has also contributed to a $30,000 disparity in the net financial assets owned by a typical white family and those of a typical black family (Lipsitz 108). Between inherited wealth and differences in the appreciation of property values, “it [is] impossible for most blacks to make up through wages the disparities they encounter from the racialized distribution of wealth” (Lipsitz 108). The
structural disadvantages for black Americans are thereby preserved.

When white parents bequeath wealth and opportunities for increased earnings to their children (either by helping their progeny gain valuable employment or educational experience), these and similar behaviors are rarely called racist. However, it is clear that these actions and inactions alike are significant in the reproduction of white supremacist oppression. That is, the act of recycling privileges back into the visibly or practically white community—the omission of investing privilege in marginalized communities—produces the unequal distribution and control of privileges that constitute the very conditions of oppression. To capture the racial significance of these behaviors within

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51 My suggestion that we project “racism” to include these acts of “omission” raises an interesting philosophical question about the causal and ethical significance of acts of “omission” within systems. Though a fully developed enquiry into the moral significance of these omissions is beyond the scope of this thesis, I would like to make several points: first, we should not be quick to assume that the standards applicable to ethical responsibility are the same ones for assessing political responsibility. So an answer to the question of whether one is ethically accountable for omissions might not also resolve the question of political responsibility. Within the scope of this thesis, I cannot adequately investigate the differences and similarities between our concepts of ethics and politics, but I do think there are reasons to initially suspect that the same standards of responsibility would apply: ethics and politics play overlapping but different roles in our form of life. For instance, ethics often means the principles that dictate how one ought to live her life, while politics commonly refers to practices in which groups negotiate and vie for power (and that sometimes means anything from holding political office to having lots of wealth). So perhaps political responsibility could mean something like the responsibility we have for our choices of who to politically affiliate with. In the same sense that I may be responsible for who I pick as friends, we may say I am responsible for the race I affiliate with (i.e., the practical racial identity I embrace). This notion of responsibility would be premised on the thought that one’s choices in who to spend time with, who to help, and who to mimic reflects an important and valuable feature of a person’s character. If different standards apply to ethical and political responsibility, then someone may have political obligations to redress a wrong even if she is not ethically responsible for that wrong having occurred. Regardless of whether the little I have said on this possible distinction was compelling, I think the possible difference between ethical and political responsibility are worth considering, especially as they pertain to evaluating practical white identities.

Second, for what it is worth, I think one could compellingly argue that the act/omission distinction, if it holds any water, is invalid when applied to systems analysis. Sometimes the omission of something is precisely what triggers an effect. Systems involve a set of roles that, if fulfilled, enable the system to function. These roles can be fulfilled in multiple ways and, as long as they are, the system functions. In the case of systems of white privilege, its basic roles or needs are fulfilled so long as privileges are largely kept away from people of color. Whether this is accomplished via laws that explicitly discriminate, employers who only hire whites for prestigious jobs, or people doing ordinary things they think are neutral with respect to racism (e.g., expressing love for one’s white child by setting her up with elite jobs and education, for instance, is thought to neither undermine nor perpetuate racist oppression), the effect is the same: privileges are recycled into whiteness and the conditions that

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systems of white privilege, I suggest we conceptualize racism to encompass the performance of a white practical identity.

So-called white privileges are being reinvested in the white community. But the community that enjoys white privileges is not coextensive with the visibly white community: though most people of privilege will be visibly white, people who are not visibly white—but nevertheless practically white—will also benefit significantly from systems of white supremacy. By helping to exclude other outsiders from access to white privileges and opportunities, non-white people can become “active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards” (Lipsitz viii). This fact has led bell hooks to prefer the phrase white supremacist thinking to “racism” because it encompasses people of color who have racist mindsets (Teaching Community 28). White practical identities, possessive investment in whiteness, and white supremacist thinking similarly depict the community that benefits from white privilege as constituted by a range of visible identities. Another upshot of these terminologies is not just that we notice visibly non-white people who benefit from white privilege, but we also come to better notice some visibly white people who have been (at least partially) excluded from the community of white privilege. Violence is used to police our racial boundaries, including punishing visibly white people who fail to exhibit a white practical identity.

Examples of that violence abound. The vast majority of those cases involve non-white people as the targets of that violence. And the messages the violence conveys are clear: to survivors of the violence, conform to the norms that white oppression has prescribed for your race or else; and the message to everyone else: the norms of our constitue oppression are reproduced.
society of white privilege will be enforced at drastic costs to those who step out of line. I would like to consider in detail two stories of racial violence against whites as acts of policing racial boundaries. Both stories are rather eventful, but there are countless others that go less noticed in our ordinary everyday lives.\textsuperscript{52}

In the introduction to \textit{Possessive Investment in Whiteness}, Lipsitz writes with reverence about Bill Moore, a white man, who was murdered as he began his solitary civil rights march from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. Moore had been raised in the Deep South. He had moved to Baltimore for the “express purpose of becoming active in the front lines of the civil rights movement” and was working as a post office employee when, in 1962, he was outraged by Mississippi governor Ross Barnett’s resistance to the desegregation of the University of Mississippi (Lipsitz ix). Moore decided to respond: “Playing on his identity as a postal worker,” writes Lipsitz, “[Moore] decided to ‘deliver a letter’ expressing support for integration to Governor Barnett” (ix). Wearing placards on his chest and back that read, “Equal Rights for All: Mississippi or Bust” and “Black and White: Eat at Joe’s,” Moore marched into Alabama with his letter for Barnett. He was killed near the city of Attalia in 1963. He was killed for

\textsuperscript{52} For example, white classmates will mock and harass a white kid with a mostly black friend group, or one who wears baggy clothes, or prefers black clothing brands like fubu. Perhaps they even call him racial slurs—“he’s a wigger!” These acts of harassment are whites’ exertion of power in an effort to coerce a disobedient white into conformity. I do not mean to suggest that having a mostly black friend group or dressing in a certain way is sufficient (and at least in the case of clothes, even necessary) for cultivating a black practical identity. Nevertheless, I think this is an example of violence against a non-white practical identity. Cases of harassment like this one are only superficially about the black friend group, baggy clothes, and fubu shirts. What really drives the white’s rage is the thought that these visual features are physical representations of an affiliation or identification with a black practical identity. It is the practical identification that threatens the violent whites, not the visible one. The behavior disrupts their sense of normal. It is disorderly. And so it seems to signal revolt—whites think they have lost a potential ally in the disobedient white, which makes many of them anxious that the security of their white privileges might be waning.
being a white man who was not acting white.

Kingsley Clarke tells the story of Brady Heiser, who was a white high school student who was harassed for betraying white solidarity. Brady was on the high school football team in Crown Point, Indiana. Before a game against neighboring Merrillville, the Crown Point coach Brad Smith said of Jamel Williams, the Merrillville’s black running back, “We’ll stop him by putting watermelon, fried chicken and barbecued ribs on the sideline” (Clarke 40). Brady was the only player to quit the team in response to the coach’s racism. Clarke describes the reaction of his white neighbors and classmates:

Thirty Crown Point students, most of the football team, jammed onto the Heiser’s small Main Street lawn. They serenaded the Heisers with the school song in a crude attempt to shame Brady back onto the team. When Brady came out of the house and confronted them, they called him a nigger lover. When he stood his lonely ground facing thirty schoolmates, they threatened: ‘You’re dead. You’re not gonna see tomorrow’ (Clarke 40).

At Brady’s almost entirely white high school, he was cast aside by most of his peers. Harassed and isolated, Brady was punished for challenging white racism. In the eyes of those that called him a nigger lover, who shunned him, and who threatened bodily harm, Brady Heiser had broken off his allegiance to whiteness. And at the threat to the white solidarity that ensures white privilege, his classmates retaliated in an effort to bring him back into conformity and, at least implicitly, to dissuade others from following his lead.

Notice the prominent role that white practical identities play in these accounts of oppression: whites punish other whites who do not perform a white practical identity. And the reason for that is clear: to maintain white dominance, people must reproduce the unequal distribution of privileges by recycling them back into control of the white
community. In other words, they must perform a white practical identity. Additionally, the privileged community I speak of consists predominantly of people who are visibly white but also includes some who are not. Those members who are visibly non-white earn their place of privilege by performing a white practical identity. For those reasons, I think white practical identities ought be featured more prominently in our conceptualizations of whiteness and racial oppression than they currently are. This would require that we see certain modes of being as racist, rather than only those behaviors motivated by hate or feelings of racial superiority.

If we characterize racial oppression at least partially in terms of the reproduction of unequal distributions of privileges and access to opportunities, then the motivations behind the acts that reproduce those oppressive conditions should be regarded as only minimally relevant. And they should be less important than the consequences of people’s behaviors in our conceptualization of racism because people can be treated unjustly for an infinite number of reasons. That is, any number of attitudes could motivate oppressive behavior and any number of beliefs could give rise to reasons to act in ways that produce oppressive social conditions. I have tried to capture this possibility by shifting our attention to the role white practical identities play. It is a virtue of a view of racism that it encompasses a wide variety of racist techniques, motivations, and belief sets.

53 Convincing performances of a white practical identity is not necessarily sufficient for a visibly non-white person to remove herself from the matrices of racial oppression. In a culture where visible markers are a salient, let alone predominant, criteria of ascription, a visibly non-white body will always potentially be interpreted through a racialized lens and, thus, become the target of oppressive treatment. Nevertheless, we go wrong to discount or even downplay the significance of performing a white practical identity in gaining access to the privileges that constitute membership in the white community. Remember, I am not appealing to the sense of whiteness as a population defined strictly in terms of a visible identity. Rather, I mean something closer to the social, hierarchical location of whiteness, since it is this relationship of domination that motivates a good deal of our normative interest in race.
White practical identities are politically objectionable and, to say the least, ethically questionable. To perform that identity is to place oneself into a role within the systems of racial oppression. Performing that identity serves to distribute privileges in racially disparate ways. That is, this performance serves a functional role in systems that oppress visibly non-white bodies and practically non-white subjectivities. Resistance to racial oppression, therefore, must involve challenges to white practical identities, both to their meaning and to their being performed, especially by those people who are visibly white.

The problem, then, is that our contemporary views of race motivate and determine political efforts that preserve racism and efforts to contest the oppressive construction of racial meanings without disrupting the crucial connection between white skin and a white practical identity. Since both of these political efforts lead to the reproduction of the conditions of oppression, I think we ought to reject our contemporary views of race and instead conceptualize and inhabit our racial identities differently, and thus give rise to a more radical political resistance. This will require radical changes in our behavior so as to constitute an alteration in our racial concepts, norms, and, thereby, the racial dimensions of our social reality.

Accordingly, I suggest we begin to radically reconsider how constrained we

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54 A compelling causal account can be given to connect performing a white practical identity to producing the symbolic and material conditions of oppression. However, I recognize that might not be sufficient to justify the moral culpability of a person who performs that identity, given that level or kind of contribution to the operation of systems of oppression. Nevertheless, I think it significant that we can offer an intelligible causal story that connects supposedly non-racist acts/omissions (like whites giving money to the predominantly white schools their children attend, rather than supporting the schools of impoverished and oppressed peoples) to the reproduction of the conditions of racist oppression. That we can offer a reasonable account suggests the need to reconsider our ethical evaluation of white acts that we might currently think are nothing more than morally neutral omissions or too causally indirect to matter much consequentially.
actually are in choosing our practical racial identities. Am I, a visibly white male, so
constrained by my visible identity or my current white practical identity that I cannot
racially become anything else? Do I have such little choice over these racial identities
that I will forever be both visibly and practically white? These are the kinds of questions
that I think we should be asking. And no matter what our previous answers might have
been, I suggest my analysis of race prompts us to reconsider these questions.

However, the arguments I have advanced here do not point to a definitive,
preferable alternative, or any clear alternative at all, to our current ways of inhabiting
race. This thesis has argued that our ethically problematic understanding of race is
inconsistent with the actual meanings of our racial concepts, but that only shows that our
racial identities can be intelligibly expressed in other ways, given our existing racial
norms. Several questions immediately emerge, but without obvious answers: can we
appeal to these other meanings to successfully alter how we ordinarily understand our
racial identities? What are the limits of intelligible racial identifications? How
constrained are we in appropriating our racial concepts to transgress and transform those
limits? And what is involved in cultivating and performing non-white practical identities,
particularly for people who are in fact visibly white.

Some writers and activists are already involved in considering these and related
questions, several of whom I have already considered in this chapter—both George
Lipsitz and bell hooks develop definitions of racism that bring white thinking (or what I
call a white practical identity) to the forefront. They work to reveal the ways that race-
based oppression is maintained by ordinary behaviors that are commonly treated as
neutral with regards to systems of white privilege.

To conclude this chapter, I will discuss the writings of Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, and Cressida Heyes because they too are exceptional examples of the kinds of philosophical work I think should be pursued: Guinier and Torres theorize a political conception of race intended to galvanize cross-racial political alliances. Theirs is a provocative vision for race that effectively makes skin color and ancestry irrelevant to how we may racially identify—much as I have tried to do through the notion of practical racial identities.

Heyes considers the possibility of changing race—something that I have argued does occur in some forms (e.g., the Irish) and is at least intelligible in other forms (e.g., a visibly and practically white person who chooses to cultivate a non-white practical identity). Since I have done little to show how radically one can change her racial identity, Heyes’ arguments may help to fill in this gap. Hers is a pursuit into the same philosophical questions that I intend my thesis to prompt. Second, the Heyes article is important for my purposes because it discusses the possibility of changing race in connection with the possibility of changing sex. As such, explication of her arguments will allow me to return to the comparison of gender and race that I began in the introduction to this thesis.

In *The Miner's Canary*, Guinier and Torres radically challenge our ordinary conceptions of racial identities. They introduce the concept of *political race* to “dislodge race from this color-of-one's-skin terminology” (13). This semantic extension alters racial identities to function as a political framework reminiscent of what I have suggested by a
racial practical identity. Political race is intended to conceptually capture an association between those who are oppressed as visibly black and a democratic social movement aimed at effecting changes that extend beyond any identity group (Guinier and Torres 12). To clarify what they mean by “democratic social movement,” Guinier and Torres discuss Texas’ top-10 percent rule as an example of a political achievement that benefits both historically oppressed racial groups and the historically oppressed class of rural whites—both groups had been inhibited from accessing higher education (Guinier and Torres 106). The top-10 percent rule ensures that significantly more non-white and rural white students will earn acceptance to top-tier undergraduate institutions. And since it took the support of both Texas’ Hispanic and rural white populations to pass the legislation, this is an example of a democratic social movement that effects social change within a broader sense of community—in other words, their efforts did not simply effect change for a specific group.

I introduced the concept of racial practical identities to capture the association between the lives produced by the visibility of a racial identity and the oppressive/emancipatory potential of the practical sense of racial identities. Guinier and Torres write that political race is

aspirational and activist, signaling the need to rebuild a movement for social change informed by the canary's critique. Political race seeks to construct a new language to discuss race, in order to rebuild a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others (12).

Clearly then, the notion of political race, like my use of the term practical racial identities, refers to something that grounds political action, that is, this conception of
identity emphasizes its role in interpreting political phenomena and understanding one's political interests in terms of a racial identification. Political race is understood in terms of political relationships and group interests. Race and politics are configured as an action or set of actions rather than as things (Guinier and Torres 15-16). Since “it is not about being but instead is about doing,” I suggest Guinier and Torres are referring to a practical identity (Guinier and Torres 15-16). On their account, a person's political race determines what she counts as a reason for political action.

Importantly then, a person's political race is not determined by one's visible racial identity:

political race affirms the value of the individual's choosing to affiliate with the named group as a way of making sense of--or even reframing--the condition in question and then organizing both within and without the group to do something about it (15-16).

The detachment of this conception of race from skin color serves to allow visibly white and non-white people to mobilize around the same political racial identity. And just as I was motivated to introduce the distinction between visible and practical identities to illuminate common assumptions in the debates over race, Guinier and Torres introduce their concept of political race in reaction to the fact that most sides of the debate over whether to abandon race appear to see race primarily as being about skin color (13).

Our contemporary constructions of race narrowly inscribe group interests so that people fail to see how the oppression of one group signals larger social problems. It must be acknowledged that this view of race functions as an excuse to not mobilize with racial others to fight larger injustices in our society because it cultivates the feeling that each
race’s interests and destiny are entirely its own. And at worst, this narrow conception of
group interests facilitates destructive competition between oppressed groups as they vie
for higher spots in the racial hierarchy by, as the Irish evidence, sometimes serving the
interests of white privilege in exchange for more power—marginalized groups can
become agents of racial oppression. In response to that situation, Guinier and Torres
invoke political race to envision a “‘fantastic' shift in the social psychological orientation
of progressive movements in the United States” (20). They are not so naive as to suppose
that whites would immediately see themselves as similarly disenfranchised as those who
are raced black. Instead, the authors modestly suggest that a shift to thinking in terms of
political race might better encourage visibly white people to join social movements led
by people of color than have past conceptions of race.55

_The Miner's Canary_ is an insightful contribution to rethinking the possibilities of
racial identification in light of both our contemporary need for cross-racial political
movements and the radical possibilities implicit and underused in our existing racial
identifications. To explain what I mean by the latter, consider that Guinier and Torres
argue that their application of race is radical but nevertheless intelligible given our
current conceptualizations of race—that is, they seem to think that calling for us to
inhabit our races as a political identities highlights a latent political possibility in our
notion of racial identifications. Also, a good deal of their project centers on mobilizing
around black-led political movements because blacks have played such critical roles in

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55 Whites have participated in social justice movements led by people of color; however, those individual
white antiracist activists have been rare exceptions in a history of whites actively and tacitly supporting
racism. Guinier and Torres’ point, I take it, is not to deny that whites have participated in antiracist
struggles, but to suggest that the political race project could better encourage white participation than
did previous conceptions of race.
emancipatory social movements in the United States. In other words, black-led social movements become the locus of this political reorientation because we already encounter a black identity that is firmly and explicitly entrenched in political struggle. As I hope has been clear from my explication of their arguments, I am quite sympathetic to Guinier and Torres' work in *The Miner's Canary*. There are, however, several points of disagreement worth mentioning.

First, political race calls on us to interpret the significance of the oppression of others, not in their own terms, but rather through relating that group's oppression to our own group's interests. Consider the meaning of their title, *The Miner's Canary*. The canary was the early warning system for miners: an alive canary signaled that the air in the mine was safe, while a dead or ailing one communicated danger for not just the canary but also everyone else in the mine. Similarly, Guinier and Torres urge us to locate our interest in ending white supremacy by treating the fact that some other racial group is oppressed as a signal that we too are being oppressed by similar forces, though we might be quite unaware. Racial analysis of the social oppression of black people is useful not only for understanding how black people are oppressed, but also for locating injustices secretly afflicting other groups as well (Guinier and Torres 20). For instance, it has long been argued that poor white people have more in common with members of other races than they do middle class and rich white people. A shared whiteness implies a false set of shared interests that overlook the ways that poor whites are similarly oppressed along class lines by other whites. Guinier and Torres invoke political race to inspire that kind of cross-racial analysis and to thereby persuade poor whites to join non-whites to combat
racist oppression.

However, under this conception of racial identities, we seem to have only a reason to combat oppression if we can account for how that oppression also affects us, or others of our same visible race. But it is not obviously the case that we can always give such an account. Sometimes, perhaps, one group's oppression does not strongly correlate to negative treatments of our own group. And, even when it does correlate, it might also be the case that the oppression of another race yields an overall net-benefit for my group. I suggest that Guinier and Torres' use of political race has very limited value for social resistance, as long as “interests” and “benefits” can be reduced to achieving symbolic and material privileges for one's group—especially, if those privileges are held at the expense of marginalized people. Put differently, Guinier and Torres have urged a conception of race that places too much emphasis on one’s own group-interest in justifying and motivating political engagement to be useful in sustained and coordinated resistance to systems of white privilege.

Instead, we need an ethical framework. I use the word “ethical” here to emphasize that we need to detach ourselves from narrow group interests so as to see ourselves in community with others, regardless of racial boundaries. An ethical framework would demand that we hold the fact that a group is oppressed to be a sufficient reason for us to join their struggle to resist. Whether or not my own group is oppressed in the same or similar ways should not be what enables me to have a reason to intervene against the

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56 Put differently, here is what Guinier and Torres suggest with their political race project: the fact that communities of color are oppressed is a reason for poor whites to join the antiracist struggle, but what enables the occurrence of that oppression to be a reason is that poor whites are oppressed in related ways. Without the “enabling condition” of whites being oppressed in similar ways, the fact that non-white communities are oppressed would not count as a reason for whites to join the resistance.
oppression of some other racial identity. Instead, we should see our own interests as being, at least sometimes, constituted by the interests and needs of marginalized people. We should be sufficiently motivated to resist and take on non-white practical identities simply out of an ethical duty to others. The fact that a group's oppression does not strongly affect my own life chances should be regarded as irrelevant to the question of whether I have an interest in and, thus, a reason to become an ally of those who struggle for liberation. Otherwise, the more privileged one is, the less reason he will seem to have for opposing rather than being complicit in systems of oppression. And, as I have suggested, social movements that do not aim to convert visibly white people into adopting non-white practical identities leaves in place key components in a system of white privilege—namely, the white bodies that will reinvest white privileges into their own community and, thereby, reproduce the conditions of a racist hierarchy.

Second, I am not convinced by the kinds of commitments or sense of identification required by *The Miner's Canary*. To join the political race project, writes Guinier and Torres, “[whites] would not become 'black in the conventional sense of the term” (20). Given how much time I have spent problematizing what we even mean by the conventional sense of race, this statement is far from unambiguous. Obviously whites would not be black in the visible sense, but what about in the practical sense of race? Since these are my terms and not theirs, I will try my best to extrapolate the answer Guinier and Torres would likely give:

Guinier and Torres claim that for the political race project, it is “neither necessary nor sufficient to take on black cultural styles or aspire to identify with blacks and other
people of color. Culture does not do the work of politics” (20). Their use of “identify with” is ambiguous, but I think we can safely assume Guinier and Torres do not intend to deny that we need to strongly empathize with those who have been oppressed. Rather, given their comments about culture, I take Guinier and Torres to be saying we would not need to aspire to share an identity with blacks beyond a political affiliation with their social justice movements.

I certainly agree that taking on cultural styles is not sufficient for political resistance. Even though Guinier, Torres, and I agree on this conclusion, we endorse it for different reasons. From my perspective, a non-white practical identity is necessary for political resistance to white privilege. Although practical racial identities do involve some cultural features, they are not entirely cultural identities. For instance, I introduced \textit{practical racial identities} to capture the fact that racial identities ground reasons for action and belief. Taking on a practical racial identity would therefore have to affect which life projects one chooses. In short, a change in practical racial identities would involve fundamental alterations in how one understands oneself in relation to others. These relationships are often best described as political, because they involve interactions with political consequences or because the relationships are arranged around shared/opposing political commitments. I call these \textit{political}, not \textit{cultural}, features of practical racial identities, and insofar as it is correct to say that the concepts political and cultural are not equivalent, I contend that taking cultural styles is not sufficient to perform a practical racial identity, though it may be required.

What kinds of cultural styles might a non-white practical identity require for
political resistance? No final answer should be expected. Cultural styles change, some come into existence, while others disappear from practice. And which ones are relevant to the constitution of a non-white practical identity is contingent on the political conditions of the time. I can imagine a cultural style used to critically resist oppression in one era become apolitical in another or, worse yet, appropriated by systems of oppression so that the cultural style serves white privilege. Given the contingent nature of any evaluation of a cultural style’s role in resisting oppression, I will avoid any overarching answer to what cultural form resistance should involve. Instead, I will make a general remark about the role of cultural styles in practical racial identities and political resistance. And then I will quickly discuss one example.

A different practical racial identity is a new way for a person to experience the world, not necessarily in the sense that others will treat her differently—though they might. She experiences the world differently because she perceives the world differently. Features of her everyday life are understood differently. For instance, before her perspectival shift began, a white woman might not have even noticed the subtle ways that racist norms are expressed in ordinary encounters. She had never noticed the degrading, condescending tone in her friends’ voices as they spoke to black waiters and waitresses, but now she does. Now she has started to pick up on the fuller significance of these and other discursive performances—the very tone in which white people address, for they often do not truly speak with, people of color in service positions communicates a disrespect for the person of color and a reminder to all of our society’s racist hierarchies. Of course, the waiter or waitress in this situation is already well aware of what this white
woman has only now come to understand about her friends’ behavior. And noticing the subtlety of racism is precisely the point of taking on a new (non-white) practical racial identity—to understand differently. So the question is, which cultural styles are required to do that?

To understand in new ways we need to really listen to people of color. We must be driven by the convictions that there is much we do not understand but should learn from oppressed communities. One must try to understand what it is like to experience the world from the perspective of another person. We must do this while not assuming that we can come to these experiences in just the same way as that person or that any particular experience represents the experience or perspective of that race.

The very voices that we must seek out are those that have been pushed aside by a white society that refuses to value them. So locating these voices means looking for knowledge claims that have been degraded, if not treated as arising from entirely illegitimate epistemologies. For reasons that are beyond the scope of this thesis, a number of cultural styles produced by communities of color involve explanations or expressions of non-white practical identities: poetry, novels, music, and film are some of the formats that people of color have used to depict, deconstruct, and dismantle systems of white privilege. Audre Lorde’s essays and poetry, as well as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker’s novels, are commonly cited by scholars working in African American Studies precisely because these feminist writers have contributed insights to black literary traditions that have long been engaged in matters of race. Poets and novelists like these, not to mention socially conscious hip-hop artists (and jazz and blues musicians) and filmmakers are all
part of cultural traditions that have usually viewed themselves as political and in the
service of resisting oppression.

Cornel West has written extensively on the political significance of black musical
styles—hip-hop, jazz, and the blues—as sources of knowledge and modes of political
resistance. As one example, in *Race Matters*, West uses the metaphor of jazz to explain
his proposal for a mode of being in the world. West uses “jazz” to refer to an
improvisational mode of protean dispositions toward reality. It involves a suspicion of
“‘either/or’ viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, [and] supremacist ideologies” (West
150). And jazz can be a mode of being politically resistant. West writes that

> To be a jazz freedom fighter is to attempt to galvanize and energize world-
weary people into forms of organization with accountable leadership that
promote critical exchange and broad reflection (150).

West introduces the term “jazz freedom fighter” to connect jazz as the mode of being to
the notion of resistance to oppression. In this quote, there is relationship between the
group unity implied by the notions of “organization” and “leadership”, and the
individuality of “critical exchange and broad reflection.” To be sure, there is interplay
here but not one in which uniformity is imposed from a position of power. Instead, jazz
consists of “conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to
questioning and criticism” (West 150). To better understand what he means, consider the
jazz metaphor: in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, the soloist’s individuality is used to
sustain and increase the “creative tension with the group—a tension that yields higher
levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project” (West 150-151). And
interesting for my purpose, West argues that the sensibility in this jazz mode of being is contrary to policing borders of racial and gender identities (West 151). Even if “jazz freedom fighter” does not refer to an entirely racial practical identity, it certain involves one: jazz, a black cultural style, informs the meaning of, if not inspires, the mode of being that West proposes.

Given the general significance of non-white cultural productions for challenging white perspectives on the world, and specific examples like West’s use of jazz to theorize antiracist modes of behavior, I suggest we attend to the cultural styles of communities of color. Doing so is required, though not sufficient, for the cultivation of non-white practical identities for the purpose of resisting white privilege. The point here is that one should become immersed in the literary and artistic traditions of non-white communities because those traditions often reflect and communicate the very insights that one should seek to understand.

Earlier in this chapter I argued that a white practical identity is problematic, and that social movements should consider a political orientation that demands divestment of white practical identities and that we ought to reconsider the actual limits on how we can inhabit our practical racial identities. If these thoughts have any merit, then we should conclude that in the least, Guinier and Torres’ claim that we need not “aspire to identify with blacks and other people of color” would not hold true in the fully practical sense of racial identities.\footnote{In one place, the authors seem to go back on this position in discussing the significance of oppositional consciousness. It involves “identifying with members of a subordinate group, identifying injustice done to that group, opposing these injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices” (Guinier & Torres 75). However, Guinier and Torres appear to only have...}

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In “Changing Race, Changing Sex: The Ethics of Self-Transformation,” Cressida Heyes contrasts the notions of transsexual and transracial. She observes that individuals encounter different requirements for physically altering their sex and racial identities. Only those who suffer from Gender Identification Disorder have access to the medical apparatus of sex change and, thus, to sex transformation. A person must be diagnosed with this mental illness as a precondition for changing her sex. Transracialism on the other hand is not yet categorized as a mental disorder, so anyone with the means may have cosmetic surgery to change her visible racial identity.

Heyes downplays the significance of these visible alterations, which speaks to another way in which she contrasts sex and race. While sex is ordinarily essentialized as a property of the individual's body, race is essentialized in reference to body and ancestry (Heyes 267). Since racial identities are defined in terms of biological ancestors, alterations to a visible racial identity, unlike sex, do not justify or constitute a reclassification (271). Instead, changing one's racial identity “requires an enquiry into family history to ascertain whether the rules have been correctly applied in the particular

in members of an oppressed group who choose to identify with members of an oppressed group with a strong history of political resistance—Guinier and Torres suggest a black racial identity as their model for political race given the history of well-organized, black-led political movements in our country. “Blackness . . . and the experience of black people” write Guinier and Torres, are “at the heart of our argument” (14). If Guinier and Torres instead mean to say that we should develop an oppositional consciousness regardless of our visible, class, and other social identities, then The Miner's Canary better approximates the kind of political analysis of race that I have tried to lay the foundation for in this thesis. Although that alternative reading of their argument would require we reject the narrow conception of interests that explicitly undergirds their envisioning of the political race project.

Transracial is a term meant to be the racial parallel to transsexual. Simply put, someone is transracial if she has changed her racial classification.

One interesting question is whether transracialism might become categorized as a mental illness if it becomes more common. Answering that question would perhaps take us too far off the main point of this chapter. Also, it is a question I am simply unprepared to answer. However, I think it would be clear that if transracialism were classified as a mental illness that that classification, much like in the case of transsexualism, would represent the deployment of medical discourses to normalize our current views of race and, thereby, police our racial boundaries.
case” (271). Therefore, the possibility of changing races is undermined in ways that do not hold for sex.

I have already argued at length against reducing race to its biological meanings or to ancestry, so I will only make two points here: first, Heyes has focused on differences in our ordinary understanding of sex and race rather than consider the differences in our actual uses of those concepts. I think that is a mistake. As I have argued, our actual uses constitute the meanings of our concepts, not the explicit definitions we offer. Those definitions are merely our attempts to give an account of how we use racial concepts, but they will always fail to fully capture the meanings of racial identities. Definitions represent the concepts they define as if a single thread of meaning runs through and unites all the varied uses of those words. I believe that to determine the extent to which the notion of a transracial is both intelligible and possible, Heyes should focus less on our explicit understandings of race and sex, and more on our varied uses of those concepts.

Second, Heyes defines race as an identity determined by body and ancestry. It is this definitional inclusion of ancestry that grounds her claim that racial identities are fairly stable. But recall that ancestral criteria are problematic and simply fail to ensure that one's identity is permanent in the way Heyes suggests. Furthermore, even if race is currently understood as body and ancestry, the meanings of racial identities can fundamentally change. Sometimes emphasis on a definition can inadvertently obfuscate the possibility of conceptual change by suggesting that the word’s meaning is simple and final. Heyes’ approach overlooks the tension between her definition of race and our actual uses of racial concepts. That oversight is significant because it leads Heyes to also ignore
the ways that actual uses of concepts can be employed to alter our explicit understanding of a concept: on one hand, a genealogical analysis can be used to affect our understanding of a concept by appealing to actual uses to reveal assumptions, contingencies, and confusions in our definitions. And on the other hand, as I have suggested, we often appeal to our actual uses of concepts to justify our conceptual projections. In other words, we demonstrate that we are correctly using a word by showing how our new application is consistent with our accepted uses of that concept. Therefore, I think Heyes errs when she implicitly treats our definition of race as a structural constraint on which uses of racial concepts are correct.

She seems to reduce these visible alterations to mere “passing” rather than as a change in racial identity. This characterization merely begs the question: to say that someone is “passing” is to sanction the judgment that she is performing a racial identity other than her “real” one and usually, though not always (e.g., John Howard Griffin), that she is “upping” her social status. Our contemporary notion of passing can only be understood against the background assumption of a “real” racial identity that fails to match the racial identity being performed, convincingly to others. The breadth of this thesis has contested the very notion of a “real” racial identity—that is, a fully determined, permanent identity. Visible racial identities fail to live up to those expectations and there is even less reason to think a practical identity would be more stable. Furthermore, there are two senses of racial identities, so someone can have (at least) two correct races. Passing, however, incorrectly presupposes that there is one definitive racial truth about a person, against which we can dismiss the racial performance as mere pretend.
I think there is room under my view of race to still make sense of the notion of passing. Two possible uses are worth mentioning: first, passing would mean something similar to what it means now: to perform one’s identity so that people ascribe a visible racial identity to someone that is different than the one she would be ascribed based on ancestry. For example, a visibly black woman trying to pass as visibly white may accomplish this feat through taking on visible markers, like certain styles of clothing, and placing herself in “white situations”—perhaps she surrounds herself with other white people, attends mostly white functions, and otherwise performs a white practical identity. Passing then, under my view, amounts to a person behaving in ways that lead people to ascribe a visible identity to her that is a) different than the ancestral racial identity she would be ascribed and b) is consistent with the practical racial identity she performs. In other words, passing involves the performance of a practical racial identity as a means to encouraging others to ascribe the corresponding visible identity to her.

Passing in the sense I just described plays on and thereby reinforces the notion that there is no distinction between visible and practical racial identities or, in the very least, that they are normally correlated with one another. So besides being descriptive, “passing” could also be used to imply disapproval of behavior that reinforces that suspect view of race. Similarly, suppose a visibly white person claims to have cultivated a non-white practical identity and convincingly performs this non-white practical identity. Yet, when he gets back around whites, he reverts to performing a white practical identity. Arguably, this man is not representing his authentic self when he performs the non-white practical identity because it is not something he fully embraces as his own. Rather, he
puts on a mere performance, perhaps to appear antiracist, while avoiding any real confrontations with whiteness, since he does not performatively disavow his white identity around other whites. In a case like that, I would use the term “passing” to describe his purported non-white practical identity. Playing on the connotation that a person has a real race, I use “passing” to criticize the performed identity as inconsistent with the identity a person actually embraces in his everyday life. So I think “passing” can be used descriptively and critically, and consistent with the view of race I have proposed.

Returning to my previous attack on the idea that a person has a “real” race, I do not wish to overstate those criticisms. Undeniably, some criteria—like body and ancestry—will be privileged as the “official” criteria within certain discourses, like the law. And for those who perform one racial identity but fail its “official” criteria, there can be severe consequences. People caught passing are often punished by a society that violently enforces its racialist hierarchies. These risks exist precisely because people ordinarily think that there is a racial fact about us and that this fact is determined by the official criteria.

However, “official” merely describes the power of legal discourses. “Official” and “legal” are not equivalent to “more real.” My argument is that the unofficial racial

60 Heyes treats racial identities as essentially about the body and ancestry. There are ways to racially alter one's body—for instance, plastic surgery to modify skin color or racial phenotypes. Similarly, it is possible to alter one's body to change sexes, though access to that technology requires being diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. While Heyes does seem to suggest that, in a sense, body modifications could be enough to make one a transracial, she ultimately downplays the significance of this kind of change by heavily weighting ancestry as a criterion for racial identities. Since race is about body and ancestry, she argues that mere visible alterations are closer to passing than being transracial. Furthermore, race is legally determined based on ancestry, so legally changing race requires showing that there has been a mistake in interpreting one's ancestry. So even though Heyes does initially say that “changing one’s race can also sometimes arguably be achieved by moving in or out of relationships, neighborhoods, social class groups, or cultural practices, affecting one’s perception by others and one’s sense of oneself,” she ultimately concludes that this too is just a case of passing (271). And remember that “passing” for Heyes means to pretend to be something different than one's real race. The point here
identities are certainly real: for someone who successfully “passes” most days, the racial identity she convinces people of has a much greater impact on her real day-to-day life than her “official” racial identity. The problems with justifying an official racial identity as the “real one” are overlooked in Heyes treatment of sex and race. I believe that that oversight is significant because it is the notion of a “real” biologically and ancestrally determined race that justifies Heyes' implicit distinction between the performance of passing and authentic racial transformation. The performative dimensions are mistakenly minimized by Heyes in conceptualizing race.

This is not to say that race is performative in just the same ways as sex. In fact, I think Heyes is right to say that sex and race have been constructed differently and that we should be skeptical of analogizing the two. But despite the differences between sex and race, there are similarities to take note of. In the least, Heyes already admits that there is some possibility of changing races through bodily modifications that are not unlike those used for transforming one’s visible gender. So, to reiterate, my criticisms are that her view of race places undue weight on legal definitions of racial identities; she also overlooks the differences between a visible racial identity and practical racial identities when she dismisses performing a new racial identity as mere passing. Similarly, Heyes talks about sex transformations only in terms of medical alterations to the body, which overlooks the performative nature of sex and gender (i.e., the performative natures of a visible gender identity and a practical gender identity). These objections suggest that we have a greater chance of transforming our race and gender than Heyes acknowledges.

Race's performative dimensions have wrongly been denied. Therefore, we should...
reconsider the ways that gender and race are similarly constructed, enacted, and maintained/transformed. In other words, scholars and activists should reconsider the comparisons between visible gender identities and visible racial identities, as well as between practical gender identities and practical racial identities.

Earlier I argued that white practical identities are implicated in the reproduction of oppression. Given that, the questions of racial (and arguably gender) transformation—the possibility, desirability, and requirements of those transformations—ought to revolve more around practical racial identities and less around visible ones. And since Heyes insists that only visible and ancestral criteria are appropriate to apply to judge whether someone has racially transformed, her analysis of race is focused on visible racial identities rather than practical ones.

My conclusion that we ought to focus on indicting and transforming from white practical identities raises several questions that I only have space to tentatively consider here: what should visibly white people do? In other words, what should we mean by the label “antiracist,” especially when applied to white bodies. How do these people extricate themselves from systems of white privilege in order to subvert it and, thereby, demonstrate themselves to be an ally of oppressed people? The answers to those questions will likely change with the political climate. Oppression changes in form and strategy, and so resistance too much change in order to continue opposing those systems of oppression in their actual operation. Effective resistance requires that political projects be tailored to challenge systems of oppression as they currently operate. With that said, I offer some thoughts on resistance through giving account of myself as someone
struggling to transform my race and gender.

My interest in the question of what white people should do is central to this thesis because I think the answer must affect how we perform racial identities and organize social resistance. I was also motivated to reflect on what whites must do to be antiracist because, I am a white man and do not want to perpetuate the systems that benefit me through the oppression of others.

I am a visibly white and visibly male person. Those visible identities have determined a significant amount about me, including my share in white privilege. People treat me according to what is prescribed by dominant racial norms in our society. That racial ascription and treatment are involved in socializing me to perform a white practical identity. So I emerged as a self-conscious being as a visibly and practically white male.

Importantly, the fact that I had no choice over my initial practical racial identity does not ultimately remove my responsibility. I may not be responsible for the fact that I emerged as a white subject, but am not responsible for what I choose to become? If I am right that white masculine practical identities are objectionable and capable of being altered (to whatever degree), then one does bear some responsibility for whether he maintains a white or masculine practical identity. So while I am still visibly white and male, I am working to cultivate different practical identities. My aim is to resist the systems that currently bestow privileges on me on the basis my visible identity. So in the least, I ought to test the limitations of my ability to racially transform so that I might divest myself of white and masculine practical identities and cultivate alternative ones as much as possible.
There are of course obstacles to achieving that self-transformation. Not all privileges are easy to divest from, even though being a traitor to white or male systems of privilege will often provoke punishment (i.e., the withholding of white male privileges) in efforts to force the defiant white (and/or male) back into compliance. For instance, the cop who pulls me over will generally still treat me better than he does most visibly black people regardless of whether I adopt a non-white practical identity. (In large part, this difference in treatment will be due to the fact that the police officer in this context might not know that I am becoming a race and gender traitor.) And I cannot undo the educational and business opportunities I received by virtue of my being a white male.

However, many of these privileges can be put in the service of resistance. They can be deployed to undermine the very systems of oppression that bestowed those privileges and that depend on our recycling them back into the control of white males. For instance, I can use the benefits of my educational opportunities to resist oppression by teaching in low-income schools, which largely serve communities of color. Doing so involves using my privileges (e.g., the education I received) to improve the educational opportunities of low-income students who largely attend failing schools and, as a result, are kept from higher education and higher paying jobs. Improving the educational experiences of low-income students is one way to resist the educational system’s role in reproducing oppression.

To be sure, racial and gender transformation is not as easy as simply choosing to not have a white masculine practical identity. Self-transformation requires difficult and continuous work to transform our perspectives, our actions, and what we do with our
racial and gender privileges. And there will always be a danger that someone will identify as a transracial—a declaration that one has adopted a non-white practical identity—without actually engaging in the ongoing praxis of transforming into an authentic ally of oppressed groups. The fear here is that whites will use the language of cooperation and alliance to divert social justice movements or, worse yet, that whites might appropriate the organizations and discourse of those movements so they serve to maintain rather than challenge the status quo. To be clear, I share this fear, in the least because I always thought of myself as antiracist but now think that I was simply wrong about what it took to not contribute to racist or gendered oppression. And the history of white women in positions of leadership within feminist organization silencing women of color is enough to make one worry about whites claiming to identify with people of color. But the risk of misidentifying someone as an authentic ally will always be present, since people of all visible identities can serve oppression. And given that performing the practical identities of the dominant group implicates us in perpetuating systems of white and male oppression, what real choice do we have but to take that risk and mitigate it by remaining vigilant?

Whatever one may say is required for a white male to cultivate these new practical racial and gender identities, it is crucial to remember that those requirements flow from an analysis of what it means to become an ally of oppressed communities. And

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61 I have used “we” several times to implicitly refer to those who have a white and/or male visible and/practical identity. This rhetorical choice is simply intended to take ownership of the relationship between my own identities and my criticisms of white masculine practical identities. Though I hope to have made progress in divesting myself of those identities and working to become an ally of the oppressed, I want to remain skeptical of my own assumed progress so that I remain vigilant in my efforts to transform.
like all authentic alliances, it will involve sharing in the risks that those oppressed communities are forced to endure. Racial and gender transformation will involve stepping out of line to disrupt the exercise of oppression in any way we can. It means identifying and being identified as not simply a race and gender traitor but as someone who has transformed into a different kind of person. And in a society where the dominant group violently enforces its racial and gender norms, self-transformation requires exposing oneself to those reprisals.

One might mistake these as the acts of a person who does not love herself. After all, have I not suggested severing ties to one’s racial and gendered history? Have I not suggested that one risk her physical health and psychic well-being? On the contrary, for me, this path—into a Women’s Studies department to radically question my gendered beliefs, and now as I seek to broaden that project to include a racial transformation—has always been motivated by a fundamental self-love and love for others. It is a deep commitment to being antiracist that drives me to challenge my racial and gendered conditioning. So it is that love for others and myself that leads me to try expelling the oppressive features in my own identity. A mature self-love must be grounded on a quest to become a better person. What exactly this mature self-love involves, that is, what an ethic and politic of racial and gender transformation requires of us, is precisely what we should earnestly investigate in both theory and practice.
Bibliography


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Vita

Kris Wright grew up in Bedford, Texas and graduated from Trinity High School. He earned his B.A. at the University of Texas at Austin as an undergraduate in Philosophy and Government. While attending the University of Texas as both an undergraduate and graduate student, Kris worked as a debate coach at several public schools, including Westlake High School in Austin. Having coached a number of nationally competitive debaters, Kris and several of his colleagues in Texas founded a nonprofit called the Texas Debate Collective (TDC). TDC works to expand educational opportunities for low-income students through increasing their access to the most intellectually rigorous levels of competition in high school debate. As of 2010, Kris is a Teach for America corps member. Placed in a Dallas charter school, he is currently part of the movement to help close the education gap in America.

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This Thesis was typed by the author