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## Future Genders? Future Races?

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## **Future Genders? Future Races?**

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### **I. BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>**

In the social world as we know it, two of the most salient dimensions of human difference are race and gender. If I mention that I met an interesting person while waiting for the subway last week, a first step to understanding the nature of our contact would be to identify whether the person was a man or a woman, and what race they were. (Also especially useful would be their relative age.) To describe someone by their race and gender is not simply to describe their appearance, but to situate them in a framework of meaning and indicate the social norms that govern our interactions.

Drawing on the insight that one's sex has quite well-defined and systematic social implications, feminists have argued that it is helpful to distinguish sex and gender. Very roughly, as the slogan goes, gender is the social meaning of sex. The idea is that gender is not a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but marks social differences between individuals. Sex differences are about testicles and ovaries, the penis and the uterus (and on some theories, quite a bit more (Money and Tucker 1975, Fausto-Sterling 2000))<sup>2</sup>; gender, in contrast, is a classification of individuals in terms of their social position, as determined by interpretations of their sex.

To help understand this, consider, for example, the category of landlords. To be a landlord one must be located within a broad system of social and economic relations which includes tenants, private property, and the like. It might have been that all and only landlords had only four toes on their left foot. But even if this were the case, having this physical mark is not what it is to be a landlord. Being nine-toed is an anatomical kind; being a landlord is a social kind. Similarly, we can draw a distinction between sex and gender: *sex* is an anatomical distinction based on locally salient sexual/reproductive differences, and *gender* is a distinction between the social/political positions of those with bodies marked as of different sexes. (See also Haslanger 1993.)

To be clear, I'll use the terms 'male' and 'female' to designate sexes, 'man' and 'woman' to designate genders.<sup>3</sup> Because one is a female by virtue of some (variable) set of anatomical features, and one is a woman by virtue of one's position within a social and economic system, we should allow, at least in principle, that some males are women and some females are men. Although it is clear enough for our purposes here what distinguishes males and females, the question of what it is to be a man or woman is not at all clear. And this has been a major site of controversy amongst feminists.

I'll return to how we might define gender shortly. In the meantime it is interesting to note that there is a parallel to the sex/gender distinction in the case of race. Just as one's primary and secondary sex characteristics are socially meaningful, so are the color of one's skin, shape of one's eyelids, color and texture of one's hair, etc. So we can distinguish the physical markers of race from the social implications that these markers have. To register this terminologically,

let's distinguish "color" and "race" as parallel to sex and gender. I will use the term 'color' to refer to the (contextually variable) physical "markers" of race, just as I use the term 'sex' to refer to the (contextually variable) physical "markers" of gender. I mean to include in "color" more than just skin tone: common markers also include eye, nose, and lip shape, hair texture, physique, etc. And in principle I want to allow that virtually any cluster of physical traits that are assumed to be inherited from those who occupy a specific geographical region or regions can count as "color". (Although the term 'people of color' is used to refer to non-Whites, I want to allow that the markers of "Whiteness" count as "color".) Borrowing the slogan we used before, we can say then that race is the social meaning of "color".

So far I've characterized race and gender very vaguely. It is one thing to say that race and gender are social categories that capture the social implications of certain bodily traits, but can we give them more content? For example, what are the specific social implications of sex in terms of which we should define gender?

Among feminist theorists there are two problems that have generated pessimism about providing any unified account of women; I'll call them the *commonality problem* and the *normativity problem*. Very briefly, the commonality problem questions whether there is anything social that females have in common that could count as their "gender". If we consider *all* females—females of different times, places, and cultures—there are reasons to doubt that there is anything beyond body type (if even that) that they all share (Spelman 1988). The normativity problem raises the concern that any definition of "what woman is," because it must select amongst the broad variation in women's traits, cannot help but be value-laden, and so will marginalize certain females, privilege others, and reinforce current gender norms (Butler 1990, Ch. 1).

A primary concern of feminist and antiracist theorizing is to give an account of the social world that will assist us in the struggle for justice. Given this goal, I take the primary motivation for distinguishing sex from gender to arise in the recognition that societies, on the whole, privilege individuals with male bodies. Although the particular forms and mechanisms of oppression vary from culture to culture, societies have found many ways—some ingenious, some crude—to control and exploit the sexual and reproductive capacities of females. So one important strategy for defining gender has been to analyze it in terms of women's subordinate position in systems of male dominance.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the legitimate goals of feminist and antiracist theory, we can allow, then, that certain values guide our inquiry. Pursuing this line of thought, here is a (rough) proposal for specifying what it is to be a man or a woman:<sup>5</sup>

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.<sup>6</sup>

*S is a man* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically privileged along some dimension

(economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction.

It is a virtue, I believe, of these accounts, that depending on context, one’s sex may have a very different meaning and it may position one in very different kinds of hierarchies. The variation will clearly occur from culture to culture (and sub-culture to sub-culture); so e.g., to be a Chinese woman of the 1790’s, a Brazilian woman of the 1890’s, or an American woman of the 1990’s may involve very different social relations, and very different kinds of oppression. Yet on the analysis suggested, these groups count as women insofar as their subordinate positions are marked and justified by reference to female sex.

With this strategy of defining gender in mind, we can now consider whether it will help in giving some content to the social category of race. The feminist approach recommends: don’t look for an analysis that assumes that the category’s meaning is always and everywhere the same; rather, consider how members of the group are *socially positioned*, and what *physical markers* serve as a supposed basis for such treatment. Elaborating the earlier slogan, we might say that race is the social meaning of the geographically marked, i.e., “colored” body. To develop this, consider the following account.<sup>7</sup>

A group is *racialized* (in context C) iff<sub>df</sub> its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the group is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.

In other words, races are those groups demarcated by the geographical associations accompanying perceived body type, when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated. Given this definition, we can say that S is of the White (Black, Asian...) race [in C] iff Whites (Blacks, Asians...) are a racialized group [in C], and S is a member.<sup>8</sup>

Note that on this view, whether a group is racialized, and so how and whether an individual is raced, is not an absolute fact, but will depend on context. For example, Blacks, Whites, Asians, Native Americans, are currently racialized in the US insofar as these are all groups defined in terms of physical features associated with places of origin, and insofar as membership in the group functions socially as a basis for evaluation. However, some groups are not currently racialized in the US, but have been so in the past and possibly could be again (and in other contexts are), e.g., the Italians, the Germans, the Irish.

Given these accounts it should be clear that a primary task in the quest for social justice is to eliminate those social structures that constitute races (or racialized groups) and eliminate men and women. Of course this is not to say

that we should eliminate males and females, or impose a “khaki” appearance on everyone. Rather, it is to say that we should work for a day when sex and “color” markers do not have hierarchical implications.

## II. ALTERNATIVES

At this stage one might reasonably ask, however: Why build hierarchy into the definitions? Why not define gender and race as those social positions motivated and justified by cultural responses to the body, without requiring that the social positions are hierarchical? Wouldn't that provide what we need without implying (implausibly) that women are, by definition, subordinate, men, by definition, privileged, and races, by definition, hierarchically positioned?

Recall the suggestion that gender is the social meaning of sex and race is the social meaning of “color”. Consistent with this, one could allow that the social implications of sex and “color” are, *as we know them*, hierarchical, but insist that sex and “color” can nonetheless be meaningful under conditions of justice. If so, then in envisioning a just future we should include the option of preserving race and gender while working towards race and gender *equality*.

Pursuing this strategy we could use the definitions of *man* and *woman* offered above: it is clear that these dominant nodes of our current gender structures are hierarchical. But rather than assuming that gender is simply the genus under which the more specific categories of men and women fall, we could define gender as a broader genus allowing both hierarchical and non-hierarchical cases. For example (roughly),

A group *G* is a *gender* (in context *C*) iff<sub>df</sub> its members are similarly positioned as along some social dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in *C*), and the members are “marked” as appropriately in this position by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of reproductive capacities or function.

A similar approach to race would yield the following:

A group *G* is *racialized* (in context *C*) iff<sub>df</sub> its members are similarly positioned as along some social dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in *C*), and the members are “marked” as appropriately in this position by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.

As in the case of gender, we could retain the hierarchical analysis for existing races, e.g., Black, White, Latina/o, etc., are hierarchical groups. But we might envision a new egalitarian structure of races, i.e., new races, to take their place.

In what follows, I will argue that there are interesting and important differences between race and gender that count *against* treating them as parallel. Because sex is, from a political point of view, inevitably meaningful, we need to envision new egalitarian genders; but race is different, and we should not

take a parallel approach to race.

### III. “SEX”, “COLOR” AND BIOLOGY

Start with gender. I am sympathetic to radical rethinkings of sex and gender. In particular, I believe that we should refuse to use anatomy as a primary basis for classifying individuals and that any distinctions between kinds of sexual and reproductive bodies are importantly political and open to contest. Some authors have argued that we should acknowledge the continuum of anatomical differences and recognize at least five sexes (Fausto-Sterling 1993). And if sexual distinctions become more complex, we would also need to rethink sexuality, given that sexual desire would not fit neatly within existing homosexual/heterosexual paradigms.

However, one can encourage the proliferation of sexual and reproductive options without maintaining that we can or should eliminate *all* social implications of anatomical sex and reproduction. Given that as a species there are substantial differences in what human bodies contribute to reproduction, and what sorts of bodies bear the main physical burdens of reproduction, and given further that reproduction cannot really help but be a socially significant fact (it does, after all, produce children), it can seem difficult to imagine a functioning society, more specifically, a functioning *feminist* society, that doesn't acknowledge in some way the difference between those kinds of bodies that are likely able to bear children, and those that aren't. One could argue that we should work towards a society free of gender in a materialist sense—one in which sex-oppression does not exist—while still allowing that sexual and reproductive differences should be taken into account in a just society. (Frye 1996; Gatens 1996.)

The argument just sketched (more is certainly needed to flesh it out) asserted that sexual difference—allowing variations in what cultures consider or should consider relevant in marking sex differences—would be in some way meaningful in any society of people with bodies like ours, at least in any society in which humans are sexual beings and reproduce biologically; so doing away with gender categories altogether, i.e., eliminating social categories that take sexual difference into account, would not be an effective way to create a just future. On this issue I am sympathetic to Beauvoir's argument that females, on the whole, bear a greater physical burden for the species than males, and it is the responsibility of society to address this in order to achieve justice (Beauvoir 1989/1949, Ch. 2).

So instead of attempting to eliminate gender, we should try to envision new non-oppressive ways of being gendered *without* being a man or a woman, and should eventually incorporate these new gender concepts as parts (possibly very small parts) of our self-understandings. In other words, in a just society gender (in some as yet unknown form) should constitute a thin social position, and to the extent that one's social position has an impact on one's “identity,” we should allow for the development of non-hierarchically grounded gender identities.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it is an important project within a feminist anti-



racism to construct alternative social positions and identities (hopefully many of them!) for people of different sexes.<sup>10</sup>

The idea here is that justice requires that we radically rethink the structure of relationships that constitute our societies. But this does not mean that “anything goes”. There are some limits to what alternatives are viable, e.g., there may be features that are necessary for the society to function at all, or for it to be just, or that are especially desirable in some way. Sexual reproduction, I submit, imposes some limits in forming a just society, though it is not clear what those limits are. Given that sex needs to be meaningful in order to achieve justice, a conception of gender that allows new non-hierarchical cases will be valuable in our efforts.

The question arises, however, whether there is something about race that should also constrain us. Is there something significant we are in danger of losing track of should we pursue the elimination of race?<sup>11</sup> It would seem that *racial equality* should be our goal (as opposed to the *elimination* of race), only if we have reason to view “color” as a justifiable way for societies to differentiate groups of people, i.e., if “color” is a legitimate basis for a thin social position. Although it appears that there are reasons for *any* functioning society to take sex and reproduction seriously, there does not seem to be any comparable reason for thinking that functional societies must acknowledge those physical differences that distinguish “color”. Classifications based on “color” vary tremendously depending on the socio-historical-legal context, and are not grounded in meaningful biological categories. (Appiah 1992, Ch. 2; Appiah 1996; Root 2000; Mills 1998, Ch 3; Zack 2002; Lewontin 1982; cf. Mosely 1995; Kitcher 1999; Andreason 1998; Andreason 2000).<sup>12</sup> For example, the markers of “Blackness” differ when considering, e.g., the contemporary United States, Brazil, and South Africa, and the rules for racial marking change over time (Davis 1991). Moreover, “color” classification is not just an informal practice, but is often legally imposed and based on biological myths of “blood” (think of the “one drop” rule, enforced under Jim Crow). It is not plausible to explain the variation and development of “color” distinctions in terms of increased understanding of biology or genetics. Rather, the best explanations point to their social and political implications (Fields 1982; Fields 1990; Stocking 1994; Mills 1997).

These facts indicate an important difference between race and gender. Although gender as we know it is a site of social injustice, just societies should be concerned with those functions of human bodies that matter for reproduction. But “color”—those clusters of features such as skin tone, hair texture, eye and lip shape, imagined “racial gene”, and other imagined anatomical differences that are used to mark races—does not seem to correlate with any feature that carries sufficient biological weight that it must be socially addressed.

It is important to note that even if society should not be structured to recognize “color”-distinctions, this does not entail a politics of “race blindness”. Race, as I’ve argued, is more than just “color”; it concerns the systematic subordination of groups of people marked by “color”.<sup>13</sup> The effort to end racism



must recognize racialized groups in order to understand the processes by which they are formed and sustained, and in order to remedy the ongoing injustice done to their members. Recognizing racialized groups is not only compatible with justice but essential to achieving it. But to recognize the social positions created by existing racist ideologies and institutions is not to endorse the formation of public or personal identities based on “color”.

For example, in the contemporary US, there are many groups that define themselves by reference to race and racial injustice: some form on the basis of a common history of racial oppression, or in solidarity against such oppression, others on the basis of cultural practices that have evolved within racialized groups (e.g., Kwanzaa). However, note that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for group membership that one have a particular inherited body type *per se*; what is required is a common history, a moral stand against injustice, or the enjoyment of a celebratory practice. These groups, or at least many of them, do not define themselves by reference to “color”, even if in the context of racial oppression some of them correspond in their membership roughly to groups that are marked by “color”. Such group conceptions avoid false assumptions about biology and geography in constructing group solidarity, and also avoid the entrenchment of social divisions along existing racial lines: at least in principle and often in practice, the membership of such groups is “multi-racial” by the dominant standards of racialization.

#### **A. *The medical necessity of “color” coding***

But perhaps this is too fast. What about racial patterns in susceptibility to disease? Shouldn’t societies be prepared, as a matter of justice, to address disadvantages that some suffer due to genetic risk factors? And don’t some of these correlate with “color”? The weight of current research suggests not (Root 2001). Although there are significant generalizations linking race/“color” with disease in the United States, the basis for these generalizations is social not biological:

Blacks are seven times more likely to die of tuberculosis than whites, three times more likely to die of H.I.V.-A.I.D.S. and twice as likely to die of diabetes. The diseases are biological but the racial differences are not; How is this possible? ...No mystery. Race affects income, housing, and healthcare, and these, in turn, affect health. Stress suppresses the immune system and being black in the U.S. today is stressful. (Root 2000, S629)

Given the contextual variability of “color” classifications, it is not surprising that generalizations linking “color” with disease are only local and do not support a biological basis for race. For example,

An individual with sickle-cell disease can be black in the U.S., but white in Brazil, for the category of black or white is defined differently

here and there. As a result, rates of sickle-cell disease for blacks differ from place to place, in part because race does. (Root 2000).

Thus, it seems that although there are reasons for a society to take “color” seriously as an indicator of risk under conditions where groups are racialized (or are suffering the long-term effects of racialization), this only shows that prior injustice imposes constraints on the construction of a just society; it does not show that “color”, or a biological fact correlating with “color”, imposes such a constraint. As a result it may be appropriate for societies to be structured so that there are social implications of having suffered injustice—implications that attempt to redress the injustice or prevent recurring injustice—but history rather than biology is what requires our response.

One might insist, however, that although we currently think of “color” as something that is easily observable in everyday interaction, perhaps instead it should be genetically defined. If so, then in keeping with the terminology I’ve introduced, the genetic traits in question would count as “color”. And to be more explicit, we might adjust our slogan for race: race is the social meaning of certain (to be specified) genetic traits.

In pursuing this approach, we cannot assume that such genetically defined groups will correspond with the groups we currently count as races, i.e., that the external appearance of the groups will correspond to the “color” divisions we make now, or even that the external appearance of members of a single group will be similar. But that’s just to say, on this view, that our current classification is misguided. Moreover, one might argue, we need to treat such genetic groups as socially relevant because they correlate with socially meaningful traits, e.g., susceptibility to disease. Because medical care is something that a just society must be concerned to provide, “color”, like sex, must be taken into account even under conditions of justice. As a result, we should treat *race* like *gender* as a category that currently has hierarchical forms, but need not.

The question whether there are genetically defined groups that are medically significant and should count as races is a large issue in contemporary genomics and biomedical ethics. I will not be in a position to address fully the literature on this topic here. However, there are three points that count against revising my account of race to include non-hierarchical groups defined by reference to genetic traits.

First, according to my definition, racial divisions are marked by *observed or imagined clusters of physical traits that are assumed to be inherited from those who occupy a specific geographical region or regions*. Consequently, not just any medically relevant genetic division amongst humans will count as a basis for race: the genetic traits must be interpreted as geographically significant. The connection between race and geography is, I believe, a key factor in distinguishing race from other social categories that are marked on the body and assumed to be natural, e.g., gender, certain forms of disability and disease, (sometimes) sexual orientation, and (sometimes) caste. The link with geography also helps explain the role of racial concepts in the context of imperialism and the process

of nation-building (Mills 1997). So there are good reasons to maintain the geographical element in the definition of race.

Second, although my definition of “color” does not require that the physical traits in question be easily observable in ordinary interaction, the marking of racialized bodies involves appearance. For example, at certain times and places, Jews have been racialized. The specifics of the racialization process vary, but on one scenario Jews are imagined to have some physical feature inherited from populations originating in what is now the Middle East. In some cases, however, it is recognized that there is no reliably observable physical feature that distinguishes Jews from non-Jews, so other devices have been introduced to make sure that their race is identifiable in casual encounters, e.g., yellow stars. So even if geneticists can find ways of dividing humans into groups based on genetic features that are assumed to be inherited from populations originating in a particular region, as I see it, those groups are racialized in a context only if in that context it is thought that there are observable markers, either anatomical or artificial, that—at least in paradigm cases—distinguish members of the group. Such observable marking is important to the process of racialization, for a key factor in racializing a group is the invocation of social norms that differentiate “appropriate” behavior towards the members of the group (normally) before any interaction is possible. You experience the “color,” behave in accordance with the norms for individuals of that kind, and ask questions later, if ever (Alcoff 2000a, Alcoff 2000b).

Granting these two points, it would seem that it is still possible for races, in my sense, to be constituted by social responses to genetic facts. A genetic division amongst humans, together with assumptions concerning geography and practices of marking, can create social groups which are either privileged and subordinated. In other words, it is possible for genetics to function as an element of “color” in a process of racialization. However, the question now before us is whether there are good reasons to count non-hierarchical groups constituted in this way as races. Is “color” genuinely analogous to “sex” or not? (Recall, I’ve suggested there is good reason to treat differently sexed bodies differently even under conditions of justice.)

For example, consider those who have a genetic susceptibility to sickle cell anemia. Although it is often thought that sickle cell is a “Black disease”, the “color” designation “black” does not correlate at all well with those who have the relevant gene (*HbS*), or with those who have the disease. (I’ll use the capitalized term ‘Black’ for the racialized group; I’ll use lower-case ‘black’ for the body schema designated for those with relatively recent sub-Saharan African ancestry.) Sickle cell is found primarily among populations whose ancestors have lived where malaria is common. So it occurs among those with ancestors from central and western Africa, but not southern Africa; it is also found, e.g., in Turks, Yemenis, Indians, Greeks, and Sicilians (Adelman 2003).

Should we treat carriers of the sickle cell gene as a group whose genotype-plus-geographical origins is relevant in structuring a just society? Given that presumably justice requires that we treat *HbS* carriers as a morally sig-

nificant group (they should be entitled to certain medical care, perhaps to health education concerning reproductive options, accommodation for any resulting disabilities, etc.), it appears that “color” features do matter in setting constraints on how we organize ourselves. In order to guarantee needed accommodation *HbS* carriers might also be “marked” by health alert bracelets or necklaces (note that I’m not recommending this, but raise it to make a more exact analogy with race). If so, then it would seem that the disanalogy between sex and “color” breaks down.

But this leads to my third point against treating non-hierarchical genetic-cum-geographical groups as racial groups. Insofar as justice requires that we accommodate the needs of such a group, it is by virtue of their health status. Of course, medical conditions are relevant in considering what justice requires, and it may be that medical conditions sometimes correlate with geographical origins (for obvious cases think of children born or brought up in highly polluted areas). But the basis for the differential treatment in these cases is the medical condition; any real or imagined links with geography is, from the medical point of view, accidental. For example, suppose a large percentage of individuals born in a certain area have a specific genetic defect. Presumably an individual born in or with ancestors from a very different area with the same genetic defect should be grouped with them from the medical point of view.

As I see it, the main issue is how we draw distinctions between humans for the purposes of justice. I’ve argued that it is important to distinguish existing races and genders because of historical and contemporary forms of oppression; I’ve argued that we should distinguish new forms of gender in order to accommodate the special burdens some humans carry in the process of reproduction; I have also suggested that we should distinguish groups with respect to medical conditions in order to provide adequate care and support. These different categories of concern require different strategies of response. Although there are cases where the genetics, geography, and marking relevant to medicine can trigger racialization, I submit that this is when hierarchy is imposed. In effect, there will be cases in which racism and ableism overlap and in which antiracists and anti-ableists are confronting structurally similar injustice. However, for the most part, the challenges facing those who have suffered racial injustice and those who have suffered medical/ableist injustice are very different; and race and disability require different responses in order to achieve justice. This provides good reason for not expanding the definition of race to include non-hierarchical genetic divisions between us as racial divisions.

### **B. *Evolution, populations, and life-worlds***

But perhaps there are other biological explanations of the persistence of race. Lucius Outlaw provides further reason to pause before we reject “color” as a legitimate, perhaps even inevitable, source of social meaning. He asks, concerning the number and persistence of differently “colored” populations,

Might these populations not be the result of bio-cultural group attachments and practices that are conducive to human survival

and well-being, and hence must be understood, appreciated, and provided for in the principles and practices of, say, a liberal democratic society? (Outlaw 1996, 13)

He seems to answer that populations defined at least in part by “color” are valuable and virtually inevitable. Communities, he argues, constitute “life-worlds” of meaning which include interpretations of the body. “... of particular importance,” he points out, “are norms of somatic aesthetics that help to regulate the preferences and practices in terms of which partners are chosen for the intimacies that frequently (must) result in the birth of new members...” (Outlaw 1996, 16)

Because, he argues, humans on the whole desire “to achieve relative immortality” by having offspring “who look and carry on somewhat like ourselves” (Outlaw 1996, 17),<sup>14</sup> moreover, because we have reason to be fearful of “significantly different and objectionable strangers” (Outlaw 1996, 17), and finally, because the “valorization of descent” increases our chances of survival by motivating cooperation (Outlaw 1996, 18), our communities develop into “self-reproducing populations that share distinguishing physical and cultural features that set the demographic boundaries of a life-world.” (Outlaw 1996, 17) On his view, when such a population is defined to a significant degree by physiological factors, it is a race; when to a lesser degree, it is an ethnicity. (Outlaw 1996, 136). Races are, then, enduring, if not inevitable, facts of social life, and because they promote cooperation, security, and so survival of a community’s life-world, they are valuable.

Although I am sympathetic to Outlaw’s interest in the embodiment of social norms and the development of an aesthetic of “color” (see, e.g., Haslanger 2004), there are a number of points in this narrative that strike me as worrisome. In particular, I wonder about the implicit gender assumptions and the supposed “naturalness” of mate selection among humans. For example, it appears that Outlaw is taking as given that individuals tend to choose mates of the same “color” (allowing that “color” differences depend on context), and the task is to provide an explanation of this that will show such choices to be conducive to the survival of their society. There are potentially two connections with biology here: on one hand, individual choices for “same-color” mates are being cast as, although admittedly shaped by cultural cues, nonetheless “natural”; and on the other hand, the model of natural selection is being applied to the society: the societies that are “color”-conscious in their choices are more “fit” than others, and so survive.

However, considering the broad extent of human history, the option of an individual “choosing” his or her mate has not been uniformly granted, and in particular, has more often not been granted to women; fathers or tribal elders typically control the reproductive options for women and girls. Moreover, women have been regularly used in the context of gift-exchange between “foreign”, even hostile, groups as a means of increasing the chance of friendly relations (Rubin 1975), not to mention a way of expanding the gene pool.

So much more would need to be said to support Outlaw’s suggestions that in-

dividuals naturally choose mates who are marked as being the same “color”, for the alleged “choice” of mates is plausibly accounted for by a broad range of social facts rather than any biological predisposition on the part of individuals.<sup>15</sup> And given the potential value of out-group mating (as evidenced by the practices of gift-exchange), more is also needed to support the claim that in-group mating is the most successful strategy.

A further concern is whether, even if the choice of a same-“color” mate is common, and even if to some extent “natural,” whether this is good. Outlaw suggests that it is valuable because it promotes the survival of the “life-world” of the community. But of course, not all “life-worlds” are ones that should be preserved, even within a “liberal democratic society”. For example, Outlaw speaks of the “valorization of descent” as a factor that contributes to the uniformity of “color” in a population, and also which also serves as a means of promoting cooperation between members of the population. Setting aside the empirical question of whether this is an effective way to promote cooperation, it would seem that the valorization of descent would (and does) create an unjust hierarchy of family forms. The history of adoption provides a rather gruesome tale of the effects of the “valorization of descent”: orphaned and “illegitimate” children are systematically abandoned, women who give birth to “illegitimate” children are cast out, even murdered, if discovered; parentless and adopted children through history have been mistreated, denied legal protections, and severely stigmatized. Families that are formed through (either formal or informal) adoption are very often not regarded as “real” with the implication (among many others) that individuals and couples who want children nevertheless remain childless and leave children without homes, rather than face the stigma of adoption. This suggests that the “valorization of descent” should be rejected in a “liberal democratic society”, not preserved.

In summary, it appears that “color” may in some hypothetical contexts and by accident be morally significant. But this is not sufficient reason to treat race like gender as a response to a physical fact that even a just society must address. Although both “color” and sex as we know them are socially significant, “color” need not, and in most cases, should not be. However, thus far I’ve supposed that if “color” does impose constraints on what can be just, it would be due to the biological basis of “color”. Are there other aspects of “color” that might legitimately constrain us?

### III. “COLOR” AND CULTURE

It is hard to imagine any function essential to a society that could only be served by distinguishing people along the lines of “color”.<sup>16</sup> So it does not appear that an argument for treating “race” as a genus of social categories that includes both hierarchical and non-hierarchical forms, analogous to the argument offered for gender, is available. But given the purposes of an engaged feminist antiracism, it is important to know not only what sorts of idealized societies there might be, but what a just society would look like that could plausibly evolve as a successor to ours. One might argue, for example, that racial groups, although originating as offshoots of racist practices and policies,



develop cultural forms and self-understandings that are valuable. It might seem, more specifically, that a society without race couldn't plausibly evolve from ours without cutting itself off from its own history and doing damage to meaningful communities. Linda Alcoff argues in her paper, "Mestizo Identity:"

...within the context of racially based and organized systems of oppression, racial identity will continue to be a salient internal and external component of identity. Systems of oppression, segregated communities, and practices of discrimination create a collective experience and a shared history for a racialized grouping. It is that shared experience and history, more than any physiological or morphological features, that cements the community and creates connections with others along racial lines. And that history cannot be deconstructed by new scientific accounts that dispute the characterization of race as a natural kind. Accounts of race as a social and historical identity, though this brings in elements that are temporally contingent and mutable, will probably prove to have more persistence than accounts of race that tie it to biology. Ironically history will probably have more permanence than biology. (Alcoff 1995, 272)

Here Alcoff suggests that race might be best understood as "a social and historical identity", and that race is more meaningfully centered on "shared experience and history" than on body type.

The suggestion that racial unity stems more from shared experience and history is especially significant as we move away from the "Black-White binary" and think more carefully about the racialization of Latina/os and Asians. For example, Latinas/os do not fit many of the assumptions typically made about races. Latin America is highly diverse in the "color" of its populations and the cultures it includes:

By U.S. categories, there are black, brown, white, Asian and Native American Latinas/os. There are many Latinas/os from the southern cone whose families are of recent European origin, a large number of Latinas/os from the western coastal areas whose families came from Asia, and of course a large number of Latinas/os whose lineage is entirely indigenous to the Americas or entirely African. (Alcoff 2000b, 31)

Moreover, the cultures of Cuba, Brazil, Panama, Mexico, Chile, Columbia, Costa Rica, to name a few, vary widely in their dominant (and regional) languages, cuisine, holidays, political structures, and virtually every other dimension of culture. Comparable diversity can be found in Asia. (And it should not be forgotten that there is tremendous cultural diversity in all of major groups racialized in the US, e.g., the cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa and the African Diaspora are by no means homogeneous.) This is, of course, compatible with



Latinas/os and Asians being racialized in the United States.

Such diversity of appearance and culture raises the question whether there is anything other than being racialized that unifies Latinas/os and Asians. Although racial identity has been imposed by systems of oppression, there are and have been movements within the groups to construct positive identities (pan-Latina/o, pan-Asian) to counter stigmatized identities and fight against the injustices inherent in the process of racialization.<sup>17</sup> Do these count as “racial” identities? Should we reconceive the notion of racial group in their terms? Should a feminist antiracism support the formation of racial identities and racial groups in this sense?

### **A. History, experience, and self-interpretation**

One goal of this inquiry is to provide an account of race and racial identity that will be useful in the quest for social justice. As Alcoff suggests, this will be to a significant extent a constructive project requiring us to look not only back to history but also forward towards a better future. In developing my accounts of race and gender I have focused on the task of identifying groups who have suffered from certain forms of embodied oppression; we should not ignore, however, that the members of these groups are not passive victims, but are agents engaged in the construction of their own meanings (Lugones and Spelman 1986). For members of subordinated races, their racial affiliation—as it has been constructed *from within* the group—is often not only a source of pride and value in their lives, but has provided resources to combat racial oppression. So if we are thinking about the possible future of race, one option is to build on these positive racial reconstructions, rather than the damaging structures of oppression.

For example, amongst those working on reconstructions of “Blackness”, one theme emphasized is *shared history* as opposed to “color”, and cultural *inter-connections* as opposed to common culture (Gilroy 1993; Hall 1992; Gooding-Williams 1998). This option is also considered by those working on Latina/o and Asian identity (Gracia 2000a; Gracia 2000b; Alcoff 2000; Shah 1994), though as suggested above, the prospects of finding a plausible way to characterize the historical and cultural connections are diminished as the group becomes more diverse. Moreover, insofar as a reconstruction of race in terms of history and experience will have to provide an interpretation of that history and experience, and so select what aspects to highlight, we re-encounter the problem of normativity.

One of the arguments that has been used to challenge the usefulness of the category of gender for feminist politics raises the concern that women are so diverse that there is no way to capture *what women are* that does not privilege some women as paradigmatic and others marginal. This is a not merely an abstract concern in the context of women’s studies, for there have been strands of feminist research that focus on White privileged women as if their issues and experiences are representative of all women. In developing my own account of gender I argued that theoretically privileging certain features of a group or

certain members of a group over others is not always pernicious, if the basis for privileging is justified by a legitimate purpose of the theory. In the case of feminist research, one legitimate purpose is to develop a framework that enables us to identify and better understand forms of injustice. Because my theory defines women as those who suffer from sex-based oppression, it theoretically privileges oppressed females. But this is justified given the purpose of the inquiry.

I suggested that an analogous argument might also hold for race. For example, there is a danger in determining what history and experiences should count as definitive of Blackness, or of Asianness, that a narrative would be constructed that privileges men, heterosexuals, the economically advantaged, the educated, etc. The suggestion that reconstructed races would be defined by those who are its members is, if we imagine it happening through some highly democratic process, one strategy of addressing this concern (Gooding-Williams, 1988). However, even democracy doesn't guarantee equitable inclusion. Given that the effects of such efforts are not merely symbolic, but also have substantial ramifications in law and politics, there is reason to be extremely cautious. It may be possible to provide a positive reconstruction of race or of particular races; my point here is to highlight the challenge of simultaneously accommodating the broad diversity of people who count as members of a race, and the selectivity involved in constructing a basis for group membership.

I agree with Alcoff that there are a variety of groups unified by social/historical background and/or culture, and these are valuable and are likely to persist. In the case of panethnicities, their formation and self-definition is still in progress. If we build on the positive reconstructions of race to envision the future of race, then we might pursue Alcoff's suggestion that the future of race lies in panethnicities, or what she calls (following David Goldberg) *ethnoraces*, that are unified around the history of being racialized as a group and the positive cultural forms that have evolved in response.

## B. *Ethnorace*

What exactly is an "ethnorace"? I've argued that there is a conception of *race* in terms of *racialized group* that is valuable for thinking about certain forms of embodied oppression. This is how I characterized it in section I:

A group is *racialized* (in context C) iff<sub>df</sub> its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the group is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.

How is an ethnonrace different from a race? Is the notion of an *ethnorace* more useful than race (as I've defined it)? In considering a more just future, should we aspire to preserve ethnoraces or eliminate them and the conditions

that sustain them?

Alcoff introduces the notion of *ethnorace* because social and historical reality does not seem to fit the standard classifications of race or ethnicity. For example, Latina/os as a group are not racially homogenous, although Latina/o (or Hispanic) in many contexts counts as a race. Some have suggested that a better strategy is to replace racial classification with ethnic classification. Ethnicities, as Alcoff is using the term, concern “cultural practices, customs, language, sometimes religion, and so on.” (Alcoff 2000, 25) Some ethnicities, in this sense, are sub-groups of existing races (all of the standard races include various ethnic groups); and some ethnicities cross racial lines.

Alcoff recommends that we think of currently racialized groups (perhaps especially groups such as “Latina/os”) in terms of *ethnoraces* rather than ethnicities for three main reasons<sup>18</sup>: (i) culture, especially the cultures of racialized groups, tends to be naturalized and to entail membership in a race. For example, as soon as one reveals information about one’s *culture* of origin, one is immediately racialized. If one has grown up in Mexico and is culturally Mexican, then regardless of how one physically appears, one is assumed to be Latina/o. (Alcoff 2000, 37-8) (ii) the racial coding of the body trumps cultural identification:

...race, unlike ethnicity, has historically worked through visible markers on the body that trump dress, speech, and cultural practices....in popular consciousness—in the implicit perceptual practices we use in everyday life to discern how to relate to each other—ethnicity does not “replace” race. When ethnic identities are used instead of racial ones, the perceptual practices of visual demarcation by which we slot people into racial categories continue to operate because ethnic categories offer no substituting perceptual practice. (Alcoff 2000, 38)

Because current social perception is conditioned to interpret “color” as culturally meaningful, classifications of individuals into ethnic groups will continue to rely on the physical markers of race. And (iii) positive group solidarity amongst currently racialized groups in the United States is likely to provoke anxiety and resistance because the long history of their subordination is a threat to the dominant American self-image. Insofar as the United States identifies with and takes pride in its commitment to equality and freedom for all, the affirmation of Otherness is a reminder of a shameful history that many long to erase. (Alcoff 2000, 39). Because racialization has been rhetorically crucial to the legitimizing narratives of white supremacy, deracialization will be resisted.

So because race and racialization is intimately bound up with culture and so ethnicity, Alcoff recommends *ethnorace*:

Unlike race, *ethnorace* does not imply a common descent, which is precisely what tends to embroil race in notions of biological

determinism and natural and heritable characteristics. Ethnorace might have the advantage of bringing into play the elements of both human agency and subjectivity involved in ethnicity—that is, an identity that is the product of self-creation—at the same time that it acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the visible body. (Alcoff 2000, 42)

Although intriguing and suggestive, I'm not sure I have a firm grasp on the notion. My best guess is that an ethnorace is a group of people who have been "marked" as of the same race (this is the uncontrolled racializing aspect), who share some common cultural elements and are collectively involved in the constitution of their shared identity. Ethnorace differs from race, as I've defined race, in including the conditions of common culture and agency in the construction of identity. Races, as I've characterized them, do not require any commonality in culture, commitment, or identity. They only require that members are similarly positioned structurally in society, whether they want to be or not, whether they even notice this or not. Races are more ascribed than embraced. However, plausibly Alcoff's ethnoraces count as a subset of races in my sense: if races are groups whose "color" affects their social position, ethnoraces are those among them that have developed a common culture and a commitment to shared identity. Some, but not all, races are ethnoraces.

Alcoff offers the notion of ethnorace not as a vision of the groups that should be part of a utopian future, but as a reconstruction of the notion of race that applies to (some of) us now and what the next step in the elimination of race might look like. I would assume that in a context where racialization is long past, ethnorace could be replaced by ethnicity. In effect, not only the condition of common descent, but also the practice of "color" marking would disappear.

Are ethnoraces a valuable interim category? This is controversial. I take it that Alcoff (and others) encourage the formation of ethnoraces because they highlight and encourage agency in group formation and acknowledge some degree of common subjectivity amongst those who are similarly racialized. Others, however, will urge us to resist racism by rejecting membership in "color"-defined groups, and resisting identities formed around "color". I prefer not to take a stand on this normative issue. In any case, we have reason to be theoretically attentive to the formation of such groups as we trace the workings of racializing practices and active resistance to them.

However, I believe that we also need to maintain a conception of *race* or *racialized group* that is not as concerned with culture or agency. For example, internationally adopted children of color who are brought up in the United States are ethnically American; often if they are adopted transracially they are not involved in the self-creation of an ethnic identity associated with their birthcountry, or even a panethnic identity. And yet they are raced; they don't become the race or ethnorace of their adoptive parents. (See also Corlett 2000, 227; Corlett 1999) At least we need some way of including such adoptees within the racialized group they are taken to belong to in order to understand

some of the injustices they face in the United States.

Moreover, although it is clear that ethnicity is racialized, race is also “ethnified” in problematic ways. Alcoff herself points out that because she is Latina, she is assumed to enjoy spicy food, even though in Panama (her ancestral home) the food is mild. (Alcoff 2000, 33) Racial stereotypes that allegedly capture “cultural” differences abound (Blacks enjoy basketball, Asians value education). In the context of adoption, a link between race and culture has been a site of controversy for decades. In the 1950’s, internationally adopted children were forced to assimilate and were allowed to have little, if anything, to do with the culture of their birthcountry. By the early 1970’s, transracial adoption (both domestic and international) was challenged for, among other things, denying a child “her” culture. By the 1990’s when international adoption boomed and domestic transracial adoption began to significantly increase, the pressure on adoptive parents to become educated in the child’s culture and to provide “cultural competence” in this culture to the child, remained very strong (in some cases being written into policies determining who could adopt). There is a way of seeing this as an enforcement of ethnorace.<sup>19</sup> Such practices are, I believe, at odds with Alcoff’s recommendations. However, they alert us to both concerns about the normative import of the category of ethnorace and also the need for a category that allows us to keep race and ethnicity apart.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I recommend that we opt for the account of race that I’ve proposed as useful for doing the work of identifying those affected by racialization and remedying its harms. I further propose that we employ the notions of culture, ethnicity, panethnicity, and ethnorace, for understanding the more constructive efforts to form new identities that do justice to our histories and our experiences. This proposal leaves open the possibility that currently racialized groups will either form a more encompassing identities describable in terms of shared history and experience (a pan-Latina/o identity) or will retain a variety of more local identities (Puerto-Rican, Brazilian, Cuban-American, Chicana/o).

I have argued (though the argument is far from conclusive) that in the long run, social justice does not require the formation or maintenance of groups defined by “color”, though “color”-based groups may be valuable as part of an interim strategy. Race, as I’ve proposed we understand it, is something to be rid of. Ethnicity or ethnorace, if understood as involving both “color” and culture may be helpful in the short term, but I believe that an ongoing social investment in “color” is harmful. In short, “after the revolution” we should anticipate that there will be no men and women, but there will be males and females (and herms, merms, ferms, etc.), and these sexual differences will have distinct but egalitarian implications. And although, we should hope, people will come in the broad variety of skin tones, shapes, and appearances they do now and will organize themselves around a rich array of cultural practices, there will be no races. Although from the point of view of justice, it would be irresponsible not to accord differences between our bodies some social

meaning, it would also be irresponsible not to overturn the meanings we now assume to be natural and right.

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## NOTES

- 1 Much of the material presented in this section can be found in more fully developed form in (Haslanger 2000). Thanks to Lawrence Blum, Jorge Garcia, Koffi Maglo, Ishani Maitra, Tommie Shelby, and Stephen Yablo for helpful discussion of the issues discussed here.
- 2 As we saw above, the everyday distinction between males and females leaves out the intersexed population that might have been given its own sex category (or categories); so it may be appropriate to introduce terms for additional sexes, e.g., 'merms', 'ferms', and 'herms' (Fausto-Sterling 1993). A study of the construction of sex—meaning the genealogy of sex categories—is itself an interesting and valuable

- project (*Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000*), but it is not my focus here.
- 3 It is by no means a simple question what criteria should be used to distinguish different sexes. Sexologists such as John Money have argued that there are ten indicators of sex including: chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, fetal hormonal sex, internal morphologic sex, external morphologic sex, brain sex, sex assignment and rearing, pubertal hormonal sex, gender identity and role, procreative sex. (*Fausto-Sterling 1995*). Clearly, not all of these indicators are anatomical. However, as I will be using the term, sex primarily concerns anatomy. Additional sex-related characteristics, femininity, feminine identity, etc. go beyond sex towards gender.
  - 4 Some theorists (*Delphy 1984*) focus on the economic exploitation of women in domestic relations of production; others (*Wittig 1981; Wittig 1982*) focus on sexual and reproductive exploitation under compulsory heterosexuality; others (*MacKinnon 1987*) focus on sexual objectification.
  - 5 This is a simplified version of the account I offer in (*Haslanger 2000*).
  - 6 These analyses allow that there isn't a common understanding of "sex" across time and place. On my account, gendered social positions are those marked by reference to features that are generally assumed in the context in question to either explain or provide evidence of reproductive role, whether or not these are features that we consider "sex".
  - 7 On this I am deeply indebted to (*Stevens 1999, Ch. 4*), and (*Omi and Winant 1994, esp. pp. 53-61*). I develop this definition more fully in (*Haslanger 2000*).
  - 8 As in the case of gender, I recommend that we view membership in a racial/ethnic group in terms of how one is viewed and treated regularly and for the most part in the context in question; though as before, one could distinguish being a member of a given race from functioning as one by considering the degree of one's entrenchment in the racialized social position (not on the basis of biology or ancestry). For more work that compares race and gender, see (*Thomas 1980, Appiah 1990, Corlett 1997*).
  - 9 For more on "thin" and "thick" identities, see (*Haslanger 2003*).
  - 10 It should also be part of that project to identify those reproductive (and potentially also erotic) differences that should be taken into account in order to achieve justice, i.e., in identifying legitimate sexual/sexuality differences.
  - 11 Note that there are several different questions at issue. Considering a just future when the effects of contemporary racialization have been remedied: i) Must the state, in its laws and policies, be "color-blind" or is attention to "color" differences required for justice? ii) Must we eliminate "color" categories in our social practices and our self-understandings in order to achieve justice? iii) Is there something socially valuable in "color" classification, and would its elimination destroy something valuable? iv) Even if not required for justice, would the elimination of "color" as a way of organizing ourselves socially be better overall? It may be helpful to rethink the discussion that follows with a greater attention to these different questions.
  - 12 Note that even though there is controversy over whether races are biologically meaningful categories, there is general consensus on the claim that "color" distinctions do not track biologically meaningful categories except to the extent that "color" takes on a meaning that has social implications.
  - 13 For a useful discussion of related issues, see (*Wasserstrom 1987; also Gotanda 1995*).
  - 14 This claim puzzles me: not only is it asserted without evidence (the nuclear family is, in fact, a relatively recent and socially specific phenomenon!), but it would seem that if one reproduces biologically, one cannot avoid having a child who looks

- like you, to some extent. Perhaps the idea is that because “looks like” is socially defined, one is in danger of not passing on the socially salient features if one mates with an out-group member.
- 15 There is reason to believe, in any case, that for many populations geographical isolation made it difficult not to mate primarily with others of the same “color”; is there any evidence that when a variety of “colors” are available, and there are no social sanctions, there is a preference for in-group mates?
- 16 What about health policy? Are there racially specific diseases or vulnerabilities that might make it important to have different health care options for people of different races? Are the explanations of the differences socio-economic or biological? Is there a basis for a parallel to the argument for gender here?
- 17 For example, Simón Bolívar, José Martí, and Che Guevara have promoted a pan-Latina/o solidarity (*Alcoff 2000b*, 27). There have also been moves, especially amongst feminists of color, to embrace mixed identity, e.g., (*Anzaldúa 1987*, *Zack 1993*, *Zack 1995*).
- 18 She also provides reasons for not thinking of Latinas/os as a race. On this see also (*Mendieta 2000*).
- 19 I agree that it is extremely important for transracially adopted children to be given the resources to develop positive self-esteem and to combat the racism they will confront. And in some cases this will involve building a connection to a community of people of the same race. However, my concern is that the argument for such involvement is often based on the idea that by virtue of having a race the child already has a culture; on this view, transracial adoption is inherently problematic because it uproots a child from her culture. (*Cf. Allen 1993*)