

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE PROBLEM OF
WHITE SENSIBILITY

by

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“Read the history, say the teachers. History tells us who we are, how we have behaved, therefore how we will behave. Does it? The history in the bookscreens, Earth History, that appalling record of injustice, cruelty, enslavement, hatred, murder—that record, justified and glorified by every government and institution, of waste and misuse of human life, animal life, plant life, the air, the water, the planet? If that is who we are, what hope for us? History must be what we have escaped from. It is what we were, not what we are. History is what we need never do again.” - Ursula K. Le Guin, “Paradises Lost,” 2002

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Abstract

This thesis proposes that whiteness serves as a barrier to understanding the cultural constructionist theory of race. Cultural constructionism, a social constructionist theory of race put forward by Chike Jeffers, argues that race is both politically and culturally constructed. This means that while the political hierarchy of races with the white race as dominant represents an important aspect of our contemporary conception of race, it is possible to imagine a future in which the hierarchy of races has been overcome and what remains of race is cultural groups. Political constructionists such as Sally Haslanger deny that race has a cultural dimension and therefore advocate for the eventual elimination of the race concept. I argue that being white makes it difficult to understand that race is cultural as well as political because of the dominant position of white people and the pervasive notion that whiteness represents a neutral and universal identity.

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Chapter 1

Situating Cultural Constructionism

1.1 Introduction to Chapter 1

In this chapter, I provide an explanation of the social constructionist theory of race; a summary of the significance of W.E.B. Du Bois' essay "The Conservation of Races" to philosophy of race and of the main interpretations of this essay by race theorists; and an explanation of how the cultural constructionist theory of race differs from the more commonly held political constructionist theory. This chapter provides the background information necessary to understand the contemporary debate on race preservation, or the question of whether racial identities could and should persist after racism has been eliminated from our social world. Political constructionists define race purely in terms of racial hierarchy, and as such do not consider race to have any positive dimensions worth preserving indefinitely [36, 409][23, 32]. Cultural constructionists, in contrast, hold that race is partly defined by cultural differences between racial groups, and therefore believe that the political dimension of race could be eliminated while the cultural dimension is preserved and celebrated [23, 412]. Kwame Anthony Appiah, Lucius Outlaw and Chike Jeffers are three prominent theorists of race who hold that racial identities could be fruitfully preserved in a post-racist world [38, 212]. While Appiah began as an anti-realist about race, his engagement with Outlaw prompted him to rethink his position on the elimination of race such that his later work leaves open the possibility that racial identities could be positively retained [38, 210][4, 39]. Jeffers' novel reading of "The Conservation of Races" finds that Du Bois is best understood as a cultural constructionist as well, and that his conception of the unique contribution each race has to offer society is consistent with the idea of race preservation [36, 423]. Jeffers develops his cultural constructionist theory of race further in the 2019 book *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*, which I expound in the final section of this chapter. Against the political constructionist position that racial hierarchy exhausts the race concept, Jeffers holds that culture is equally

salient in philosophical discussions of race and of race-related social issues, and argues that we should aim to preserve the cultural dimension of race after the elimination of racism [23, 57]. Sally Haslanger, a political constructionist whose position this thesis critiques, holds that we should not aim to preserve race because she does not consider race to have a cultural dimension [23, 27]. The details of her argument, which appears alongside Jeffers' argument in *What is Race?*, are treated in chapter two. This chapter provides an overview of the position Haslanger rejects when she insists that race cannot meaningfully be linked to culture.

1.2 The Social Construction of Race

'Social construction' is a widely used term in the humanities and social sciences to mean that some object or phenomenon is "caused or controlled by social and cultural factors rather than natural factors" [40]. Some aspects of our world that the term 'social construction' has been applied to are emotions, gender, sexuality, disability and race [40]. The theory of social construction is appealing because it offers an alternative explanation to biological essentialism without denying that a kind or trend exists [40]. For instance, social construction allows for an understanding of how women come to display certain traits such as domesticity at a higher rate than men due to social influences rather than any sort of biological difference between the sexes. Such an explanation accounts for the trend of women performing the majority of household labour without essentializing this behaviour; if children were socialized differently, the trend could disappear. As this example suggests, social construction opens up the possibility of change in the relevant social domain; as Ron Mallon writes, "if there is any core motivation of such research, it is the aim of showing that such objects are or were under our control: they could be, or might have been, otherwise" [40]. This insight has been particularly important to the understanding of gender and to the movement for transgender rights, since it follows that individuals are socialized into their gender roles and are not naturally predisposed to particular social roles by virtue of being born with particular genitalia or possessing particular sex chromosomes [6]. Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble* famously used social construction theory to explain that gender is best understood as a performance and

that even sex is socially constructed¹ [9, 173]. Social construction has also contributed significantly to philosophical discussions of race since the decline of biologically essentialist racial realism, or the erroneous belief that “we inherit, along with racial membership, a set of distinctive traits...including mental and behavioral tendencies, moral and intellectual talents or deficiencies, and physiological characteristics beyond a distinctive appearance,” in the late twentieth century [23, 41]. Social construction theory provides a sociohistorical explanation of racial diversity that avoids any reliance on ‘racial essences’ or biological distinctions and therefore allows philosophers to question race’s ontological status without denying the reality of race [23, 47]. The theory of social construction is not simply that human linguistic and social behaviors cause certain social objects to exist or persist, but rather stipulates that “ X ’s construction of Y is some sort of constitutive relationship” [40]. The difference between straightforwardly causal construction and constitutive construction is summarized by Mallon as follows:

Causal Construction: X causally constructs Y if and only if X causes Y to exist or to persist or X controls the kind-typical properties of Y .

Constitutive Construction: X constitutively constructs Y if and only if X ’s conceptual or social activity regarding an individual y is metaphysically necessary for y to be a Y . [40].

To illustrate the first instance, Mallon uses the example of a wristwatch. We may say that the social idea of a watch is normally necessary for all of the different materials—gears, a clock face, a wristband—to come together to form a watch, but that it is not metaphysically impossible to stumble upon a fully-formed watch in the wilderness that “had always been there” [40]. In the case of constitutive causation, Mallon draws on John Searle’s example of the social construction of a cocktail party from Searle’s 1995 book *The Construction of Social Reality*. Searle writes, “Part of being a cocktail party is *being thought to be a cocktail party*” [51, 33](emphasis mine); Mallon elaborates, “[a] particular gathering of persons can be a cocktail party only with the conceptual and social recognition of those gathered” [40]. The idea that race

¹In brief, Butler argues that although we tend to think of sex as binary, there are in fact a lot of people who do not fit neatly into either the ‘male’ or the ‘female’ category, no matter what criteria we are using to sort individuals into those categories (i.e., genitalia, chromosomes, gonads). It is social, not natural, to imagine that there are only two sexes and that every person will be easily categorized into one sex or the other [9].

is a modern invention aligns with the cocktail party example in that it asserts that race did not exist before the social idea of race and does not exist apart from it; it would be impossible to stumble upon a race in the wilderness [55, 186]. In his 2013 book *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, Paul C. Taylor compares the way race is socially constructed to the social construction of money [55, 186-187]. Money is ‘real’ in that it has social meaning, but leaving the social circumstances in which money is meaningful makes it ‘unreal’:

The green pieces of paper in my wallet are instances of legal tender. Each one really is worth a dollar. But is that an objective fact about these pieces of paper? If I visited a Stone Age people, or a camp of radical Luddites, would my little papers mean anything to anyone? If all human societies everywhere collapsed, a rock would still be a rock. But what happens to my dollar? [55, 185].

Taylor’s argument is that the same can be said of race—it “depends for its existence on human agreements” [55, 186]. In the next section, I address the social constructionist theory of race in greater detail.

1.2.1 Race and Social Construction

As mentioned above, the social constructionist theory of race emerged in response to the collapse of classic racialism, otherwise known as biological essentialism [23, 41]. The thesis of social constructionism about race can be summarized as the belief that it is “only through social and historical processes that the physical, biological, and geographical differences that we recognize as racial have come to gain some relatively stable significance” [23, 45]. As Taylor writes, in the early twentieth century, “experts agreed that studying racial physiology fails to illuminate much of anything, including culture and psychology, which, along with political and economic relations, were causes rather than effects of allegedly racial distinctions” [55, 150]. Race was thus reinterpreted “as a social product” rather than a biological fact [55, 150]. This shift in experts’ thinking about race did not eliminate racism from their rhetoric, however; it merely altered the discussion from “naturalizing” to “politicizing” differences between racial groups [55, 150]. Discrimination against members of subordinated racial groups

could no longer be justified on the basis of biological essentialism, but it could be justified on the basis of impoverished or underdeveloped culture [55, 155][23, 44][1, 65]. Elizabeth Anderson describes this sort of ‘impoverished culture’ justification for racial inequality in the U.S. thus:

Since racism and discrimination have apparently declined precipitously since the passage of antidiscrimination laws, the stubborn persistence of racial inequality must be due to pathologies internal to blacks and the black community. ... If only poor blacks would behave responsibly, they would not be disadvantaged [1, 63; 75].

This was the line of reasoning present in the infamous “Moynihan Report” of 1965², in which Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a high-ranking official in the U.S. Department of Labor—claimed that the socio-economic struggles of African Americans in the Watts neighbourhood of Los Angeles were due to a sort of cultural backwardness rather than a result of systemic racism [27]. The Moynihan Report had a “regrettably durable impact” on social policy and race relations in the United States, despite its false premises and conclusions about the causes of poverty in the Watts neighbourhood [27, 2]. The narrative of black cultural backwardness was still alive and well in 1997, when Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom wrote *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible*. The book claims that the Civil Rights Movement solved racial discrimination and therefore that the government has minimal responsibility to assist black people, who cause their own suffering [1, 75]. Referencing the high percentage of black families with single mothers, the authors write, “the first crucial step down the road to reducing the level of black poverty” is “different marital decisions” [56, 257]. As these examples show, the mere fact of reconceptualizing race as a social construct did not eliminate racist generalizations from the discourse on race and race relations; it did, however, provide a fruitful line of thinking for theorists hoping to understand the source of such generalizations.

Social constructionists developed a story of how race-thinking, defined by Taylor as “assigning generic meaning to bodies and bloodlines,” came to be such a significant

²The report was officially titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” but became known simply as “The Moynihan Report” after it was leaked to the press and spawned “a flurry of news articles” in 1965 [27, 2].

aspect of how we categorize people in the modern era [55, 50]. This story, as Jeffers describes it, “is that Europe’s colonization of most of the rest of the world...brought it about that differences of appearance and ancestry gained significance in the modern era in a systematic and global manner unlike anything that came before” [23, 52]. While social constructionists recognize that people were organized according to skin colour and ancestry prior to the modern era (i.e., the last 500 years), Taylor distinguishes pre-modern “race-thinking” from “modern racialism” [55, 54]. The difference that Taylor sees between ancient practices of organizing people according to bodily features and bloodlines and modern racialism is that modern racialism involved the development of a particular racial vocabulary that was then “built into the foundation of world-shaping” [55, 56]. This vocabulary included a particular emphasis on the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa as “the aboriginal home of a distinctive type of human being” [55, 61]. Modern racialism is also “self-conscious” in a way that ancient race-thinking was not; as Taylor writes, people in the modern world began to “explicitly appeal to race in organizing the social world and their perceptions of it” [55, 61]. Pre-modern race-thinking tended to be an ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ mentality rather than the explicit association between physical features, geographical place of origin and traits such as intelligence that defined modern racialism [55, 62]. As Taylor writes, the “white supremacist project” of modern racialism spread across the world and was imbued with scientific authenticity, providing a basis for racist distinctions between people and a justification for unequal treatment of non-white people [55, 55-56]. Even after the scientific explanations of racial differences were shown to be faulty, race-thinking retained its strength as a way of understanding the differences between people and of labeling some groups as inferior to others [55, 155].

Social constructionists find this story useful in terms of recognizing the effects of historical and present-day race-thinking on human populations without asserting that race is a biological reality [23, 45]. Returning again to Taylor’s money comparison, we can see how a social constructionist conceptualizes race as ‘real’ without it being “ontologically objective”:

Just as money-thinking, or dollar-thinking, takes pieces of paper and assigns them value as legal tender (or just as we, in the grip of dollar-thinking, create pieces of paper that we will assign value as legal tender),

so race-thinking takes human bodies and assigns them racial identities. We may use our dollars while thinking erroneously that they are backed by piles of gold somewhere, or without thinking much about what makes them worth what they're worth; similarly, we may interact with members of races while erroneously thinking that racial identities turn on biological facts, or without thinking much at all about what racial identities mean. [55, 186]

As Taylor demonstrates here, racial identities emerge in the context of social interactions and do not exist outside of social contexts, yet they still possess a certain reality that is not subjective; I cannot make my one-dollar bill transform into a one-hundred-dollar bill just by thinking about it differently, just as I cannot refuse to be assigned a race [55, 186]. Social constructionists believe that referring to a racial group is referring to a real group, but a group that is only real by virtue of social practices [23, 47]. While appearance and ancestry are significant aspects of the race concept for most social constructionists, they are significant “as a matter of social reality that we produce and maintain through widespread patterns of thought and behavior” [55, 41]. In other words, as Jeffers puts it, “race is real precisely because of the social practices that bring it into existence” [36, 406]. This position is contrasted with two other contemporary theoretical positions: racial anti-realism,³ an error-theory position that holds that there is no such thing as race, and biological realism,⁴ a position that holds that races are biologically real entities that correspond to populations with ancestral ties to particular geographical regions [23, 95][28]. Biological essentialism, as described in section 1.2, is no longer considered a viable position due to the lack of supporting evidence for the claim that races are genetically dissimilar in a way that

³This was Appiah’s position on race in his earlier work. Details on his racial anti-realist position can be found in section 1.3.5. This position is also defended by Joshua Glasgow [24][23] and by Lawrence Blum [7].

⁴Spencer writes, “what I will mean by a biologically real entity is an epistemically useful and justified entity in a well-ordered research program in biology” [23, 95]. Spencer’s position is nothing like the biological essentialism of old; it does not link mental or physical traits with racial membership. He argues instead that it is not a mistake to “investigate genetic explanations for racial disparities in health,” for instance, because the five races officially recognized in the United States correspond to “the set of human continental populations” identified by population geneticists [23, 104]. Another, distinct version of racial realism is deflationary realism, a position defended by Michael Hardimon holding that race is real but relatively uninteresting because the concept can only tell us very basic information about the origins of an individuals’ ancestors [28]

is linked to intellectual, cultural or behaviour traits [55, 150]. In the next section, I explain the distinction between two types of social construction of race: political constructionism and cultural constructionism.

1.2.2 Social Construction of Race: Two Branches

It is important to distinguish between two branches of the social construction of race, as the views associated with each branch diverge in significant ways and, as Jeffers argues, “[f]ruitful philosophical discussion of race going forward...will require serious attention to and critical comparison of these two positions” [23, 47]. The political constructionist theory of race, which Jeffers identifies as “the default position for a social constructionist,” holds that “race is made real wholly or most importantly by hierarchical relations of power” [23, 38; 48]. This is the position Haslanger defends in *What is Race?* and elsewhere [30][23]. Jeffers notes that political constructionists also tend to believe that the root of this hierarchical structure is European imperialism and the resultant “global sociopolitical system of white supremacy” [23, 48]. This is consistent with Haslanger’s description of the origin of race in her political account; as she writes, “the current dominant races emerged in a particular context of White racial domination” [23, 24]. Because the political theory of race emphasizes the power imbalance between racial groups and the ongoing discrimination of non-white groups, race is understood as an entirely negative feature of our social world that must be eliminated in order to achieve justice [36, 411]. The cultural constructionist account, in contrast, identifies another dimension of race that should be recognized in the present and that could be fruitfully preserved after racism has been eliminated: the cultural dimension of race [23, 57].

The cultural constructionist theory of race holds that “participation in distinctive ways of life, rather than positioning in hierarchical relations of power, is what is most important in making race real” [23, 50]. Unlike the political constructionist, the cultural constructionist can envision a future in which racial identities represent a positive, non-hierarchical dimension of social life [36, 411]. For the political constructionist, it is contradictory to imagine racial identities being preserved after racism has been eliminated, since race is defined as the political hierarchy of racial groups; retaining race would imply retaining this unjust hierarchy and thus stoking the fires

of racism. Haslanger’s theory advocates for the eventual elimination of race on these grounds [23, 171]. The cultural constructionist, in contrast, holds that the preservation of race beyond the elimination of racism is a laudable goal, since race has much to offer that is valuable [23, 58]. Beyond the question of race preservation, the two positions also differ with regards to how they understand contemporary racial issues, such as unequal outcomes in education [23, 66]. While the political constructionist can point to “inequality in basic access [and] funding, and unequal treatment of students by teachers and other staff with regard to discipline and the provision of opportunities,” a purely political description of racial issues in education misses the important element of curriculum design [23, 67]. Specifically, the privileging of white culture and history in education—otherwise known as Eurocentric bias—has been cited as one reason for lower graduation rates among students of colour [23, 67]. While the political constructionist identifies important aspects of the issue of racism in education, only a cultural constructionist theory can account for both the political *and* cultural aspects of this problem, thus allowing for a more comprehensive solution.

Jeffers notes that it is important to distinguish between the maximally robust versions of each branch of social constructionism and his own position, which does not match up with the maximally robust version of either theory [23, 57]. He argues that it is not necessary to accept the maximally robust version of one of the branches and that one can instead accept some tenets of the maximally robust version of each position while rejecting others [23, 55]. He describes the tenets of a maximally robust political constructionist theory of race as follows:

- (1) differential power relations are what first brought racial difference into existence and are thus fundamental in being the origin of races;
- (2) differential power relations count as most important in the present to the reality of race, which is to say that properly understanding any event, process, or state of affairs that involves race always requires understanding how power relations are at stake, whereas there is nothing else that must similarly always be understood;
- and (3) differential power relations are essential to race, making it the case that if an egalitarian state of affairs in which appearance and ancestry do not correlate with positions in a hierarchy is achieved, race will be no more [23, 56-57].

Jeffers accepts the first premise of the maximally robust political constructionism while rejecting the second and third premises because he believes that culture is equally important in the present to the reality of race and therefore holds that race in its cultural form could outlive racism [23, 57]. Jeffers describes the tenets of a maximally robust cultural constructionist position thus:

- (1) the origin of racial difference is to be found in divergences in ways of life; (2) only cultural difference must always be understood in order to understand the reality of race in the present; and (3) cultural difference is essential to race, such that the end of distinctive ways of life would mean the end of race [23, 57].

Jeffers' position could not be described as a maximally robust cultural constructionism because, like the political constructionist, he takes European imperialism to be the origin of race [23, 57]. The second and third premises are not representative of his position, either, as he holds that both political and cultural dimensions are important for understanding the present reality of race and because he can imagine either dimension living on while the other dies out (though he hopes to see the political dimension die out while the cultural dimension is preserved). As he writes, "Culture cannot be essential in this way if, as I hold, race is political at its origin. Politics cannot be essential if, as I believe, a future in which race is merely cultural is possible" [23, 58]. His position is accurately called "cultural constructionism" because, contrary to the political constructionist position, he considers culture to be of equal importance in our present understanding of race, and because of his normative claim that we should work to preserve racial culture while fighting against the political hierarchy of races [23, 58].

While cultural constructionism can arguably be traced back to Du Bois' work in the late 19th century, it is the less commonly held position for a social constructionist about race and is often "simply ignored as a distinct option" [23, 51]. As Jeffers writes, political constructionism is "the norm among social constructionists" and seems the obvious choice due to its explanatory power in terms of "the historical development of racial difference," i.e., by linking race formation to European imperialism [23, 51]. Political constructionism also "appears most persuasive in explaining how race is made real socially, partly through the impact of racial categorizations on personal

experience” [23, 53]. On this latter point, political constructionism appears to explain why some people feel little or no connection to their racial group [23, 53]. Further discussion of this can be found in section 1.4. Suffice for the moment to say that as Jeffers argues, the cultural constructionist position does not require that all members of a race participate equally in the culture, nor is the theory defeated by the existence of people who are alienated from their race’s culture or do not identify with it for whatever reason, because it is a theory based on probabilities [23, 53; 65]. As section 1.4 explains more fully, Jeffers argues that the political constructionist theory of race elides the significance of culture to race and in so doing fails to provide an adequate account of how race functions in our social world [23, 57]. In the next section, I provide a summary of the debate among theorists of race over interpretations of Du Bois’ essay “The Conservation of Races,” a seminal text for philosophy of race. Jeffers’ novel interpretation of Du Bois as a cultural constructionist is an important starting point for understanding Jeffers’ position on race and race preservation.

1.3 Du Bois and Critical Debate on “The Conservation of Races”

W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1897 essay, “The Conservation of Races” (hereafter abbreviated as “Conservation”) introduced the idea of race as a fruitful topic for philosophical reflection, and his work is largely considered responsible for the birth of philosophy of race as a distinct subfield [25]. As Jeffers writes, “contemporary philosophy of race has built itself up in large part through discussion of this essay,” in which, on Jeffers’ reading, Du Bois advocates for a cultural constructionist theory of race [36, 414]. I will return to Jeffers’ novel reading of Du Bois’ essay in section 1.3.4. Prior to Jeffers offering this interpretation in 2013, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Lucius Outlaw were the main contributors to the debate on the correct interpretation of Du Bois’ essay [38, 204]. In his 1985 article “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” Appiah criticizes Du Bois for what he sees as Du Bois’ continued reliance on a scientific definition of race [2, 207]. At the time of publication, Appiah was an anti-realist about race, meaning that he denied that the term ‘race’ points to anything real in the world; as he famously wrote at the end of his 1985 article, “The truth is that there are no races; there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask “race” to do for us” [2, 35]. At this time, Appiah did not see the value in preserving racial identities,

since he saw race as a pernicious fiction [2, 36]. Outlaw took issue with Appiah’s reading of Du Bois, and responded in his 1996 essay “Conserve Races? In Defense of W.E.B. Du Bois” by claiming that Appiah’s strategy of criticizing the individual elements of Du Bois’ definition of race was the wrong approach, as Du Bois is best understood as offering a “cluster concept” of race [47, 209]. Outlaw’s own position on race takes into account sociocultural and biological elements, and recognizes the value of preserving racial identities beyond the elimination of racial hierarchy [47]. In this section, I provide a brief exposition of “Conservation”; summarize the debate between Appiah and Outlaw and the evolution in Appiah’s position on race as outlined by Jeffers [38]; and explain Jeffers’ intervention in this debate on “Conservation” with his cultural constructionist reading of Du Bois.

1.3.1 Exposition of Du Bois’ “Conservation”

Jeffers has noted that Du Bois’ essay “The Conservation of Races” holds “something like the significance for contemporary philosophy of race and African American philosophy that Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* holds for modern epistemology and philosophy of mind” [38, 204]. Du Bois delivered “Conservation” as a speech to the first meeting of the American Negro Academy (ANA) on March 5, 1897 in Washington, D.C., when he was 29 years old, and it was published later that year as one of the academy’s “occasional papers” [11, 228]. The ANA was founded by Reverend Alexander Crummell as “an organization of black intellectuals who through their scholarship and writing were dedicated to the promotion of higher education, arts, and science for African Americans as part of the overall struggle for racial equality” [32]. In “Conservation,” Du Bois—an historian, social critic and philosopher—argues for a sociohistorical account of race that sees each racial group as possessing a distinct spiritual message for humanity [11, 232]. Du Bois claimed that is the duty of each racial group to deliver their message to the world, a goal the black race had yet to fully achieve in 1897, according to Du Bois [11, 232]. He begins his address by noting the aversion most African Americans experience to discussions of race, which inevitably label them as politically, intellectually and morally inferior to members of other races, and their resultant tendency to “minimize race distinctions,” speaking instead of “human brotherhood” [11, 228]. Yet Du Bois rejects this sort of denial of

race's reality, writing, "Nevertheless, in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races" [11, 229]. He remarks that recognizing racial distinctions is essential when considering the political ramifications of racial discrimination, while at the same time urging his listeners to "rise above the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage-discrimination and lynch law, to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy" [11, 229]. Du Bois then points out the difficulties in defining race, showing how the scientific definition of linking physical features with particular races has failed, as "these criteria of race are most exasperatingly intermingled" [11, 229]. He argues that despite these difficulties, the significance of race in human history cannot be overstated, as race constitutes "the central thought of all history"—a "universal" idea whose "invention" has driven "human progress," as much as we may wish to deny it [11, 230]. Du Bois then offers his definition of race: "a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life" [11, 230]. It is this definition that Appiah dissects and ultimately uses to dismiss Du Bois' essay for failing to provide a sociohistorical account of race, as will be discussed in the next section.

1.3.2 Appiah's Argument Against Du Bois

Appiah's engagement with "Conservation" in his article "The Uncompleted Argument" was responsible for bringing Du Bois' essay to prominence and "helped stimulate debates about the nature and existence of race that remain central to philosophy of race today," according to Jeffers [38, 204]. In the article, Appiah argues that despite the common assumption that Du Bois presented a sociohistorical account of race in this essay, and despite Du Bois' explicit rejection of racial biology, he is in fact still reliant on the scientific notion of race of his day [2, 25]. Appiah demonstrates this reliance by examining the individual elements of Du Bois' definition of race, showing that each element is either incoherent or reduces to the scientific notion. He begins with Du Bois' reference to "common blood," which he concludes "can mean little more than "of shared ancestry" [2, 26]. This element of Du Bois' definition implies that race is inherited and therefore aligns with the du jour biological essentialism,

“which presupposes common features in virtue of common biology derived from common descent” [2, 26]. Appiah then dismisses the “common language” element of Du Bois’ definition as “plainly inessential,” noting that members of a race cannot be said to share a language [2, 26]. As for the element of “common history and traditions,” Appiah calls this circular reasoning, as “sharing a common group history cannot be a criterion for being members of the same group, for we would have to be able to identify the group in order to identify its history” [2, 27]. After removing those elements of the definition that are not fruitful or coherent, Appiah finds that “[w]e are left with common descent and the common impulses and strivings” [2, 27]. Since he notes that “common descent and the characteristics which flow from it are part of the scientific conception of race,” it remains for these common impulses and strivings to do the work of creating a sociohistorical conception of race [2, 28]. Appiah argues that if it is possible to identify someone as a member of a race without knowledge of their “impulses,” then this cannot function as a criterion for racial membership [2, 28]. Since such identification is possible, Appiah concludes that Du Bois’ claim regarding shared racial impulses as an identity criterion is “mere bravado” [2, 28]. We are left, then, with a scientific conception of race rather than a sociohistorical one. Appiah therefore concludes, on Jeffers’ account, that “what [Du Bois] opposes in “Conservation” is not so much the idea that physical difference is significant but rather the association of black physical difference with inferiority” [38, 208]. On Appiah’s reading, Du Bois retains “racial essence” while denying that “the capacities determined by [black-skinned people’s] essence were inferior to those of the white-skinned” [2, 34]. Outlaw took issue with Appiah’s interpretation of “Conservation,” and published a response and defense of Du Bois in 1992 [45], later refining his argument in a 1996 article that will be discussed in the next subsection.

1.3.3 Outlaw’s Defense of Du Bois

Outlaw’s 1996 article “Conserve Races? In Defense of W.E.B. Du Bois” outlines his disagreements with Appiah’s reading of “Conservation” and offers an alternative interpretation of the essay. Outlaw argues that Du Bois is defending a theory of race that combines cultural and biological elements, though he clarifies that the relations between biological and cultural aspects of race “are not of a mechanical, deterministic

sort” but are involved in a “complex interplay” [47, 148; 144]. Outlaw is careful to note that although his definition of race includes biology, “the biological features referred to when making racial distinctions are always conscripted into projects of cultural, political, and social meaning-construction” [47, 145]; his is not a biologically deterministic understanding of race. For Outlaw, and on his reading of Du Bois, race is best understood “as a cluster concept that draws together under a single word references to a sociohistorically varying collection of sets of biological, cultural and geographic factors, which collection is then thought of as characteristic of a particular population” [47, 145]. Accordingly, no single feature is necessary to be considered a member of a racial group, nor does the absence of a particular feature exclude someone from a racial group; as Outlaw writes, “Du Bois took care not to characterize a race by regarding the defining features (physical characteristics, geography, cultural practices, and traditions) as essential and invariant” [47, 152]. Further, Outlaw’s reading of Du Bois is compatible with the idea of racial identities “remain[ing] a feature of human life indefinitely” [39, 209], and Outlaw explicitly expresses his own desire for the preservation of racial identities in the article, calling the elimination of race “unlikely and unnecessary” [47, 146]. Outlaw argues that if we think of Du Bois’ definition of race as a cluster concept, then Appiah’s strategy of analyzing and evaluating each individual element of the definition is misplaced [47, 148]. “Common language” could be a useful criterion for a cluster concept of race, as could “common history”; Outlaw claims, against Appiah, that the latter condition would only be circular “if common history were the only criterion” instead of one of many possible defining features of a racial group [47, 149]. For Outlaw, it is important to note that Du Bois was “deeply committed to taking culture seriously” [47, 152]. Jeffers’ reading of “Conservation” picks up on this strand of Outlaw’s argument.

1.3.4 Jeffers’ Novel Interpretation of “Conservation”

In his 2013 article “The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘The Conservation of Races,’” Jeffers argues that Du Bois’ definition of race is best understood as a form of social constructionism that he later termed cultural constructionism. Jeffers sees Du Bois as rejecting both a biological and a purely political

understanding of race, and “demand[ing] that we pay greater attention to race’s cultural dimensions” [36, 404]. He argues that “Conservation” shows the careful reader that Du Bois “distinguishes between and evaluates not two but three alternative answers before he asserts the supremacy of the sociohistorical—or, more precisely, the *cultural*—option” [36, 408](emphasis in original). Jeffers demonstrates that Du Bois is best understood as a cultural constructionist by first focusing closely on the opening statements of “Conservation” [36, 408]. Here, as Jeffers points out, Du Bois references the biological theory of race by mentioning “the insinuation of black inferiority” and “certain assumptions as to his natural abilities” that tend to accompany discussions of race and which naturally deter African Americans from such discussions because they reject, as Jeffers puts it, “the biological assumptions of this discourse” [36, 408]. Next, Du Bois references that political dimension of race by mentioning “the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage discrimination and lynch law,” urging his audience of the need to “rise above” these issues and to “survey the whole question of race in human philosophy” [11, 229]. As Jeffers sees it, Du Bois’ opening statements show a rejection on the part of African Americans of “the significance of biological distinctions that feature in mainstream thinking and talking about race,” while also demonstrating the importance of the political dimension of race to the majority of African Americans [36, 409]. This leads Jeffers to conclude that the first theory of race that Du Bois considers in “Conservation” is a political constructionist position.

Jeffers argues that while most commentators have overlooked the political constructionist position as a theoretical option considered by Du Bois in “Conservation,” “recognizing it makes “Conservation” clearer” [36, 409]. On Jeffers’ reading, Du Bois acknowledges the political dimensions of race while denying “that a political relationship is all there is to race” [36, 409]. Du Bois believed that the political theory could highlight certain important racial issues in America—certain “pressing...practical difficulties” faced by African Americans—but that a complete theory of race must move beyond these “smaller questions...to survey the whole question of race” [36, 408]. The second theory of race that Jeffers takes Du Bois to consider in “Conservation” is the scientific theory, “which holds that physical differences between human beings

indicate their division into biologically distinct groups called races” [36, 410]. In reference to the physical traits typically remarked on by scientists (“color, hair, cranial measurements”), Du Bois indicates that he does not consider such traits as useful to defining racial groups [36, 410]. Jeffers sees Du Bois as not rejecting wholesale the possible contribution of science to a theory of race but rather as recognizing that science can represent only “part of race’s reality” [36, 410]; Du Bois’ reference to the “three great families of human beings” identified by scientists of his day indicates that he still puts some stock in science, but he ultimately holds that science alone will not be able to explain the complexity of race [36, 410]. Du Bois can therefore be understood as considering and finding inadequate both the political and the biological theories of race before introducing a sociohistorical, cultural theory of race [36, 411].

Du Bois’ recognition and valorization of the cultural dimension of race is seen in his claim about the cultural particularity of racial groups; in “Conservation,” he repeatedly emphasizes the unique and important cultural contribution the black race can make to America, arguing that African Americans have a duty to uphold their black identities in order to ensure that this contribution is made in full [11, 233]. As Jeffers says of Du Bois’ position, “If black people fail to value their racial identity, they do a disservice not only to themselves but to the world as a whole. They rob themselves and the world of the valuable cultural gifts that their particularity enables them to develop” [38, 206]. On Jeffers’ reading of Du Bois, “Conservation” supports the idea of preserving race in its cultural form even after racism has been eliminated, and such a goal can be seen as consistent with Du Bois’ political agenda more broadly [37, 223]. As Jeffers writes,

If racial identities are, properly understood, cultural identities, a strong sense of attachment to one’s race is as normal as any kind of pride in being part of a culture. In the case of the black race, Du Bois wants to go further: it is not just normal but imperative that black people value their racial identity. ...[G]iven his view that races are characterized in part by the fact that they strive for various ideals, the existence of racial diversity is directly linked to human progress [38, 206].

Through this novel reading of Du Bois, which disambiguates between political constructionism and cultural constructionism, Jeffers introduces a theory of race that is

consistent with a valorization of racial identities and their indefinite preservation [36, 404]. He elaborates on his cultural constructionist theory in the 2019 book *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*, which I discuss at length in section 1.4. Returning first to Appiah’s theory of race, Jeffers describes an important evolution in Appiah’s thought over the course of his career that takes him from racial anti-realist to a theorist who can understand and defend the position Jeffers and Outlaw hold on the preservation of racial identities.

1.3.5 Appiah’s Evolution

In his chapter titled “Du Bois, Appiah, and Outlaw on Racial Identity” in *The Oxford Handbook on Philosophy and Race*, Jeffers argues that Appiah’s position on race has undergone a significant evolution over the course of his academic career, from antirealism about race to something like social constructionism [38, 46]. Accordingly, Appiah’s position on the preservation of racial identities has also changed, and his later work expresses optimism about the possibility that racial identities could outlive racism and continue to have positive value in an egalitarian world [38, 212][4, 39]. While there are still notable distinctions between Appiah’s position and Outlaw and Jeffers’ positions on race (which are themselves distinct in that Outlaw’s position involves biology), Jeffers sees “a welcome point of consensus” between all three thinkers on the question of race preservation [38, 212]. This consensus means that all three thinkers could be said to support a world with racial equality as opposed to a post-racial world whose goal is “to recognize ourselves as raceless” [39, 1]. This distinction is important for Jeffers, as the goal of racial equality “is compatible with racial difference continuing to matter,” while the goal of a post-racial world is not [39, 1].

In his aforementioned 1985 essay “The Uncompleted Argument,” Appiah takes an antirealist position on race after surveying the current research in human genetics and sharing the finding that two people within a race are almost as genetically dissimilar as two people from different racial groups [2, 21]. Given that the similarities between members of different racial groups far outweigh the differences when it comes to genetics, the biological theory of race must be dismissed [2, 31]. Yet, Appiah admits, “To establish that race is relatively unimportant in explaining biological differences

between people, where biological difference is measured in proportion to differences in loci on the chromosome, is not yet to show that race is unimportant in explaining cultural difference” [2, 31]. However, the way Appiah understands ‘cultural difference’ in this article is not in a social constructionist sense; directly after making this statement, Appiah continues to consider biological explanations for the differences we observe between racial groups, such as the far-fetched theory that “large differences in intellectual and moral capacity are caused by differences at very few loci [the region of a chromosome occupied by a gene] and that, at these loci, all (or most) black-skinned people differ from all (or most) white-skinned or yellow-skinned ones” [2, 31]. After stating that there is “little evidence for any such proposition and much against it,” Appiah is back where he started with his antirealist stance on race [2, 31].

In his contribution to the 1996 book *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, Appiah argues that “the concept of race developed in this country neither adequately explains existing American social distinctions nor properly acts as a surrogate for culture or identity” [57, 4-5]. His essay, entitled “Race, Culture, and Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” explores the role of race in individual identity formation. Appiah considers and rejects the thesis that races should be considered “cultural subgroups” in America, arguing that members of a racial group do not hold common beliefs and that calling races distinct cultures invokes authenticity scripts about “proper ways of being black,” for example [3, 99]. He suggests that we ought to be using the term “racial identity” when we wish to speak of race [3, 32]. However, as Jeffers notes, “Appiah has not made the same distinction in more recent work and has thus drifted toward social constructionism” [23, 46]. Appiah’s position on race preservation at this point in time was negative; he cautions readers against “making racial identities too central to our conceptions of ourselves,” claiming that “if we are to move beyond racism we shall have, in the end, to move beyond current racial identities” [3, 32]. It is noteworthy that this is Haslanger’s current position and one that Appiah rejects in his later work. Even in this chapter, Appiah acknowledges that there are positive ways of relating to one’s racial identity, such as demanding respect “*as a black*” rather than “despite being black” [3, 98](emphasis in original). Yet Appiah at this time was still wary of the tension that arises, as Jeffers puts

it, “between valuing not just racial identity but any collective identity, on the one hand, and valuing individual autonomy, on the other” [38, 211]. Appiah’s concern was that collective identities ultimately restrict individual freedom by creating and enforcing authenticity conditions that may interfere with individual self-expression [3, 32]. However, his later work such as his 2005 book *The Ethics of Identity* takes a more favourable stance on embracing social identities, with a focus in the final section on “the compatibility of concern for specific social identities with concern for our shared identity as human beings” [38, 211]. This is also the subject of his 2006 book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.

In his 2007 essay “Does Truth Matter to Identity” from the book *Race or Ethnicity? On Black and Latino Identity*, Appiah expresses optimism about the future of racial identities. In response to Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s argument that racial identities must be eliminated “because it looks as though they keep refiguring themselves somehow as mechanisms of oppression,” Appiah responds, “it is not yet clear that this is what they must be” [4, 39]. He also argues, against his earlier position, that racial identities can be normatively grounded without their members sharing distinctive biological properties [4, 41]. He speaks of racial group membership in this essay as being “transmitted through families” and argues that “if a property is transmitted within families, it is likely to have a human significance, whether it goes hand-in-hand with any intrinsic properties or not” [4, 41-21]. Appiah ends the chapter with three questions intended to test whether a social identity should be preserved as it is or whether it is “in need of abandonment or reform” [4, 44]. While these questions are geared specifically towards Latinx identities in this context, they are equally applicable to racial identities (or to other racial identities if you take ‘Latinx’ to be a race; taking a position on this is beyond the scope of this thesis). Appiah’s three questions are as follows:

Does identifying as an X enable things of value in the lives of the individuals who take them up through identification? Are those who don’t identify as X’s unharmed by the existence of X’s? Are people in general better off with being-X around as a social identity available to some than they would be without it? [4, 44](emphasis in original).

With these questions, Appiah demonstrates that his position has evolved significantly beyond the stance he took on racial identities in 1985. He began by denying that race exists because it has no biological basis, but came to a position where he recognizes that races do exist as social identities and even acknowledges that racial identities have “value in the lives of individuals” and could conceivably survive beyond racism [4, 44]. This position is consistent with Outlaw and Jeffers’ stances on race preservation. In the final section of this chapter, I elaborate on the details of Jeffers’ cultural constructionist position as he outlines it in *What is Race?*.

1.4 Jeffers’ Cultural Constructionism

In his two chapters in *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*, Jeffers defends a cultural constructionist theory of race that he argues is superior to the political constructionist theory more commonly held by social constructionists [23, 59]. He criticizes political constructionism “for downplaying the importance of culture in the present and for leading us to conclude that race cannot survive the end of racism” [23, 193]. Recall from the above discussion of the two branches of social constructionism that Jeffers’ cultural constructionist position has much in common with the political constructionist account; he explains the distinction in terms of how each branch of social constructionism conceives of the significance of “hierarchical relations of power” in the making of race [23, 48]. Recall that a political constructionist thinks that racial hierarchy is the most important way or only way in which race is socially constructed [23, 48]. In contrast, Jeffers’ cultural constructionist theory sees “participation in distinctive ways of life” as equally significant in the present social reality of race [23, 50]. Importantly, Jeffers does not deny the significance of differential power relations between racial groups [23, 57]; as noted above, he agrees with the first tenet of a maximally robust political constructionist account, which states that the origin of race is “the global sociopolitical system of white supremacy” [23, 48]. Jeffers’ account of race is termed ‘cultural constructionism’ due to his rejection of the political constructionist’s claim “that politics is more important than culture at present” when it comes to defining race [23, 48]. This position implies a different normative stance on the preservation of racial identities as compared to political constructionists; while the political constructionist sees the end of racism as the end of race tout court,

Jeffers writes, “I see the potential for a transition from cultural difference being one component of a social reality to being the entirety of that reality” [23, 58]. This distinction is highly significant, as it has implications in terms of how proponents of each theory envision a post-racist world. As Jeffers writes in his 2013 article in which he introduced cultural constructionism as a distinct option, “[w]hile the political theory of race gives us clear reason to hope for and work toward the abolition of races, a theory according to which races are cultural groups suggests the possibility that races represent valuable forms of life to be celebrated rather than eradicated” [36, 412]. In other words, a political constructionist imagines a post-racial world as the ultimate goal, while a cultural constructionist is aiming for racial equality.

Further, Jeffers argues that cultural constructionism helps us understand more clearly various race-related issues in society which the political theory can only partially account for, such as inequalities in education, opposition to inter-racial marriage, and racial stereotyping [23, 66-70]. As discussed above, a theory of racism in education that fails to account for the phenomenon of white culture and history dominating school curricula is inadequate; considerations of the cultural dimension of race are essential to properly addressing this issue. As Jeffers writes, “it would be manifestly unsatisfactory for us to achieve equality in access, funding, discipline, and opportunities while doing nothing about the traditional privileging of white people, their accomplishments, and their perspectives in school materials and teaching methods” [23, 67]. The same is true of a purely political description of many other racial issues in society, as Jeffers argues [23, 67-70]. Recognizing the cultural dimension of race is thus essential for combatting racism in the present, on Jeffers’ account. He writes,

The normative implication of this view is that dedication to fighting racism requires sensitivity to racism’s ability to operate in two seemingly contradictory ways: it creates and sustains difference where there ought to be none, and it disparages and suppresses difference where it ought to be respected and valued. [23, 71]

An ideal, post-racist world, from Jeffers’ perspective, would result from eliminating the first kind of difference while promoting and upholding the second kind of difference [23, 71].

Jeffers provides a three-fold explanation of why we ought to understand race as cultural [23, 62]. Firstly, the fact of living in a society where people are sorted into races implies a particular kind of human culture that is distinct from that of societies (of the distant past, for instance, or extremely isolated populations) where people are not organized into races [23, 62]. The cultural distinction between raced and raceless societies demonstrates that culture is a part of race from its inception, just as the political dimension is [23, 63]. Secondly, the social practice of sorting people into different races leads to the development of different ways of life for members of different racial groups [23, 63]. Jeffers uses the example of people of different African ethnicities who were transported via the slave trade to countries in the Americas, where they developed new musical styles such as jazz, samba and calypso [23, 63]. These “new cultural creations” are rightly considered “products of black culture” rather than “products of the distinctive ethnic groups of old” [23, 63]. Thirdly, as Jeffers writes, “racial groups are also shaped culturally by historical patterns and events preceding racial formation” [23, 63]. Black people in the present can feel a connection to historical sites such as the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, for instance, a place that did not have ‘black people’ because no racial designations were recognized in that place and time [23, 63]. While this might seem anachronistic—and it is, to some extent—there is also “something clearly right” about it, for Jeffers; the people of Great Zimbabwe can be thought of as “one’s people” by black people today because of “an ancestral connection to Africa made significant by the social reality that being black is significant” [23, 64]. This is similar to the way some white people take pride in ancient Greeks and Romans⁵[23, 64]. The political constructionist theory of race does not account for any of these forms of cultural significance, but it is not clear to Jeffers that “the committed political constructionist has reason as yet to deny anything I have said”; since Jeffers recognizes “the political origin of race,” his theory’s addition “of cultural significance arising in the wake and as part of this process of origination may be seen as helpful detail, rather than harmful challenge” [23, 65].

One aspect of cultural constructionism that political constructionists do tend to take issue with is the idea that the cultural dimension of race that Jeffers discusses

⁵The valorizing of ancient Greeks and Romans has recently become part of white supremacist ideology in the United States, with far-right extremists holding that ancient Greek and Rome represent the origins of white culture [49].

cannot be understood in terms of ethnicity rather than race. Although political constructionists tend to advocate for the preservation of cultural diversity, they often use the term ‘ethnicity’ to account for apparent cultural differences between racial groups [23, 27][55, 117]. It is generally understood that ethnicity spans racial groups and does not require similarities in physical appearance across members, while race does require similarity in physical features; therefore, ethnicity is said to be cultural while race “points to the body” [55, 113]. For Jeffers, this explanation is not incorrect, but it is inadequate, as race can also be said to have a cultural dimension [23, 61]. As he writes, “Culture is not displacing the centrality of the body, in my view, but rather serving as a key factor in explaining how the body is socially meaningful in cases of racial difference” [23, 61]. In support of his position, Jeffers explains that it is possible to imagine “people feeling cultural pride in both their race and their ethnicity, where these are not the same thing,” such as an Afro-Cuban woman who celebrates both her blackness and her Latina identity [23, 61]. Jeffers asserts that the pride this woman expresses in her blackness “is racial pride, and it can be felt without having a biologically essentialist understanding of racial identity” [23, 62]. Further, her black pride “involves valuing black bodies and their activities in the face of their historical devaluation,” which historical specification “helps to make it obvious beyond a shadow of a doubt that race is not being confused here with ethnicity or any other social category” [23, 62].

Some opponents of cultural constructionism argue that race cannot be cultural because there are people who do not feel connected to their racial identity [23, 53]. Jeffers notes that white people are particularly susceptible to the impression that race has “little or no impact on their life,” which can lead to the mistaken impression that culture plays a negligible role in the experience of race [23, 53]. This feature of whiteness will be treated in greater detail in chapter two. Theorists who deny the cultural dimension of race can also point to cases of transracial adoptions where an individual is isolated from their racial group and does not feel a particular tie to their race [23, 65]. The mistake in this argument about exceptions, for Jeffers, is that one need not posit that all members of a cultural group are “equally invested and engaged in reproducing a specific set of customs” [23, 66]; in fact, he writes, it is inevitable that in any cultural group there will be a spectrum of investment, from members

who are deeply committed and knowledgeable about the culture, to members who are mildly familiar with the traditions of the group and perhaps indifferent to their preservation, to those who reject the culture entirely [23, 66]. For Jeffers,

What makes it the case that there is a culture of the group to speak of is . . . there being many group members whose identification with the group is connected with investment and engagement in practices that they take to be distinctively related to the group's existence, which is a state of affairs compatible with a significant amount of diversity in what is taken to be distinctive and in how invested and engaged group members are [23, 66].

As this excerpt makes clear, Jeffers' theory of racial culture is best understood as accounting for probabilities, not homogeneity. His theory is based on trends which can be observed among members of a race, not on the idea that every member of a race will behave in the same way. For this reason, examples of people who have limited exposure to the culture of their racial group do not collapse the theory that race has a cultural dimension, in the same way that an example of a black person who had never experienced a specific form of racism—i.e., being stopped by police while driving or walking on a public street—would not collapse the political theory of race [23, 66]. The mistaken assumption that whiteness is an unmarked or neutral identity is more complex and will be treated in greater detail in chapter two. For the moment, it is sufficient to note, as Jeffers does, that “[i]t is precisely one aspect of how race may shape us that one's whiteness may be systematically hidden from view even as the relative privileges flowing from said whiteness are enjoyed” [23, 54].

In his reply to the other theories of race offered in *What is Race?*, Jeffers addresses a potential problem with his own theory: by advocating for the preservation of race as culture, his theory could be seen as encouraging ‘white pride’ in the sense of endorsing white supremacy [23, 199]. Jeffers claims that the antiracist nature of his position prevents this interpretation, and he argues that non-pernicious aspects of white culture could be preserved and celebrated in a “racially egalitarian future,” and even in the present [23, 199]. While white identity is problematically bound up with white supremacy, Jeffers sees no reason to think that all of white culture would

need to be eliminated in order to achieve racial equality. He believes that race has a positive role to play in identity construction for all racial groups, and that this positive cultural aspect of race could and indeed should live on past the end of racism [23, 71]. The cultural features of racial membership that could live on in an ideal world include “values and ideals,” “distinctive cultural traditions,” pride in one’s heritage, a sense of “cultural allegiance” to one’s race “as a whole,” and a recognition of what one’s race has overcome “in the face of their historical devaluation” [23, 60-62]. Leaving race behind entirely is not only undesirable from Jeffers’ perspective, but also potentially dangerous in that it may facilitate the horrible history of racial injustice repeating itself [36, 426]. Jeffers writes, “[a]s part of preserving our racial cultures, I would think we should also strive to preserve our memory of the terrible political origin of races, as preserving this memory would hopefully help to prevent us from ever doing such evil again” [36, 426].

1.5 Chapter 1 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the necessary background information on cultural and political constructionism to contextualize the argument I will present in this thesis, that whiteness serves as a barrier to understanding and accepting as plausible the cultural constructionist theory of race. The second chapter focuses on Haslanger’s political constructionist theory of race and exposes some of the weaknesses in her reasoning. Haslanger’s theory relies on her definition of race as a social hierarchy whereby individuals are marked as privileged or subordinated in a social context based on the real or imagined presence of bodily features presumed to be “evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” [23, 25]. As such, and against the cultural constructionist position, Haslanger sees race as a wholly negative concept that ought to eventually be eliminated from our social world [23, 32]. While she concedes that racial identities may offer useful resources for protection and political solidarity in the short term, she does not see race preservation as something we should strive for in the long term [23, 171]. I will ultimately argue that this position is rooted in white sensibility, a way of seeing and understanding the world that is grounded in unconscious commitments to whiteness. I claim that both the denial of race’s cultural dimension and the desire to eventually eliminate race are motivated by the tendency

of white thinkers to imagine that they occupy a neutral social position and therefore have access to a universal perspective on social and cultural phenomena. This argument will largely be presented in chapter three. Chapter two takes a closer look at Haslanger's theory, comparing her position to a similar position on race presented by Elizabeth Anderson in her 2010 book *The Imperative of Integration*.

Chapter 2

A Critique of Sally Haslanger’s Political Constructionism

2.1 Introduction to Chapter 2

I have four principal objectives in this chapter, which are as follows. First, I expound Haslanger’s political constructionist theory as she presents it in her main chapter and in her reply to the other theorists in *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views* [23]. Second, I outline Haslanger’s arguments against cultural constructionism, pointing to weaknesses in her reasoning and to previous work by Jeffers that addresses her main concerns. Third, I address Haslanger’s position that an ideal world is post-racial, drawing on Howard McGary’s lecture *The Post-Racial Ideal* to clarify the motivations for such a position, as well as to question its value as a political goal in anti-racist work [41]. Finally, I compare Haslanger’s position on the harms of racial segregation to a similar position defended by Elizabeth Anderson in her 2010 book *The Imperative of Integration*, highlighting criticisms of Anderson’s argument by two black theorists [35][34].

This chapter is building to the main argument I will make in this thesis: that a theorist’s social position as white serves as a barrier to understanding cultural constructionism and makes her less likely to generate strong hypotheses and theories about the nature of race. Details of this argument will be presented in chapter three, but to give a brief overview, the argument is that white people are uniquely positioned in the racial hierarchy such that they do not have access to the experience of racial subordination. This epistemic standpoint may serve as a barrier to understanding certain aspects of race, since the dominant white race is often taken to be a neutral or unmarked category and its members are often unaware of how significantly their worldview is structured by race [13, xiv][15, 191][23, 53][58, 4]. Even white people who think about race in a conscious and self-aware way will struggle to overcome what Lissa Skitolsky has termed “white sensibility”—a way of seeing and understanding the world that is structured by white interests [53, 7]. In chapter three, I argue that

Haslanger’s insistence that race is not cultural could be connected to her whiteness, as could Anderson’s and other, similar theories of race presented by white theorists that deny or downplay the connection between race and culture. This chapter aims to demonstrate that Haslanger does not adequately respond to cultural constructionism and does not present convincing arguments to support her position that race is not cultural, nor her conviction that an ideal society would be a raceless one.

2.2 Haslanger’s Political Constructionism

Haslanger claims that her definition of race, which she calls “Social-Political Race” (*SPR*), is “a reasonable interpretation of the representational tradition concerning race” and is best able to guide our practices around race going forward [23, 29]. After explaining how Haslanger arrives at this definition and her justification for it, I introduce a problem with *SPR*: it is unable to account for individuals who have ancestral ties (including very recent ties such as parents and grandparents) to a subordinated racial group but who regularly pass as white. Because white-passing people are regularly assumed to be white, Haslanger’s *SPR* definition has the consequence of assigning these individuals to the white race [30, 237]. I argue that this is an inaccurate designation because it fails to account for the effects of systemic racism, which impacts white-passing people just as it impacts non-white-passing members of subordinated racial groups. This makes the social position of ‘white’ and ‘white-passing’ distinct; grouping these people together as ‘white’ is harmful to white-passing people in that it fails to account for the effects of racism on their lives. This problem is particularly noteworthy considering that Haslanger’s explicit goal in offering this political constructionist account of race is to move towards racial equity by recognizing past injustices and accurately describing present injustices [23, 32].

2.2.1 Haslanger’s Approach to the Question

Haslanger spends a significant portion of her first chapter in *What is Race?* discussing the best way to approach the question, “What is race?”, a discussion that serves as justification for her political constructionist theory [23, 7-18]. While she remarks that there is not “one right way to pose the question” and that different versions of the question will illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon, she identifies

her own approach as that of a critical theorist [23, 7]. Haslanger uses a method borrowed from Laura and François Schroeter’s account of meaning to “diagnose the most important representational interests at stake in the representational tradition” of the word ‘race’ [23, 13]. After listing various instances of our use of the term and examples of its historical, biological, practical, explanatory, and symbolic roles, Haslanger determines that race is a social phenomenon “that in some sense “depend[s] on us” but [is] not stipulated or planned by us” [23, 16-18]. This leads her to conclude that it is the role of the critical theorist, such as herself, is normative [23, 9]; she aims to “understand the practices in which we are currently engaged as participants,” as well as to make suggestions for amelioration in these practices [23, 6]. She thus sees her goal in defining race as going beyond “a simply descriptive or explanatory project” to encompass “tools and understandings that are designed to improve” our social practices [23, 8]. In defining race, she aims to determine “what is salvageable (if anything) and how to go on,” with the specific goal of attaining a more just and equitable society than the one we currently inhabit [23, 10]. She sees empirical research as crucial to the project of describing how “[t]he idea of race is already embedded in our customs, practices, and institutions” and subsequently determining how we should alter our understanding of race to improve the features of our social world that are structured by it [23, 8].

Haslanger decides to focus specifically on the U.S. context in her investigation, as she does not find “the idea that there is a single best interpretation of what race is—across language and cultures—...entirely plausible [23, 15]. She employs the subscript “US” on the word ‘race’ to indicate that she is speaking of race within the geographical boundaries of the United States, the country with which she is most familiar, although she suggests that conclusions drawn about race in the U.S. context may turn out to have broader relevance [23, 16]. Having thus outlined the approach she will take to the question and the scope of her project, Haslanger sets out to determine whether we should “reject the idea of race completely” [23, 18]. Considering that she takes the most important “input” in the representational tradition of race to be the practice of “drawing distinctions between groups of people on the basis of certain bodily features (skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and the like) and postulating racial “natures” underlying these observable differences” for the purposes

of white racial domination, it is easy to predict the position she will take on race preservation [23, 18]. She writes that “there are compelling reasons ... to think that the racialization of groups is a bad thing and that society would be better if we were to acknowledge and respect ethno-cultural differences but cease to think and act in racial terms” [23, 32]. The next subsection examines Haslanger’s definition of race, which she refers to as *SPR* [23, 25].

2.2.2 Haslanger’s Definition of Race

Haslanger developed a definition of race in her 2000 article, “Race and Gender: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” which she imports into her argument in *What is Race?* [29, 44]. Haslanger’s *SPR* account defines a ‘racialized group’ as one whose members are systematically subordinated or privileged “along some dimension” as a result of their membership in said group, which membership is identified by the presence of “certain bodily features presumed...to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” [23, 25-26]. She claims that the strength of this definition lies in its ability to capture “an important set of social groups”—“those groups that have been racialized”—and argues that it is “a reasonable interpretation of our ongoing representational tradition and the social practices with respect to the idea of race” [23, 31]. She also refers to *SPR* as “a debunking account,” meaning that it “aim[s] to shift our understanding to reveal how our prior thinking is false or misguided,” with the intention of “disrupt[ing] our ways of thinking, to motivate a new relationship to our practices” [23, 32]. As she writes, “[t]he hope is that if we can see that what we are tracking with our racial classifications is something captured by *SPR*, then we will begin to see the importance of disrupting race and organizing ourselves on different terms” [23, 33].

Haslanger’s definition of race closely resembles her definition of gender in the original article; she argues that women are an oppressed class, socially subordinated on the basis of bodily features they are observed or imagined to possess [29, 39]. Just as she argues for the eventual elimination of race, Haslanger advocates for the eventual elimination of gender; as she writes, “I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women” [29, 46]. She believes that these definitions of race and gender “invite us to acknowledge the force

of oppressive systems in framing our personal and political identities,” and hopes that such an acknowledgement will lead to a movement away from these oppressive identity categories [29, 47]. Haslanger’s full *SPR* definition of race as it appears in the original article, in her 2012 book *Resisting Reality*, and in *What is Race?* is as follows:

A group G is racialized relative to context C iff members of G are (all and only) those (i) who are observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed in C to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (or regions)—call this “color”;

(ii) whose having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them within the context of the background ideology in C as appropriately occupying certain kinds of social position that are in fact either subordinate or privileged (and so motivates and justifies their occupying such a position); and

(iii) whose satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in their systematic subordination or privilege in C , that is, who are along some dimension systematically subordinated or privileged when in C , and satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in that dimension of privilege or subordination. [23, 25-26]

This definition aims to identify a political wrong in need of correction—racial subordination—but pointing exclusively to these “persistent inequalities” comes at the expense of any possibility of positively identifying with an identity category that targets one for oppression [23, 35-36]. As Haslanger writes, “the function of *SPR* is to highlight...how our racializing practices and identities contribute to injustice” [23, 34]. Taking pride in being a member of a subordinated racial group thus appears to be at odds with Haslanger’s definition, although she claims that this is not the case [23, 29-30]. As she writes, “I believe that many forms of racial identity are important, valuable, and in some cases inevitable responses to racial hierarchy” [23, 30]. However, the utility of racial identities for Haslanger is restricted to “navigating one’s position in racialized social space,” which social space would cease to exist after the elimination of racism [23, 30]. The end of racism would therefore entail the end of

racial identities, for Haslanger, which she sees as a desirable consequence. The next subsection addresses a problem with *SPR* and its designation of white-passing people as ‘white.’

2.2.3 The *SPR* Account and the Problem of White-Passing People

One problem with Haslanger’s definition of race is that she considers white-passing members of minority races as white, which is in direct contradiction with her stated goal of acknowledging racial harms and moving towards racial justice [30, 237][23, 32]. ‘White-passing’ refers to people with ancestral ties to one or more subordinated racial groups who are taken to be white in most social contexts. Haslanger’s *SPR* account considers white-passing people to be white because she aims to capture cases of “imagined features and presumed ancestral links”; as Jeffers writes, “imagined and presumed attributes count just as much as accurately perceived ones for her” [23, 49]. What matters to Haslanger in terms of race is how an individual is treated in social settings, not how they self-identify or what ancestry they possess [30, 238][31, 110]. As Jeffers notes, Haslanger “does not take the connection between features of the body, ancestral relations, and ties to particular geographic regions to be sufficient for racial membership”; on her account, “these attributes must furthermore figure in widely shared patterns of thought about how different kinds of people can be compared with one another” [23, 49]. In a footnote in her 2012 book *Resisting Reality*, Haslanger addresses this consequence of her definition:

First, on my account, those who actually have the ancestral links to the specified region but who “pass,” do not count as members of the racialized group in question. This is parallel to the case of a female functioning socially as a man or a male functioning socially as a woman. Because the goal is to define race and gender as social positions, I endorse this consequence of the definitions [30, 237].

There is much to unpack here. Haslanger’s comparison of a white-passing person to “a female functioning socially as a man or a male functioning socially as a woman” is problematic in that it denies that transgender people face any additional barriers or stigma as compared to cisgender people. Even transgender people who regularly ‘pass’

as members of the gender to which they have transitioned have to navigate gender-related issues in the workplace, in medical settings, in changerooms and washrooms, in sports, in romantic relationships and in family settings that a cisgender person would not face. In this sense, the comparison is apt, as white-passing people also face many additional barriers—to gainful employment, higher education, home ownership, a nutritious diet, a safe community environment, and the avoidance of chronic illnesses—as compared to white people [1, 23-25]. These barriers are the result of systemic racism [16].

In his 2006 book *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, Joe R. Feagin defines systemic racism as “the unjust, deeply institutionalized, ongoing intergenerational reproduction of whites’ wealth, power, and privilege” [16, 4]. Because so much of the United States’ history has involved racialized slavery and “extreme Jim Crow legal segregation,” economic inequality between black and white people has a long reach, dating back about twenty generations [61, 99]. As Feagin writes in a 2017 interview with George Yancy,

Social science research is clear that white-Black inequalities today are substantially the result of a majority of whites socially inheriting unjust enrichments (money, land, home equities, social capital, etc.) from numerous previous white generations—the majority of whom benefited from the racialized slavery system and/or de jure (Jim Crow) and de facto overt racial oppression that followed slavery for nearly a century [61, 99].

The ongoing effects of systemic racism in the contemporary United States mean that your race will largely determine your socioeconomic status; how much crime occurs in your neighbourhood; the quality of education available to you; health outcomes including your likelihood of being affected by certain medical conditions and being exposed to environmental toxins; and the chance that you will end up incarcerated [55, 85-87;107-112][50, S629] [1]. The “well-institutionalized power and wealth hierarchy favoring whites” in America makes it impossible to imagine that *being white* and *passing as white* are identical social positions in the contemporary United States [16, 5]; the former implies a connection to unjust enrichment spanning back to slavery, while the latter implies preferential treatment in some social contexts as compared to members of subordinated racial groups who are perceived as such. The exclusion of

white-passing people from the subordinated racial group to which they have ancestral ties amounts to a denial of systemic racism, which directly impacts the well-being, socio-economic status and life opportunities of members of subordinated racial groups, regardless of whether they are ‘passing as white’ in most social situations. This problem with Haslanger’s definition of race leads to a direct contradiction with her stated political goal of identifying how race impacts individuals by subordinating or privileging them along various social dimensions [23, 25]. This problem is noteworthy because it demonstrates that *SPR* may not be as effective at accounting for “our ongoing representational tradition and social practices with respect to the idea of race” as Haslanger claims [23, 31]. Political constructionist theories may avoid this problem by including an ancestry condition, for instance, rather than relying entirely on how an individual is treated in social contexts to determine their race. The next subsection elaborates on Haslanger’s argument that the concept of pan-ethnicities can account for the cultural dimensions of race and calls into question the strength of this argument.

2.3 Haslanger Against Race as Culture

Critically examining the strength of Haslanger’s arguments against cultural constructionism is important because she is one of the leading figures in the field of philosophy of race and because she presents her political constructionist theory as the superior cultural constructionist theory of race. The main points Haslanger presents against Jeffers’ cultural constructionist theory are firstly, that race cannot be meaningfully linked to culture because racial groups are too vast and their members too heterogeneous and geographically dispersed [23, 28]. Secondly, she argues that we should not desire the preservation of racial identities in a post-racist society because they are divisive, exclusive, and restrictive [23, 30-31]. On this first point, Haslanger employs the term ‘pan-ethnicity’ to describe the observable cultural differences between racial groups in a particular region such as the United States, claiming that it is possible for members of a pan-ethnicity to develop a shared “way of life,” but that the same is not possible for racial groups [23, 28]. I argue that Haslanger’s theory of pan-ethnicities is ambiguous and ill-defined; as Jeffers points out, Haslanger does not articulate why geographical dispersion prohibits the development of a shared culture

across a racial group, nor does she identify what is missing from racial groups such that they could be said to share “a form of life” [23, 196]. As Jeffers argues, it is possible to speak meaningfully of cultural groups even when there is a great deal of internal diversity and geographical distance between members; for instance, we can refer to “Western culture” in a meaningful way, even though the members of this culture have a variety of nationalities, native languages, customs and traditions [37, 235]. Confusingly, Haslanger refers to ‘White’ as a pan-ethnicity after she has denied that ‘Asian’ and ‘Black’ are pan-ethnicities, which makes it more difficult to grasp the distinction she is drawing between ‘race’ and ‘pan-ethnicity’ [23, 29]. Because of the ambiguities and inconsistencies in Haslanger’s use of the term ‘pan-ethnicity,’ as well as the under-developed nature of her theory, I argue that it does not serve as a useful method of accounting for the cultural differences between racial groups, nor as a convincing argument against Jeffers’ cultural constructionism.

On her second point, Haslanger raises a concern expressed by Appiah in *Color Conscious*: that racial identities imply authenticity scripts which inevitably restrict individual freedom of self-expression and exclude from membership those who fail to “satisfy the racial conditions” [3, 99][23, 30-31]. On Haslanger’s account, these racial scripts lead to slurs such as “oreo,” for instance, that imply that one is not ‘black enough,’ while also marking as suspect anyone who forms “strong alliances with and take[s] up the practices of” a racial group to which they do not belong [23, 31]. She therefore holds that while there are political reasons for retaining racial identities in the short term (i.e., to fight injustices and find solidarity), retaining race “in the long run” is not desirable and leads to factionalization [23, 171]. I draw on Jeffers’ writing on post-racialism and Du Bois’ 1960 essay “Whither Now and Why” to explain that racial identities could be preserved without this undesirable consequence [37]. Jeffers’ cultural constructionist theory takes the issues of exclusivity, restrictions on personal freedom of expression, and racial scripts into consideration and has provided a possible solution that Haslanger does not address [37, 243-244]. Cultural constructionism as outlined by Jeffers is open to cultural exchange between racial groups and to the possibility of “nonblack people who participate in black cultural community,” for instance, as well as to the idea that there will be people with the appropriate ancestry who do not identify as “culturally black” and choose not to participate in

black cultural practices [37, 243-244]. Since Haslanger raises the issue of denying membership to those who fail to meet the racial conditions as a criticism of the cultural constructionist position, she has an obligation to treat the discussion Jeffers has already offered of this potential issue.

2.3.1 Haslanger on Pan-Ethnicities

In the first chapter of *What is Race?*, Haslanger attempts to provide an explanation for the cultural aspects of racial group membership using the term ‘pan-ethnicities,’ borrowed from Asian-American Studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu [23, 27]. This subsection points out the inconsistencies and ambiguities in Haslanger’s theory of pan-ethnicities, demonstrating that her argument and even her definition of pan-ethnicity is ill-developed. As such, this theory fails to function as an argument against Jeffers’ claim that race is both politically and culturally constructed. One major inconsistency is Haslanger’s suggestion that ‘White’ should be considered a pan-ethnicity while ‘Black’ should not, with no explanation for this distinction [23, 28-29]. Haslanger claims that “Black is not a pan-ethnicity, even if African American, or Diasporic African, is,” while on the same page referring to “a pan-ethnicity such as “White,”” which “offers other creative opportunities, in addition to resources for domination” [23, 29]. Her reason for denying that Black is a pan-ethnicity is that the black race is too widely dispersed in the world and there is no way to unite people in all of these people under one cultural umbrella [23, 28]. She does not explain why ‘White’ should be considered a pan-ethnicity. Although she makes several attempts to distinguish race from pan-ethnicity, the distinction remains murky. When discussing Asian Americans (a pan-ethnicity) vs. members of the global Asian race, Haslanger claims that those ethnic groups brought together under the label ‘Asian’ “do not share a form of life,” and then claims that “[p]an-ethnicities emerge when multiple groups are racialized and treated as one group, and form an identity and way of life as a result” [23, 28]. Later, she writes, “Pan-ethnic groups have a shared identity as being racialized by the dominant culture, and develop shared practices of resistance (among others)” [23, 167]. It is unclear why, on Haslanger’s account, conceiving of a group as a pan-ethnicity allows for the emergence of a shared form of life with “shared practices of resistance,” while conceiving of a group as a race does not.

The ambiguity between race and pan-ethnicity is apparent in Haslanger’s discussion of the “substantial costs” of an error-theory about race [23, 20]. One of the things she notes that we would need to give up in accepting an anti-realist position is “the idea that race explains certain group differences,” including “artistic traditions,” which implies that we already tend to link race to culture in a meaningful way, and rightly so [23, 20]. Haslanger appears to suggest in this passage that being an anti-realist about race means accepting the undesirable consequence that we are unable to link art to race. If she does not consider race to be cultural—and she repeatedly claims that she does not—it is unclear why she would mention the inability to link race with “artistic traditions”—clearly an aspect of culture—as a loss incurred by accepting an error theory of race and as a reason to prefer a social constructionist account to an anti-realist account.

Overall, Haslanger’s attempt to capture the cultural elements of race with the term pan-ethnicity introduces confusion and lacks definitional clarity. That she later hedges on whether “U.S. racial groups even constitute pan-ethnicities” obscures the theory even further [23, 167]. This lack of conceptual clarity raises doubts about whether it is theoretically possible to advocate for keeping the cultural elements of race under a different term while eliminating the race concept. Haslanger’s theory of pan-ethnicities would be unnecessary if she was willing to concede that race also has a cultural dimension. The next subsection addresses Jeffers’ reply to Haslanger’s theory of pan-ethnicities.

2.3.2 Jeffers’ Reply: Pan-Ethnicities

Jeffers does not agree with Haslanger’s claim that the concept of pan-ethnicities offers a better account of the cultural dimension of race than the claim that races as a whole share a culture [23, 194]. Despite the challenges of providing definitive proof for his claim “that politics and culture are, at present, equally important to understanding racial phenomena,” Jeffers argues that observing a shared culture across a race *is* possible [23, 66]. Seeing that this is so requires that one consider a broader notion of ‘shared culture,’ such as the presence of particular cultural features that appear as common threads between different groups, rather than imagining a homogeneous culture shared by all members of the race [23, 64]. Jeffers sees pan-ethnicities as too

restricted in scope to capture the phenomenon of racial culture, which he takes to be “a global phenomenon” [23, 195]. He identifies pan-ethnicities as “subsets of races,” and as such not particularly useful to his discussion of race [23, 195].

When dismissing the idea that race is cultural, Jeffers notes that Haslanger fails to provide an explanation of what she means by “a shared form of life” [23, 196]; she doesn’t explain what is missing from race in order for it to fit this description. In her reply to Jeffers in *What is Race?*, Haslanger mentions “shared language, shared cultural traditions,” and “substantive contact” as aspects of a “way of life,” and attempts to prove that these features do not map onto race [23, 168]. Haslanger writes, “Immigrant Haitians in the Boston area share a “way of life” that is different from the “way of life” of African Americans in rural Mississippi. Should these count as different racial groups?” [23, 168]. Yet if the distinction between ‘sharing a way of life’ and ‘not sharing a way of life’ is for Haslanger primarily geographical, it is not difficult to provide counterexamples; as Jeffers notes, “[c]ultural commonalities across large expanses are not hard to find” [23, 65]. He argues that it is possible to speak of national culture, despite the diversity of ethnicities within a nation, and that it is even possible to speak meaningfully of “Western culture,” a group involving an even broader and more diverse set of people who do not all share a language or set of traditions [23, 196]. From Jeffers’ perspective, “This broadness does not render them formless” [23, 196]. As he writes elsewhere,

While it is not uncommon for a focus on the diversity of ethnicities, nationalities, and regional differences among black people inside and outside of Africa to lead people to assume that “black culture” must be a meaningless category, such an assumption fails to recognize the usefulness of talking about cultural formations of different types and different levels of generality [37, 235].

In *What is Race?*, Jeffers cites Kwame Gyekye’s criticism of some of Appiah’s work for his unwillingness to recognize “common threads visible in the cultural tapestry of the African peoples” [23, 64]. As Gyekye argues, recognizing similarities “in metaphysical, epistemological, moral, and sociological matters” across African cultural groups does not entail a denial of “Africa’s pluralism” [23, 64]. Jeffers employs Gyekye’s remarks

to argue that it is possible to speak of black culture in broad strokes without homogenizing the race or essentializing black culture; like the idea of Western culture, “[r]aces, understood as cultural groups, have this kind of broad scope” [23, 196].

The next subsection addresses Haslanger’s use of personal anecdotes, particularly accounts of her experience as a white mother of adopted black children, as arguments against cultural constructionism. I argue that anecdotes such as these cannot serve as evidence that race is not cultural because cultural constructionism can account for cases of members of one race participating in and becoming invested in aspects of another racial group’s culture.

2.3.3 Haslanger’s Use of Personal Anecdotes

Through her use of personal anecdotes in *What is Race?*, Haslanger suggests that her experiences as the adoptive mother of black children have given her insight into the nature of race, and she employs these experiences as evidence that race cannot be cultural. One example of Haslanger’s use of personal anecdotes to support her argument that culture is not tied to race in the way Jeffers claims is her description of her adeptness at ‘doing black hair’ for her adopted black daughter [23, 172]. Reflecting on “the cultural practices that inform [her] embodiment,” Haslanger writes:

Skin cancer runs in my family, so I apply sunblock. But I am also amazingly adept at braiding cornrows, maintaining dreadlocks, putting in extensions (either braiding or crochet), doing Sengalese twists, and other hair techniques. I’ve studied hair designs, learned through practice the geometry of the head, can distinguish different hair products and make an informed choice. I am known for light hands [23, 172].

I argue that this anecdote and other references to her black children do not function as evidence in favour of Haslanger’s theoretical position on race, nor do they serve as counterevidence to Jeffers’ theory. While it is certainly true that someone who is exposed to members of another race on a regular basis can learn and participate in aspects of this racial group’s culture, an instance of a white person participating in black culture does not demonstrate that race is not cultural. In fact, Jeffers’ theory accounts for the fact that racial culture will sometimes cross racial boundaries, and

he is open to both cultural exchange and respectful participation of nonblack people in black culture, for instance [37, 243-244]. That some black people will have less investment in black culture than others is taken as a given by Jeffers, as is the idea that some non-black people will have a particular interest and investment in elements of black culture [23, 66]. Neither of these facts weaken the cultural constructionist theory of race, which is based on probabilities rather than homogeneity within a race [23, 66]. The cultural constructionist theory does not require that to be a member of one race means having no cultural connection to any other race. The fact that Haslanger's family members of different races participate in some of the same cultural activities is therefore not mysterious from the perspective of cultural constructionism, and these anecdotes of cross-cultural engagement do not weaken Jeffers' theory. The next subsection addresses some inaccurate and misleading claims Haslanger makes about Jeffers' position that demonstrate her lack of careful engagement with his theory and which set up false comparisons between the two social constructionist theories offered in *What is Race?*.

2.3.4 Haslanger's Misrepresentations of Cultural Constructionism

When replying to Jeffers' cultural constructionist theory of race, Haslanger misrepresents his position in several places. It is important to note these misrepresentations because they allow Haslanger to draw inaccurate comparisons between political constructionism and cultural constructionism that make political constructionism appear as the more reasonable and acceptable theory of race, considering "our representational tradition" [23, 16]. For instance, Haslanger writes,

There is a key normative difference, I think, between the sociopolitical account of race and the cultural account that becomes clear when one asks why hierarchy is built into race according to the *SPR*. Why not say that races are groups who are "marked" by reference to ancestry and geography, where this marking has implications for the group's social position, without claiming that the social positions in question need be arranged hierarchically? *If I drop the hierarchy condition, then the account comes much closer to the cultural account, on the assumption that those who*

occupy the same social position are likely to share some non-trivial practices that would amount to at least a thin “way of life” [23, 30] (emphasis mine).

This remark is misleading because it suggests that Jeffers’ account does not include “the hierarchy condition,” making Haslanger’s account appear superior for including an account of racial hierarchy [23, 30]. Jeffers clearly states that his cultural constructionist theory endorses the first tenet of a maximally robust political constructionism, which holds that “differential power relations are what first brought racial difference into existence and are thus fundamental in being the *origin* of races” [23, 56] (emphasis in original). Far from ignoring or eliding the existence of a racial hierarchy, Jeffers’ theory takes the political hierarchy of races to be, at present, “of equal importance” to the cultural dimension of race [23, 57]. It is therefore inaccurate to say that “drop[ping] the hierarchy condition” brings the political and cultural constructionist accounts as they are presented in *What is Race?* into closer alignment. Nor does the idea that members of a race share “at least a thin way of life” conflict with the existence of a racial hierarchy, as Haslanger’s remark seems to suggest [23, 30]. As Jeffers writes,

If the only way we could make sense of the distinction between political and cultural constructionism were viewing the former as denying that race is in any way culturally constructed and the latter as denying that race is in any way politically constructed, I would deny that we have to choose one or the other and reject both positions as false [23, 55].

It is important to Jeffers that his theory of race accounts for both of these dimensions in its description of how race presently functions. As the above quotation suggests, Jeffers does not see either dimension as *essential* to race; while either dimension could theoretically be eliminated, the normative aspect of his theory states that the cultural dimension ought to be preserved while the political dimension is eliminated. Earlier in this chapter, Haslanger acknowledges that the two social constructionist accounts presented in the book “agree on many points,” including “that racial groups function differently within the contemporary sociopolitical structure, and are positioned on a hierarchy” [23, 24-25]. It is therefore unclear why she claims a few pages later that

the accounts can be distinguished by this “key normative difference,” as eliminating the hierarchy of races would bring her account closer to the maximally robust version of cultural constructionism, not to the position Jeffers defends [23, 30].

Haslanger makes what amounts to a false comparison between hers and Jeffers’ positions in her second chapter in *What is Race?* when she writes:

Jeffers takes a shared form of life to be necessary for a group to be a racial group, based on historical research, sociological studies, and normative considerations concerning the value of racial practices. And I take social hierarchy to be a necessary condition on racial groups based also on an interpretation of our past and present practices and normative considerations about how we might usefully deploy ‘race’ in political debate [23, 152].

Here, Haslanger implies that Jeffers does not take social hierarchy to be a “necessary condition on racial groups,” which is true in the sense that Jeffers can envision a future where race persists while hierarchy does not, but untrue in its implication that Jeffers does not recognize the present reality of racial hierarchy in the meaning of race [23, 152]. While Haslanger represents her position as covering political ground that Jeffers neglects, this is a misrepresentation. There is no ambiguity in Jeffers’ assertion that he takes “race, at present, to be *both politically and culturally constructed*” [23, 55](emphasis in original). Haslanger’s attempt to contrast the two social constructionist theories of race in a way that makes political constructionism appear more capable of addressing racial hierarchy relies on a misreading of Jeffers’ theory, since he articulates the importance of recognizing the hierarchical dimension of race at many points in his two chapters of *What is Race?* [23, 55; 57].

In Jeffers’ reply to Haslanger in chapter six, he points out another misleading remark that Haslanger makes regarding his conception of race as cultural. Jeffers writes:

Haslanger writes in Chapter 1 that “the cultural account requires that races, as a group, share a culture” (25). This is misleading when taken as a description of my view, for readers will recall that I do not offer a maximally robust cultural constructionism, which would indeed take

cultural difference to be strictly required for racial difference. On my view, diversity in ways of life is not essential to race, but neither are imbalanced relations of power. ... [R]ace, on my view, is fundamentally social and will live on as long as racial distinctions are socially recognized in some form, just as it will die if they cease to be socially recognized in any form, whether the form is political, cultural, or something else [23, 193-194].

As Jeffers explains in this excerpt, his position is more nuanced than Haslanger allows. His theory “can be identified as a kind of cultural constructionism” not because it takes culture to be essential to race, but “because it takes culture to be fundamental from a normative standpoint” [23, 194]; in contrast with political constructionism, Jeffers sees the cultural dimension of race as valuable and worth preserving in the long run.

While Haslanger’s misrepresentations of Jeffers’ cultural constructionist theory may not be intentional, they are harmful in that they present a weaker version of cultural constructionism than the one Jeffers defends. The inattentive reader of *What is Race?* may be convinced by Haslanger’s misrepresentations of cultural constructionism and come to the mistaken conclusion that Jeffers’ theory fails to properly account for racial hierarchy, thus choosing to prefer political constructionism on this account. Further, these misrepresentations mean that Haslanger is not properly responding to Jeffers’ theory and therefore is not well-positioned to critique it. The next section takes up the issue of whether we ought to preserve race in a post-racist world, as Jeffers argues, or aim to eventually eliminate the concept, as Haslanger argues.

2.4 Post-Racialism vs. the Preservation of Race

Howard McGary’s published lecture *The Post-Racial Ideal* takes up the issue of whether a raceless society is truly preferable to a society in which race exists but does not have hierarchical implications [41]. McGary outlines the two main arguments behind the belief that race must be entirely eliminated in order to achieve an equitable society and questions the validity of these arguments. The first argument is that “thinking about race means that we cannot respect others as individuals” [41, 13]; by this line of reasoning, racial divisions inevitably lead to racial stereotyping

and ultimately to racism, even if the initial groupings were based on shared culture and had no connection to political or social status. The second argument, which is parasitic on the first, is that “racism is so embedded in our racial thinking we can’t deconstruct it,” meaning that our collective history of race is impossible to overcome; since we cannot reimagine race in a positive light, we therefore must eliminate it [41, 13]. McGary does not think there is reason to be so pessimistic about race and its possible future iterations; he concludes that we can retain race after racism as long as we clearly conceptualize its role in our social lives [41, 73]. This position serves as a counterargument to Haslanger’s stance on race as a concept that would cease to exist in an ideal world.

2.4.1 Haslanger’s Argument Against Preserving Race

In *What is Race?*, Haslanger argues that race should not be preserved in a post-racist world, as racial identities, even when understood as a purely cultural way of dividing people, are overly exclusive and restrictive [23, 30-31]. According to Haslanger, racial groups imply “tendencies to cultural norming and authenticity tests” whereby those who do not meet the conditions—such as those who lack the appropriate “ancestral credentials”—are excluded from membership [23, 30]. She also worries that those who fail to meet the conditions for membership are considered “suspect when they build strong alliances with and take up the practices of those who satisfy the racial conditions,” which serves as a barrier to friendship and other types of relationships between members of different racial groups [23, 31]. Finally, she worries that those who do meet the racial conditions but also display traits considered uncharacteristic of members of the race are subjected to racial slurs such as ‘oreo’ and ‘twinkie,’ which terms imply racial authenticity scripts that place unnecessary limits on personal expression and reinforce racial stereotypes [23, 30]. For these reasons, she claims that we should be “interested in disrupting the assumption that “color” [a shorthand for the physical features that mark racial group membership] should divide us,” arguing that no form of racial segregation would exist in an ideal society [23, 172; 31]. She writes,

I find problematic the idea that a just world is one in which cultural

groups can restrict their membership on racial grounds. I embrace, instead, a model of multiple coexisting cultures that are mutable, flexible, and creatively tolerant around issues of ancestry and appearance [23, 30-31].

Haslanger's position as expressed in this passage can be described as 'post-racial' because she envisions an ideal world as one in which racial distinctions have ceased to exist. This position is neither new nor uncommon, as Howard McGary notes in his 2012 lecture *The Post-Racial Ideal*. Supporters of post-racialism have been around since the end of slavery in the United States, and the position had a major resurgence in 2008 with the election of President Obama, which many claimed was an event that marked the beginning of a post-racial era in the United States [41, 3][37, 231-232][22, 75] [17, vii]. However, as Anderson discusses at length in *The Imperative of Integration*, statistics do not support the claim that race is no longer a strong determinant of social status in the U.S. [1, 23-25;29-38]. Nor does Haslanger make any claim of this sort; she does, however, consider the eventual elimination of race to be the goal of antiracist work, which marks her position as 'post-racial.'

In her earlier work, Haslanger has claimed that "we should refuse to be gendered man or woman, refuse to be raced," since such social identity markers are harmful impositions that divide us and limit our possibilities for self-expression and coalition-building [29, 48]. She maintains this position in *Resisting Reality*, where she writes, "I'm suggesting that we should work to undermine those forces that make being a man, a woman, or a member of a racialized group possible [30, 242]. She repeats this position again in a 2014 article titled "Studying While Black": "It follows from my view that to eliminate the "color" hierarchy is to eliminate races, and this is something we should aim for" [31, 128]. In *What is Race?*, Haslanger writes, "society would be better if we were to acknowledge and respect ethno-cultural differences but cease to think and act in racial terms" [23, 32]. She claims that it is not diversity that she disavows, but race itself [23, 166]. As she writes,

I am deeply sympathetic with Jeffers' view. I agree that racial groups have developed valuable ways of life and that racial identity is a meaningful part of many people's lives. I also do not intend, nor is my view committed to, eliminating or resisting cultural differences; I want to eliminate White

supremacy and other forms of unjust social hierarchy [23, 166].

From Haslanger’s perspective, the cultural aspects of a person’s life derive from their ethnic affiliations, not from their racial group membership, and can thus live on after the concept of race has been eliminated [31, 128][23, 27]. She thus believes that we have nothing to lose in eliminating race and that doing so is the most promising path towards a just society of equals [23, 172]. In the next subsection, I discuss McGary’s lecture, which critically examines the position that eliminating race entirely is the best solution to combating racism and creating a more equitable society in the long term.

2.4.2 Howard McGary on *The Post-Racial Ideal*

Haslanger’s position that preserving race will not serve us well “in the long run” is not uncommon, as McGary explains in his 2012 lecture *The Post-Racial Ideal* [23, 30]; since the late 19th century, many laypersons and scholars have argued that eliminating race entirely is the best way to overcome racism, including the famous abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass [41, 10]. The variety of views that society would be better off without any racial distinctions are collectively termed “post-racial” [41, 13]. As McGary writes,

The term “post-racial” has been used to describe a range of views ¹ that run the gamut. One of the more common conceptions of a post-racial United States is one where we move “beyond race,” where “no one thinks about race anymore,” but instead we are able to see one another as “individuals” because we have “put some of the ugly aspects of U.S. history behind us.” ... On this view, racism is so embedded in our racial thinking we can’t deconstruct it [41, 13].

McGary’s above description appears to align with the post-racial ideal that Haslanger espouses in *What is Race?*, as she emphasizes the threat to individual self-expression posed by racial authenticity scripts, as well as the idea that sorting individuals into

¹Another version of post-racialism that McGary mentions is the belief that only the white racial identity should be eliminated while other racial identities retain significance [41, 13]. This view is defended by Andrew Pierce in his article “Reconstructing Race: A Discourse-Theoretical Approach to a Normative Politics of Identity” [48].

groups based on “physical and ancestral credentials” inevitably has a negative impact on inter-racial alliances [23, 3-31]. This account of the post-racial ideal relies on the assumption that race-thinking prevents us from seeing and treating members of other races as individuals [41, 13]; proponents of this version of post-racialism believe that the presence of racial identities, even in the absence of a political hierarchy of races, encourages racial stereotyping that is antithetical to seeing members of other races as unique and complex individuals. As the above quotation from McGary suggests, this position also assumes that “eliminating race is necessary for escaping our awful racial history” [41, 14]. Theorists who advocate for a raceless future are pessimistic about the possibility that reconceptualizing race on different terms—such as purely cultural distinctions between groups—will avoid the pitfall of racism. McGary writes that this second assumption is “parasitic on the first” [41, 14]; theorists who support this version of the post-racial ideal believe that thinking in racial terms at all leads to harmful generalizations about members of different races, which inevitably leads to racism.

McGary is not himself a supporter of the post-racial ideal and is largely skeptical about the merits of post-racialism; as he writes, “the jury is still out about the wisdom and moral acceptability of the post-racial ideal” [41, 15]. He argues that the post-racial ideal “basically boils down to is an endorsement of the so-called “color-blind” principle,” which states that acknowledging and giving significance to racial identities is “a moral and legal failing” [41, 29]. Against this principle, McGary argues that we can give race significance without racism arising, as long as we are clear on the role we want race to play in our social lives [41, 29; 73]. According to McGary, “it is unnecessary to throw the baby out with the bathwater” [41, 15]; our dark history of racism does not mean that race could not be reconceptualized in a positive light. He cites Outlaw’s essay “Towards a Critical Theory of Race,” in which Outlaw writes, “We must not err yet again in thinking that “race thinking” must be completely eliminated on the way to an emancipated society” [41, 32][47, 101]. Elsewhere, Outlaw has expressed concerns that failing to recognize cultural differences between racial groups and advocating for a kind of “rainbow socialism” descends into a form of assimilationism that still prioritizes whiteness as the neutral identity to which everyone should conform [47, 73]. He sees racial identities as “constitutive of

the person and social being of persons,” and argues that they will continue to have value “*to the extent that, and for as long as, persons take them to be constitutive of who they are*” [47, 73](emphasis in original). While McGary is not as explicit as Outlaw about his reasons for thinking that racial identities may retain value in a post-racist world, he ends on a note of optimism concerning the future of race, writing, “[r]eason and morality don’t require us to vanquish the idea of races, but to understand it and the role it should play in our lives” [41, 73]. In the next subsection, I discuss Jeffers’ similar response to post-racialism and his position, guided by Du Bois’ work, that we should not strive to eliminate race along with racism [37].

2.4.3 Jeffers on the Desirability of Race After Racism

In his chapter of the 2017 book *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, Jeffers draws on Du Bois’ 1960 essay “Whither Now and Why” to argue that racial identities could fruitfully exist in a post-racist world as cultural communities [37]. Du Bois was 92 years old when he published this essay, and while it addresses some of the same themes he presented in “Conservation” sixty-three years earlier, “Whither” adds nuance to Du Bois’ earlier theory of race while also taking into account historical changes such as advances towards legal equality for African Americans [37, 223; 227]. Jeffers argues that “Whither” provides useful insight into the contemporary discussion of post-racialism and addresses some of the concerns raised by critics of cultural constructionism (such as Haslanger) who doubt that preserving race as culture could be a social good [37, 232]. As Jeffers notes, Du Bois “encourages the indefinite perpetuation of black racial identity in the future even as we work to eliminate racism as soon as possible” [37, 223]. This aim conflicts with Haslanger’s argument that race as culture is still undesirable in that it implies authenticity scripts that exclude from membership those who do not meet the “racial conditions” [23, 31]. Jeffers argues in this chapter that it is possible to imagine scenarios in which race is preserved as culture in a way that permits cultural exchange and allows members who do not have the appropriate ancestry to participate in a respectful way, as well as allowing those who possess the appropriate ancestry but do not identify with the culture to forego participation without social consequences [37, 240]. The form of black nationalism that Jeffers sees Du Bois as advocating, and with which he agrees, is “antiessentialist”

and can therefore support the preservation of race as culture without the undesirable consequence that racial groups would be highly restrictive and exclusive, thus leading to factionalization [37, 238]. Jeffers' vision of a post-racist world, inspired in part by Du Bois' "Whither" and "Conservation," thus appears to address Haslanger's primary concerns with preserving race after the elimination of racism.

To reiterate Du Bois' position on the importance of preserving race as culture, he believes that each race has its own unique message to deliver to the world; this is a primary theme he presents in "Conservation" [11, 232]. While Du Bois does not "treat "race" and "culture" as wholly synonymous," he does consider cultural difference to be a crucial component of racial difference and an aspect of racial group membership that is "deeply valuable" [37, 223]. Preserving and cultivating the cultural differences between races is from his perspective essential to the advancement of human civilization [11, 232]. In "Whither," Du Bois repeats this theme, specifically arguing against the cultural assimilation of African Americans into white American ideals, which he sees as one potential consequence of African Americans receiving equal political status as a result of the Civil Rights Movement [37, 227]. He urges African Americans to maintain distinct "aims and ideals" rather than "becom[ing] white in action if not completely in color" [12, 193]. The ideal, from Du Bois' perspective, is not eliminating racial identities but "the possibility of black folk and their cultural patterns existing in America without discrimination, and on terms of equality" [12, 195]. Attaining equality with white people should therefore not lead to the abandonment of black institutions but to greater investment in them [37, 229]. Du Bois was particularly concerned about the impact of racial integration on school curricula, where the prioritizing of white history and neglect of black history would be hugely detrimental to African American children [37, 230]. Understanding their historical ties to Africa and recognizing "Africa's contribution to world civilization" was knowledge Du Bois considered essential for social progress in America [37, 230].

As Jeffers notes, "Du Bois concerned himself throughout his long career with the dangers of what we now call postracialism," defined as "a state of affairs in which race is not merely treated as insignificant but has ceased to exist" [37, 231-232]. This state of affairs was undesirable to Du Bois for several reasons, as Jeffers explains in this chapter. Firstly, he notes that letting go of racial distinctions would

imply abandoning the effort to develop black art such as literature and music “as distinctive and different” and giving up the cultural pride that goes along with such contributions to society [37, 232-233]. Du Bois believed that this would constitute “a deep loss to [African Americans] and to humanity,” and would separate contemporary African Americans from “the whole cultural history of Africans in the world” [37, 234]. Knowledge of black history was itself conceived of by Du Bois as an aspect of “the cultural gift that black people give” to the rest of society, as Jeffers notes, since he believed that all people could benefit from this knowledge [37, 237]. Jeffers identifies Du Bois’ position as “a thoroughly antiessentialist approach to the preservation of black culture”:

No stereotyped image is presented as authoritatively determining what counts as authentically black. Instead of this, Du Bois recommends the cultivation among black people of curiosity concerning their past and present, familiarity with the diversity of their histories and cultures, and pride in gaining such knowledge in spite of the social dominance of racist narratives that deny that black people have accomplished anything of note [37, 238].

Jeffers thoroughly endorses the form of black nationalism Du Bois offers in “Whither” and finds it compatible with “recognizing that blackness as an identity was originally a colonial imposition on enslaved Africans” [37, 238]. As with Jeffers’ own cultural constructionist theory of race, Du Bois did not deem it necessary to identify race as either a political or a cultural identity, recognizing that it was both and that the path forward must involve a recognition of both dimensions of race [37, 232].

Another reason to question the desirability of post-racialism that Jeffers discusses in this chapter is the difficulty of disentangling the desire for a raceless future world from the pervasive anti-blackness of our present social world. As Jeffers writes, “it is doubtful that one can responsibly ponder in the present the value of a future world without black people without taking into account how anti-black racism has shaped most thinking about the value of black people” [37, 242]. Further, the loss of physical blackness, which may eventually result from the mixing of races, can be considered undesirable because it is a loss of a distinctive form of human beauty [37, 242]. Preserving race in its cultural form, as both Du Bois and Jeffers support, is

consistent with seeing blackness and black culture as “a source of value going forward into the future,” while eliminating race in all forms is not [37, 238-239]. As to the question of how black culture could be preserved without limiting freedom of self-expression with racial authenticity scripts, Jeffers writes, “just as black culture will not be forced onto all black people, nonblack people will not be deprived of it” [37, 243]. He envisions a future world in which cultural affiliation could be guided by ancestry without being limited by it. As he writes,

it is not an objectionable vision of the postracist world to imagine significant numbers of black people maintaining a sense of cultural community, partly through processes of biological reproduction, as long as all black people who participate in this community do so voluntarily, and respectful participation in the culture by nonblack people is welcomed as well [37, 244].

Jeffers is not advocating for a society in which racial groups are segregated and culturally exclusionary; this is not how he understands culture to function. To review, the three ways in which Jeffers sees race as cultural are as follows: “racial consciousness itself as cultural, racial consciousness as facilitating new cultural developments, and racial consciousness as shaped by prior cultural developments” [23, 65]. None of these cultural aspects of race are currently recognized by political constructionism, but, as Jeffers writes, political constructionists have no reason to deny these cultural aspects of race as long as “the political origin of race” is acknowledged [23, 65]. However, Jeffers does not believe that it would be possible to remain a political constructionist while recognizing the significance of these cultural aspects of race, as doing so would bring one’s theoretical commitments into alignment with cultural constructionism.

Further, as Jeffers argues in *What is Race?*, the existence of some conditions for membership in a cultural group is not in itself negative; as he writes in response to Haslanger’s position, “Freedom to be considered a full-fledged member of any cultural group if one so chooses is a kind of luxurious freedom the desire for which I do not really understand” [23, 202]. The desire for complete inclusivity of cultural groups on the part of white people has been termed “ontological expansiveness” by Shannon Sullivan in her 2014 book *Good White People* [54, 20]. Sullivan defines the term as “the habit, often unconscious, of assuming and acting as if any and

all spaces—geographical, psychological, cultural, linguistic, or whatever—are rightfully available to and open for white people to enter whenever they like” [54, 20]. Haslanger’s proposed “model of multiple coexisting cultures that are mutable, flexible, and creatively tolerant around issues of ancestry and appearance” can be understood as an example of ontological expansiveness because it fails to recognize that some degree of exclusivity does not constitute an injustice [23, 31]. The next section addresses Elizabeth Anderson’s 2010 book *The Imperative of Integration*, in which she argues that race is not cultural and that a healthy democracy requires racial integration.

2.5 Elizabeth Anderson on *The Imperative of Integration*

In *The Imperative of Integration*, Anderson argues that racial segregation is a major cause of racial injustice in the United States and that it acts as a detriment to democracy [1, 22]. She strongly advocates for a society in which members of different races live, study and work in close proximity to one another to avoid opportunity hoarding on the part of the dominant (white) group [1, 61-63]. In making this argument, Anderson claims that “[t]he concept of race is essentially tied to ancestry, not culture” and that “American blacks and whites share a common American culture” [1, 114]. However, many of her explanations of the harms of racial segregation rely on an explanation of cultural differences between black and white people. For instance, when discussing the reasons African Americans struggle to attain elite jobs (where white people act as gatekeepers), Anderson cites differences in communication styles (black people tend to be more direct, white people less direct); different interests and hobbies (black people seldom know how to play golf, for example, which is often associated with elite business negotiations); a lack of “familiarity with cultural reference points that are the basis for small talk with coworkers” on the part of black job candidates; and differing senses of humour [1, 37]. She writes that “‘cultural fit’...is regarded as one of the two most important qualifications in a job candidate and is cited by 70 percent of decision makers as more important than technical qualifications” [1, 37]. Her repeated assertions that “Race defines a social identity, not a culture” therefore seem at odds with much of the evidence she provides for the harms of racial segregation [1, 37]. Anderson’s position is relevant to this research in its similarity to

Haslanger’s position that race is not cultural, and in Anderson’s similar inability to provide convincing evidence for this claim.

Critical responses to Anderson’s book from black theorists have not been entirely favourable. Responses from Jeffers and V. Denise James point to the whiteness of Anderson’s perspective on integration, which misinterprets and fails to consider some significant aspects of how such a politics would influence black people’s lives. James argues that Anderson’s vision of a racially integrated America demands too great of a sacrifice on the part of black people, who would be asked to alter many aspects of their culturally significant aesthetic choices, such as hairstyles and clothing, to accommodate white norms [34, 3]. She finds Anderson’s position largely ignorant of the lived experiences of black people, and argues that *The Imperative of Integration* does not adequately address the issue of white hegemony [34, 2]. Jeffers takes issue with Anderson’s claim that “multiculturalist defenses of black self-segregation confuse race and culture” [35, 2]. He argues that race and culture are not “easily disentangled” and further that “black communal self-development and wide interracial contact ... are not—in principle—incompatible,” as Anderson takes them to be [35, 2]. He further finds fault in the fact that Anderson does not address the tragedy of her conclusion that integration can only take place on white people’s terms and with acquiescence to white norms instead of on terms of equality [35, 3].

2.5.1 Anderson’s Argument Against Race as Culture

The Imperative of Integration (hereafter abbreviated as *The Imperative*) takes as its central case the spatial and social segregation of black and white people in the United States [1, 22]. Anderson provides ample evidence that black people are disadvantaged by this widespread segregation, which is supported by the state, and argues that it is a moral imperative to move towards racially integrated communities [1, 21]. She summarizes the main points of her argument for integration as follows:

Segregation of social groups is a principal cause of group inequality. It isolates disadvantaged groups from access to public and private resources, from sources of human and cultural capital, and from the social networks that govern access to jobs, business connections, and political influence. It depresses their ability to accumulate wealth and gain access to credit.

It reinforces stigmatizing stereotypes about the disadvantaged and thus causes discrimination. Segregation also undermines democracy [1, 2]

While Anderson provides convincing arguments for the harms of racial segregation in the United States, some of her evidence is at odds with her claim that race is not cultural. Many of the factors she describes as perpetuating racial segregation relate to culture and the differing cultural habits black and white people have developed due to pervasive segregation. Because white is the dominant race, white people act as gatekeepers for wealthier communities, higher-paying jobs and better quality schools [1, 136]. The perception on the part of white people that black people are in some way “alien” leads to their exclusion from majority-white communities and workplaces [1, 87]; the state is complicit in this segregation by ignoring “massive illegal private housing discrimination” [1, 69]. Racism is also a major factor driving segregation, as the lower socioeconomic status of black people is often pathologized and linked to the idea that black people are culturally deprived [1, 52; 84]; discrimination and segregation are therefore “mutually reinforcing” [1, 64]. Despite the clear link Anderson draws between race and culture in constructing her argument for integration, she remains invested in the claim that “race defines a social identity, not a culture” [1, 37]. On this point, her argument falters, and it is unclear why she denies the cultural dimension of race after employing it fruitfully to explain the causes and effects of racial segregation.

The cultural distinction between black people and white people in the U.S. as Anderson outlines it involves linguistic differences [1, 36]; differing attitudes towards strangers [1, 35]; different styles of dress and other adornment practices [1, 115]; different interests and pastimes [1, 37]; and different cultural reference points, senses of humour, and methods of approaching interpersonal issues [1, 37]. Anderson considers these habits to be cultural because they are “acquired by adaptation to the social environment” [1, 35]. These cultural differences tend to disadvantage black people because white people, as the dominant group, are often in a position to decide what is appropriate and are biased towards their own cultural practices [1, 37]. On the topic of linguistic differences, Anderson writes, “[t]he distance between the dialect poor blacks speak at home and that taught in the classroom impedes their educational

progress and handicaps them in competing for jobs, especially jobs that require contact with a diverse public” [1, 36]. When discussing the difficulty black people have in attaining elite jobs, she outlines the extra-professional qualifications that white people possess that give them a distinct advantage: “Facility with elite leisure activities such as golf, familiarity with cultural reference points that are the basis for small talk with coworkers, mastery of elite norms for circulating among people at a company party, and similar cultural skills” [1, 37]. Although she is careful not to make any normative claims about white cultural practices, it is clear that her vision of integration largely involves other races acclimatizing to white professional norms. She writes, “it must be acknowledged that black in-group norms of communication are liable to fade as a byproduct of integration,” and claims that black people have “no grounds for complaint” about being asked to change their clothing style to suit the “desire of firms to present a public appearance to customers that is not seen as black” [1, 115]. Such comments, while not intended to be discriminatory, prioritize white interests and implicitly associate whiteness with professionalism, competence and respectability.

Anderson’s position on race is similar to Haslanger’s in several regards. Both theorists define race as a political hierarchy that would not exist in an ideal society [1, 5; 151][23, 32]; both consider racial identities to be a kind of know-how for navigating the political hierarchy [1, 76][23, 30]; both are concerned about authenticity scripts and racism inevitably emerging from racial categories, even in the absence of such a hierarchy [1, 178] [23, 30-31]; and both deny that race is cultural [1, 114][23, 25]. I suggest that it is also noteworthy from an epistemic perspective that both theorists are upper-middle-class white American women and prominent academics in their fields who have lived in racially segregated U.S. cities and who found this segregation objectionable [1, x][30, 3]. While Anderson, like Haslanger, presents herself as in favour of diversity and against assimilation to white cultural ideals, her remarks on what each racial group has to gain from integration—and what each has to lose—are telling [1, 114]. She believes that black people stand to gain “access to job opportunities, retail and commercial services, and public health goods”; the “ability to accumulate financial, human, social, and cultural capital,” as well as “access to state-provided

goods, including decent public schools and adequate law enforcement” [1, 43]. In order to gain access to such goods, black people would have to give up certain aesthetic practices such as wearing their hair in dreadlocks and dressing “gangsta,” as well as linguistic practices such as speaking directly and using Black English Vernacular [1, 36; 115]. White people stand to gain less racist attitudes and more diverse friend groups [1, 130-131; 127]; they stand to lose preferential treatment in workplace and educational settings [1, 116]. Although Anderson is careful throughout her book to present black disadvantage as the result of systemic forces and to avoid demonizing black people, her description of the adjustments each racial group would have to make in order for integration to be successful belies a misunderstanding of and potentially a distaste for black cultural practices such as traditional hairstyles. This point is raised by V. Denise Jones in her critique of *The Imperative*, which will be discussed in the next subsection along with Jeffers’ critique.

2.5.2 Anderson’s Critics: Jeffers and James

In his piece “Anderson on Multiculturalism and Blackness: A Du Boisian Response,” Jeffers calls *The Imperative* “an exciting contribution to social and political philosophy,” but he criticizes and rejects some aspects of Anderson’s position, particularly those related to the connection between race and culture [35, 1]. Drawing once again on Du Bois’ work, Jeffers references a controversial piece published in 1934 in which Du Bois argues “that black people should avoid opposing “segregation pure and simple”” [35, 1]. Du Bois believed that focusing on “black self-organization” was more fruitful than fighting racial segregation and urged his readers to concentrate on building up their own communities rather than on integrating into white communities [35, 1]. Jeffers describes Du Bois’ reasons for “encouraging some short term acceptance of de jure segregation” as involving a recognition that the material needs of African Americans were unlikely to be prioritized by white institutions, as well as understanding that shame in being a member of the black race was one reason to oppose segregation, especially “among the black elite” [35, 2]. These concerns are still relevant in the contemporary United States, given the “continued racist attitudes and institutional racism” [35, 2]. While Jeffers finds Anderson’s argument concerning the way black choices are unfairly restricted convincing, he takes issue with her criticism

of multiculturalism.

As with Haslanger's theory of race, Anderson is willing to acknowledge only a political hierarchy of races, denying that race also implies a cultural identity, which leads to the mistaken impression that "race and culture are easily disentangled" [35, 3]. Jeffers uses the example of black hairstyles to demonstrate "that cultural expression related to the body can link culture and ancestry in important ways" [35, 3]. As he writes,

When pondering the relevance of hair to the politics of race, it would be missing the point to note that whites and Asians too can braid or lock their hair or even imitate Afros. The functioning of hairstyles of these types as forms of cultural resistance to anti-black racism is tied to the valuing of physical characteristics associated with such ancestry [35, 3].

Finally, Jeffers criticizes Anderson's failure to address how "tragic" it is to "accept the futility of the goal of an economically stable and broadly flourishing black community in America" [35, 4]. Anderson's vision of integration as occurring not on "terms of equality" but rather "as capitulation to the fact that black people remain at a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage when their exposure to white people is limited" entails "accept[ing] a huge blow to *black dignity*" [35, 4](emphasis in original). On this point, Anderson shows her whiteness by displaying an utter lack of empathy for what such a concession would mean to African Americans.

James' response, titled "The Burdens of Integration," argues that Anderson's account "does not take seriously enough the burdens of integration on black people," nor consider "that the demoncratic ideal that she posits may not only be unrealistic but also undesirable" [34, 1]. In discussing her first criticism, James draws on her own experiences in a majority-white work environment, which informs her position that integration for black people entails enduring racial microaggressions and repeatedly "forgiving whites for their awkward expressions of prejudice" as a condition of being included in a white space [34, 3]. She finds Anderson's approach to the issue of integration myopic in its inattention to the lived experiences of black people and in its failure to provide "a sustained treatment of white hegemony in the United States as the basis for racial injustice" [34, 1]. She writes, "Anderson's interpretation is fraught with value judgements that trivialize and pathologize many black

experiences,” pointing to Anderson’s misinterpretation of some of her data, such as the reasons for black students’ disengagement from formal education [34, 2]. While Anderson chalks this disengagement up to “a culture of deviance,” James argues that it has its roots in “the content of the curriculum [which] leaves intact a prejudicial view of their lived experiences and privileges white hegemony” [34, 2]. Similarly, while Anderson dismisses “the aesthetic choices black people make in a white hegemonic world,” assuming that these aspects of black culture could easily be given up in favour of white mainstream (white) styles, James argues that such adjustments “place too high a burden on the heads of black people” [34, 3]; in a world where “a white-centered standard encourages black people to use strenuous processes, at great costs, often with harsh chemicals on their hair to fit the norm,” black people’s naturally curly or religiously significant hairstyles are not the trivial personal styling choices Anderson takes them to be [34, 3]. James calls Anderson’s position on black aesthetic choices “either cruelly insensitive or unreflectively naïve” [34, 3].

2.6 Chapter 2 Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that it seems plausible that Haslanger’s whiteness is acting as a blindspot in her theory, leading her to deny that race has a valuable cultural component worth preserving “after the revolution” [23, 171]. Anderson’s similar denial, which she fails to justify and which contradicts much of the evidence she presents for racial integration, points to the same conclusion. In the next chapter, I explore the concept of ‘white sensibility’ and put forward the thesis that whiteness acts as a barrier to understanding cultural constructionism and to theorizing about race more broadly. I argue that for white people, fully grasping the cultural constructionist theory of race may require a sincere investigation of one’s relationship with white identity, as well as confronting one’s fear and discomfort with the cultural differences between racial groups.

Chapter 3

On White Sensibility and Philosophy of Race

3.1 Introduction to Chapter 3

In this chapter, I introduce and explain my main thesis, which states that white theorists face barriers to understanding cultural constructionism and to theorizing about race more broadly due to their position in the political hierarchy of races and resultant epistemic standpoint. While whiteness is not monolithic, I argue, following many other theorists, that there are certain features of the social experience of being white that lead to blind spots and mistaken assumptions about the nature of our social world [17][42][54, 4][53][59, 1-18]. These blindspots and mistaken assumptions derive from the political dominance of the white race and the species of bad faith that supports white supremacy [59, 55-64][15, 186-187]. As Joe R. Feagin has argued, the “white racial frame” is a dominant worldview whose core is pro-white and anti-black, and which is sustained by altered narratives of historical events (a “collective forgetting” of the atrocities white people have committed against nonwhite people) and a resistance to counter evidence [17, 97; 17]. Charles Mills has described white ignorance as a force of unknowing—a willful ignorance that actively resists knowledge that would displace white people from their privileged social position [42, 15]. Yet self-awareness about one’s whiteness and the unjust social benefits it entails alone is not sufficient to undo the effects of what Feagin calls the white racial frame because it has such a deep structuring effect on white people’s worldviews; white people are often unaware of their continued investments in whiteness and white supremacy, which their rhetoric promotes even as they profess antiracist views [17, 14][53, 6][54, 4]. Shannon Sullivan’s 2014 book *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* illustrates this effect through an exploration of the white liberal tendency to position oneself as superior to less educated, poorer white people, thus distancing oneself from the problem of white racism while unconsciously perpetuating and “nourish[ing]” it [54, 4-6]. I argue here that the white racial frame, or what Lissa

Skitolsky calls ‘white sensibility’—a general framework for seeing and understanding the world that is structured by unconscious commitments to whiteness—is a problem for all white theorists who work on race, regardless of how anti-racist they claim to be, and acts as an obstacle to conceptualizing race as cultural [53, 6]. This is primarily due to two aspects of white sensibility: the assumption of white neutrality and the assumption of white universality.

The unconscious assumptions of white neutrality and white universality are the mistaken impressions that whiteness is an unmarked social and political category, and that white people have complete access to knowledge about the social experiences of members of other racial groups [59, 1-23]. The assumption of white neutrality means that white people are conditioned to assume that they are not motivated by an allegiance to whiteness but are merely thinking about social issues in a disinterested way, whereas non-white thinkers are assumed to be speaking ‘for their race’ and to be motivated at least in part by concerns specific to their racial group [13, 2][42, 28]. The assumption of white universality means that the epistemic position of the white thinker is often taken by the thinker themselves and by white readers to be complete and to represent the whole of human experience, despite the fact that white thinkers are limited by their social position just as members of other races are, and, as I will argue, more so because of their unique position at the top of the racial hierarchy. Further, the dominance of the white race has produced an association of whiteness with the norm such that white people do not tend to recognize a distinct ‘white culture’ in their behaviours, interests or activities [13, 9][23, 53][21, 5]; as David Wilkins notes in the introduction to *Color Conscious*, white culture is frequently perceived by white Americans simply as ‘American culture,’ “or, even more unselfconsciously, simply the way things are” [57, 22]. The fact that many white people live highly segregated lives with little contact with members of other races [1] [54, 21][17, 92], combined with the association of whiteness with the human norm and its overrepresentation in all forms of Western media [13] means that most white people are not aware of how significantly white culture differs from the culture of other racial groups. This lack of contact with other races and assumption of white normativity could at least partly account for the denial on the part of white theorists that race has a cultural dimension as well as a political (hierarchical) dimension.

Although much of my work in this project has focused on Haslanger's political constructionism, I do not intend this thesis to apply to her work exclusively, but rather to address a broader issue in philosophy of race. As suggested in the previous chapter, the problem of white sensibility is equally applicable to Anderson's argument for racial integration in *The Imperative of Integration*[1]. I suggest that whiteness constitutes an obstacle to theorizing about race on the part of all white thinkers, regardless of how self-aware they are when it comes to white privilege and the ways in which they benefit from systemic racism. As a white thinker myself, I am aware that there is irony in asserting this position; I am also subject to the cognitive distortions caused by whiteness. These distortions are difficult to detect because of the deeply embedded nature of white sensibility [53, 7][17, 15]. Social science research has demonstrated that children as young as two years old show an awareness of "the major elements of the white racial frame" [61, 100]. Getting outside of a social frame that many white children are introduced to as soon as they can communicate is extremely challenging [17, 204]. Even white thinkers who believe that they have acknowledged their white privilege sufficiently and are theorizing from a position of awareness of the power dynamics of our white supremacist society will struggle to recognize the ways in which their worldview has been structured by white sensibility, as I argue. Increased awareness of the way whiteness structures perspective is essential to reducing its influence, according to many theorists [10][13] [60][17][46][54].

The first section of this chapter discusses Foucault's concept of a 'dominant discourse' and relates how Foucault's work has been taken up by scholars who address the question of whiteness as an epistemic standpoint, such as Skitolsky, Judith Butler and George Yancy. Section one also addresses the whiteness of representation, as discussed by Richard Dyer in his 1997 book *White*. The pervasiveness of whiteness in all forms of media contributes to the sense that whiteness is the norm from which other races deviate [13, 1-4][59, 10]. The second section of this chapter discusses the idea of whiteness as an epistemic standpoint, explaining the theory of standpoint epistemology and summarizing Charles Mills' concept of white ignorance and Feagin's concept of the white racial frame. The third section looks closely at some of the remarks Haslanger makes that I believe demonstrate the influence of white sensibility on her thought. The fourth and final section of this chapter addresses the question of what

can be done to avoid or overcome the white racial frame and white sensibility. While I do not claim that it is impossible to overcome the influence of white sensibility on one's thought, I argue that its pernicious influence is not undone by simply acknowledging that one is white and therefore privileged; awareness of the all-encompassing nature of whiteness as a structural feature of one's perspective on the world, as well as a level of epistemic humility in terms of white people's first-person access to knowledge about race and race-related social issues, is required to begin this process [59, 13].

3.2 Foucault's 'Dominant Discourse' as Applied to Whiteness

In his 1972 book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault introduced the concept of 'discourse' as a set of unwritten rules or practices that govern sense-making and meaning in a particular social domain [20, 80]. Discourse can be described as "the distribution and circulation of certain utterances and statements" in predictable patterns [20, 54]. These patterns become normalized over time such that ideas that fit within these patterns can be said to 'make sense' while those that do not are excluded from sense-making and cannot be taken seriously [43, 54]. Foucault's concept of discourse is directly linked with relations of power; as he writes in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" [18, 100-101]. Unlike earlier Marxist and feminist interpretations of power, Foucault does not see it as merely a tool of repression or as something that is simply possessed; he sees power as productive and as more of a strategy than a possession—as "a verb rather than a noun" [43, 35]. As Sara Mills writes of the connection between power and discourse for Foucault, "[t]he notion of exclusion is very important" [43, 35]; discourse is "a complex set of practices" that works to keep certain ideas and statements in circulation while keeping other ideas and statements out of circulation [43, 35]. Those statements that gain a foothold in our society become aspects of a dominant discourse, and they are repeatedly reproduced by individuals and institutions such as "universities, government departments, publishing houses, scientific bodies and so on" [43, 58]. Dominant discourse structures individuals' impressions of the world, constraining their perceptions in particular ways by imposing structures on

their thinking [43, 55-56]. Over time, these structures concretize. As Mills explains,

In the process of thinking about the world, we categorize and interpret experience and events according to the structures available to us and in the process of interpreting, we lend these structures a solidity and a normality which it is often difficult to question [43, 56].

In the case of whiteness, ideas of white superiority in intelligence, culture and aesthetics become features of a dominant discourse that pervades our social world and take on the status of unquestioned assumptions [59, 13]. It is important to note that for Foucault, there is no prediscursive domain [19, 67]. The complex set of practices that produce discourse and assign value to certain statements while devaluing others is the only reality; there is no hidden truth behind discourse [43, 55]. Therefore, control of the discursive domain is control of reality, for Foucault. Subsequent thinkers who have taken up Foucault's notion of discourse do not always endorse this aspect of the theory; in the case of whiteness studies, thinkers tend to believe that there *is* a truth behind the dominant discourse of whiteness which recounts the perspective of members of subordinated racial groups [42, 17]. This section summarizes the work of three theorists who have used Foucault's concept of dominant discourse to discuss how whiteness influences perception on an unconscious level, creating the conditions for the perpetuation of white supremacy [59, 117][8, 52][61, 59][53, ix]. The final subsection of 3.2 addresses the whiteness of representation as discussed by Dyer in his 1997 book *White*, which reinforces the notion of whiteness as unmarked and as human norm.

3.2.1 Using Foucault to Read Whiteness: George Yancy

In his chapter titled "A Foucauldian (Genealogical) Reading of Whiteness," George Yancy argues, following Foucault's understanding of power, that "whiteness, as a site of concentrated power, is productive" [59, 114]. However, what whiteness produces is a discursive field where the white voice is "sovereign voice, treating itself as hyper-normative and unmarked, conceal[ing] its status as racialized, located, and positioned" [59, 109]. In the introduction to the edited collection where this chapter is featured, *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*,

Yancy begins by noting that it is characteristic of white people to imagine that they possess a sort of ‘god’s eye view,’ failing to recognize that whiteness is not a neutral identity from which other races deviate but is itself a social identity with limitations and biases [59, 1]. He writes, “Whites have a way of speaking from a center that they often appear to forget forms the white ideological fulcrum upon which what they say (do not say) or see (do not see) hinges. In short, whites frequently lie to themselves” [59, 1]. Following Foucault’s theory of dominant discourse, Yancy argues that “[t]he power and privilege of whiteness obfuscates its own complicity in seeing a “reality” that it constructs as objective” [59, 10]. This false sense of objectivity leads white thinkers to the misguided notion that they possess complete knowledge about the social world; the resultant sense of authority and universal perception is an important aspect of what Yancy calls “the social ontology of whiteness” [59, 10]. As he explains, a “key feature” of the social ontology of whiteness is the tendency to avoid discussing one’s “social, political, economic and cultural investments in whiteness” [59, 4]. This avoidance leads to both a failure to recognize that the white perspective is not neutral, as well as “a failure [on the part of white people] to see their complicity with the systemic workings of white supremacy” [59, 4].

The mistaken impression that white people have a neutral perspective from which to view the world, uninflected by social and cultural influences, also leads to the belief that they can theorize about social and cultural phenomena from a disinterested perspective [59, 4]. This assumption of neutrality and objectivity has the result of creating a link between “reason and white power” which is very difficult to dismantle or even draw attention to, as Yancy argues [59, 117]. Yancy describes whiteness as “a specific historically constructed standpoint, one that emerges as a universal value code” that becomes internalized even by non-white people [59, 19-20]. As he writes,

Whiteness has the power to create an elaborate social subterfuge, leading both whites and nonwhites to believe that the representations in terms of which they live their lives and understand the world and themselves are naturally given, unchangeable ways of being. [59, 11]

Assumptions of white neutrality and universality have been particularly noteworthy in philosophy, where the subject of philosophical discourse has historically been imagined as a white, able-bodied, financially stable man—what Charles Mills calls “the solitary

Cartesian cognizer” [42, 15]. While the figure of the autonomous white man as the subject of philosophy has been called into question repeatedly over the past few decades by feminist and non-white philosophers, the idea that white people have a more complete and neutral perspective on the world has not entirely disappeared from the field [59, 145]; the mistaken impression that white people can theorize about social and cultural phenomena from a disinterested perspective persists because whiteness remains a dominant discourse in philosophy and in society more broadly [59, 146].

A second feature of the social ontology of whiteness which goes hand-in-hand with the first is the impression that no knowledge is beyond the grasp of white thinkers; there is an unconscious assumption on the part of white people that everything that can be known can be known by a white person. As Yancy writes, whiteness “admits of no ignorance vis-à-vis the black” and that from the perspective of the white thinker, “what whiteness knows is what there is” [59, 11-12]. He argues that white people see the racial other “as an instantiation of white normativity (the same) ..., neither more nor less than an extension of what whiteness is” [59, 13]. This inability to recognize difference in non-white people leads to arrogance and solipsism, and ultimately to a denial of the existence of the ‘other,’ as Yancy writes [59, 13]. The idea that white people refuse to admit ignorance regarding the experiences of non-white people is described by Skitolsky as one of the two refusals of white sensibility [53, 7]. The next subsection explains these two refusals and how they function to maintain the status quo of white indifference to black suffering.

3.2.2 Skitolsky’s Two Refusals of Whiteness

In her 2020 book *Hip-Hop as Philosophical Text and Testimony: Can I get a witness?*, Lissa Skitolsky frames two major aspects of white sensibility in terms of two refusals: the refusal to think about being white, and the refusal to accept that there are limits to what white people can know and understand about the world from first-person experience [53, 7-8]. Skitolsky conceives of white sensibility as a way of seeing and understanding the world that is structured by white interests and sustained by white refusals [53, 7]. Following Foucault’s theory of discourse, she writes, “white sensibility refers to the product of the dominant discursive and epistemological practices that undergird and justify the racist organization of power and capital so that it appears

to make sense” [53, 6]. Because it represents a dominant discourse, white sensibility precludes broad comprehension on the part of white people of systemic anti-black violence as systemic rather than as a series of independent tragedies, Skitolsky argues [53, 55]. White identity is not seen as causally related to black suffering in the dominant discourse of white sensibility because making this connection would disrupt the idea that anti-black violence can be solved by economic and political reforms, a solution that leaves white hegemony intact [53, 6]. White people are thus sheltered from the realization that they are essentially implicated in white supremacy and systemic racist violence, which structures both how we perceive and understand the world individually, as well as how racism and racist violence are broadly represented in society. Due to the dominant discourse of white sensibility, most white people are unable to comprehend their role in perpetuating racism and upholding systems of white supremacy [53, 56].

This misunderstanding of the nature of racism and the role of white people in its perpetuation has severe consequences, as Skitolsky writes, since it is essential to the reproduction of systemic racism; the denial that white identity is causally implicated in racist violence creates and sustains the conditions for this violence [53, ix]. For Skitolsky, the dominant discourse of white sensibility is “not primarily a problem of false ideas,” but rather a problem of “norms that govern discourse as a whole in public, private and professional spaces” [53, 17;8]. Because of the pervasive nature of these norms and the “cognitive distortions” produced by white sensibility, Skitolsky argues that “it is not possible to question or expose the limits of white sensibility in the terms of the dominant discourse” [53, 7; 3]. Describing the all-encompassing nature of white sensibility, Skitolsky writes,

the problem of “white sensibility” is ... a problem of how white people learn to see and feel and read the world around them—how they encounter the world—to perpetually defer any “sense” of being-white in a white supremacist state [53, 17].

This is not a problem that a white person can think their way out of, as Skitolsky argues; an “aesthetic stimulus” is required to disrupt “the totalizing hold of this discourse” [53, 7]. She sees hip-hop as one art form that has the power to provide such a stimulus, jolting attentive white listeners out of their misperception of racial

dynamics in America by disrupting “the narratives that have always allowed them to “make sense” of their experience at the cost of moral apathy and willful ignorance about the suffering of black communities” [53, 14]. Taking hip-hop seriously as a form of philosophical testimony is therefore an essential step in the process of coming to terms with the connection between white identity and antiblack violence [53, 12]. The next subsection addresses Judith Butler’s use of Foucault to discuss how whiteness structures visual perception, influencing what white people think they see in situations involving members of other racial groups.

3.2.3 Butler on the Whiteness of Visual Perception

Judith Butler has used Foucault’s work to theorize how the visual field is inflected by race such that “white seeing” is not neutral but becomes an unconscious “reading” that reinforces racial stereotypes and justifies antiblack violence [8, 52]. In her chapter on the Rodney King trials titled “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” Butler explores the question of how a video showing police officers brutally beating King, who is unarmed and does not resist, could be read by jurors at King’s trial as evidence that the police response was appropriate and justified [8, 51]. Butler elaborates a theory of what she calls “the racial schematization of the visual field,” explaining how “racism pervades white perception” such that King’s black body is always already read as threatening by white observers [8, 59]. Violence committed against King is therefore justified in the minds of white observers as a way of preemptively blocking the violence King is supposedly bound to unleash if given the opportunity to do so [8, 59]. Butler argues that “seeing” and “reading” merge in this “racially saturated field of visibility” so that it becomes impossible to present visual evidence to disprove the claim that King represented a threat that police needed to violently contain [8, 52]. She concludes that “[t]he visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” [8, 56]. The idea that seeing itself—what one thinks one has seen, how one interprets what one has witnessed—is affected by one’s race is essential to the concept of white sensibility. White sensibility is not defined by a set of assumptions, such as “black people are more violent than white people,” but is evidenced by the fact that a white person could watch a group of white police officers brutally beat

a black man to death and still read that assumption onto the scene, subsequently using that reading to justify anti-black violence and even to blame King for his own killing [8, 62]. The next subsection discusses Richard Dyer’s 1997 book *White* and his theory that the whiteness of representation contributes to the general perception of whiteness as neutral and as the human norm [13, 38].

3.2.4 Dyer on the Whiteness of Representation

The tendency for white people not to think about their race is related to the overrepresentation of white people in all forms of media in Western culture, as Dyer argues in his 1997 book *White*. He notes that popular visual media outlets, including television, films, advertising, fashion photography, music videos, video games and magazines all represent white people at a much higher rate than any other racial group [13, 3]. Recent AI research has demonstrated that whiteness is also over-represented on the internet; the abundance of images of white people in the training data used for facial recognition software has made AI much more adept at recognizing the faces of white men than those of people of other races, for instance [52]. Further, visual mediums themselves assume, privilege, and construct whiteness, according to Dyer [13, 122]. The lighting technologies used in photography and film were developed with the white face in mind, with undertones that specifically cater to the hues of white skin and obscure darker faces [13, 90]. The apparatus of movie lighting and lighting for photographic media privileges whiteness to such an extent that, as Dyer argues, “photographing non-white people is typically construed as a problem” [13, 89]. Catering lighting in visual media to flatter white skin also creates metaphorical connections to the idea of whiteness as “enlightened,” “pure,” and “holy” in our collective consciousness [13, 101; 78; 126]. Since our culture is so saturated with visual media and privileges sight over other senses, the representation of whiteness as human norm in these cultural products has the effect of reinforcing the notion that whiteness is “unmarked, unspecific, [and] universal” [13, 45].

Because of the whiteness of representation, white people do not typically associate their cultural activities with ‘being white’ but tend to assume that white is a neutral category [13, 9]. However, occupying the position of the ‘unraced’ is far from neutral and in fact represents an extreme expression of social power, as Dyer argues. He

writes,

There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that—they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race [13, 2].

Dyer claims that the lacuna in white people’s understanding of how much race shapes social and cultural life does not imply that there is no such thing as ‘white culture’; rather, it implies that as the racial group at the top of the political hierarchy, white people are the only ones in a position to deny the significance of race [13, 3]. Dyer refers to Foucault’s work specifically when he writes, “the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity” [13, 3]. Dyer sees the whiteness of dominant discourse spanning from media to politics to education, all of which are largely controlled by white people [13, 3]. He writes, “there is something especially white in this non-located and disembodied position of knowledge, and thus it seems especially important to try to break the hold of whiteness by locating and embodying it in a particular experience of being white” [13, 4]. The next section takes up the challenge posed by Dyer of thinking of whiteness as a particular epistemic position.

3.3 Whiteness as Epistemic Position

3.3.1 Standpoint Epistemology and the Epistemic Privilege of Subordinated People

Standpoint theory comes from feminist adaptations of Marxist theory, especially from the pioneering work of Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Alison Jaggar and Patricia Hill Collins [42, 14][26]. The basic idea of standpoint theory as developed by feminist epistemologists is that “experiential differences lead to differences in perspective, and these perspectival differences carry epistemic consequence” [26]. Perspectival differences between human groups do not need to be understood in an essentialist way, i.e., by positing that members of particular groups have particular ways of thinking

and understanding the world (although some feminists have suggested this). A non-essentialist way of conceiving of perspectival differences relates to class distinctions and other types of social privilege and subordination. Jaggar's articulation of standpoint epistemology, for instance, does not posit that women have access to a special way of knowing because they fundamentally think differently from men, but rather relies on the idea that knowledge is intimately connected to power and therefore dominant understandings of various phenomena are driven by a vested (if unacknowledged) interest in maintaining the status quo [33, 378]. Standpoint epistemologists have argued that occupying a socially subordinated status leads to a clearer understanding of certain aspects of our social world, particularly those aspects related to their subordination [26]. As Jaggar explains, the prevailing worldview reflects the interests of the ruling class and therefore will tend to confirm their status as superior and to naturalize various social inequalities [33, 370]. Members of subordinated groups can be said to have a clearer vision of the world because "the ruling class has an interest in concealing the way in which it dominates and exploits the rest of the population, [and] the interpretation of reality that it presents will be distorted in characteristic ways," while the knowledge produced by subordinated agents will not be subject to the same distortions [33, 370]. Jaggar's argument is that "[t]he standpoint of the oppressed is not just different from that of the ruling class; it is also epistemologically advantageous," both more impartial and more comprehensive than that of the ruling class [33, 371].

One of the major claims of feminist standpoint theory is that the social and political situation of the subordinated knower puts them in a better position to generate true knowledge about their social world as compared to dominantly situated knowers [26]. Many feminist epistemologists consider a standpoint to be an "achieved stance" rather than merely a different perspective because it requires a political consciousness of the shared nature of a particular form of oppression such as racism or sexism [26]. Kathleen Okruhlik, a philosopher of science who has written about unconscious bias in hypothesis generation in biology, writes, "Just as Hegel's slave could know more than the master, so women (or feminists) may enjoy an epistemic advantage over men (or non-feminists)" [44, 32]. The same point can be made about members of subordinated racial groups. This epistemic privilege is due to the fact that members

of the ruling class have an interest in “mystifying reality” in order to maintain and justify their dominant social status, while members of subordinate classes do not [33, 384]. Jaggar further notes that while the perspective of the ruling class represents the interests of only a limited sector of the population (while pretending to represent objective truth), the perspective of subordinated people “comes closer to representing the interests of society as a whole” [33, 371]. Therefore, according to standpoint theory, the knowledge produced by subordinated people—especially knowledge related to their own subordination—should be held in higher regard than knowledge produced by members of the ruling class. The next subsection addresses Charles Mills’ theory of white ignorance, which he understands as a “cognitive handicap” specifically tied to the political dominance of the white race [42, 15].

3.3.2 Mills on White Ignorance

In his chapter of the 2007 collection *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, titled “White Ignorance,” Charles Mills discusses the particular features of the “cognitive handicap” of whiteness as an epistemic position [42, 15]. He elaborates on one of the key themes of his well-known 1997 book *The Racial Contract*: the idea of white ignorance as a willful ignorance that actively resists knowledge about the true state of our present racial relations and our dark racial past [42, 15]. This form of ignorance is much more harmful than a simple lack of awareness due to limited exposure, a gap in one’s understanding, or an epistemic oversight. White ignorance, as Mills argues, is not neutral as these forms of ignorance are, but is motivated by a desire (conscious or unconscious) to maintain the status quo by failing to give credence to conflicting evidence and by promoting a “collective amnesia” regarding past racial atrocities [42, 29-30]. Because of this feature of hostility towards information that does not fit within its existing frame, white ignorance involves both false beliefs and the absence of true beliefs about people of colour [42, 16]. Mills argues that self-serving ignorance on the part of white people is a serious threat to people of colour because it both denies their suffering and enables its perpetuation [42, 17]. White ignorance is directly linked to white supremacy in that it involves “the spread of misinformation” within the “larger social cluster” or “group entity” that is white people, and this misinformation encourages the perspective that white supremacy is

either a thing of the past or is the result of the natural superiority of white people [42, 16].

Like standpoint theory, Mills' work is grounded in the Marxist tradition and the idea of different social classes possessing differing perspectives on the social order [42, 14]. He notes that "[t]he idea of a group-based cognitive handicap is not an alien one to the radical tradition," and calls his theory "a straightforward corollary of standpoint theory" in that the idea of a group with epistemic privilege due to their social location implies the existence of "another group that is handicapped" [42, 15]. Feminist epistemologists have spoken of men possessing such a cognitive handicap relative to the conditions of life for women in a sexist society [26]. As in the case of men, invoking such a handicap on the part of white people does not require positing homogeneity or uniformity "across the white population," nor does it assume a fatalism about the possibility of overcoming the handicap [42, 22]; as Mills writes, "some people who are white will, because of their particular histories (and/or the intersection of whiteness with other identities), overcome it and have true beliefs on what their fellow whites get wrong" [42, 23]. He therefore claims that white ignorance is best described as "a cognitive tendency"—a strong inclination, which, while "not insuperable" is still difficult to overcome unless one is well-informed about its existence and pervasiveness [42, 23].

White ignorance is so pervasive in our society that it is not even confined to white people, as Mills writes; nonwhite people will also be influenced "to a greater or lesser extent" by the discourse of white ignorance due to "patterns of ideological hegemony" that promote white perspectives on social issues above those of nonwhite people [42, 22]. It is therefore important that all people gain an awareness of "how certain social structures tend to promote these crucially flawed processes, how to personally extricate oneself from them (insofar as that is possible), and [how] to do one's part in undermining them in the broader cognitive sphere" [42, 23]. White ignorance can be thought of as an epistemic pitfall that is best avoided through knowledge of its existence and of the social mechanisms that support it, and by seeking out "contrasting knowledge" from other sources [42, 15]. For Mills, it is important not to take a relativist stance on different discourses on race such that "all claims to truth are equally spurious" [42, 15]; he believes that social subordination

and the survivalist mindset required by members of subordinated racial groups give them epistemic privilege relative to white knowers. In particular, he notes that black people have “been forced to become lay anthropologists, studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the “white tribe” that has such frightening power over them” [42, 17]. In this instance, it is clear that black people would have epistemic privilege and that white people would be epistemically handicapped due to their respective social roles. As Mills writes, “these are not cognizers linked by a reciprocal ignorance but rather groups whose respective privilege and subordination tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation, on the one hand, and more veridical perceptions, on the other hand” [42, 17]. The next subsection treats a similar theory put forward by Joe R. Feagin in his 2013 book *The White Racial Frame*.

3.3.3 Feagin on *The White Racial Frame*

Joe R. Feagin’s 2013 book *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* describes his theory of the dominant racial frame that has existed since “at least the mid-1600s” and has “legitimated, rationalized, and shaped racial oppression and inequality” in the United States for centuries [17, 49; x]. By ‘racial frame,’ Feagin means a broad worldview that is “embedded in individual minds, as well as in collective memories and histories, and helps people make sense out of everyday situations” [17, 9]. Feagin’s theory draws on neurological and social sciences to expand the idea of a white worldview beyond overt and covert racism to include many other elements of how whiteness shapes perspective and structures “what people see, or do not see, in important societal settings” [17, 10]. As he writes,

this white racial frame encompasses not only the stereotyping, bigotry, and racist ideology emphasized in other theories of “race,” but also the visual images, an array of emotions, sounds of accented language, interlinking interpretations and narratives, and inclinations to discriminate that are still central to the frame’s everyday operations [17, i].

The white racial frame is taught at home, in school, in workplaces, in the media, in court decisions, in the speeches of politicians, on playgrounds and almost anywhere

people spend their time, and extends “across white divisions of class, gender, and age” [17, xi; 10]. Although it has evolved over time, the basic elements of its “pro-white and anti-black core” have remained intact such that Feagin believes that a time-traveler from the 1800s would not be confused or surprised by the present state of racial relations in the United States [17, 93]. The white racial frame is “strongly resistant to displacement” and its activation “tends to suppress alternative or countering frames” such that even anti-racist liberal white people will unconsciously reproduce elements of it, even as they explicitly reject other elements [17, 12; 14-15].

The white racial frame is so persistent because it involves what Feagin calls “sincere fictions”—beliefs about the conditions of life for African Americans and other nonwhite people that contradict basic facts and require “serious collective denial” [17, 3]. As Feagin writes, “[w]hen important but inconvenient facts are presented that do not fit this dominant frame, whites tend to ignore or reject those facts” [17, 15]. This applies to collective memories and narratives about historical events as well, which are largely controlled by the socially dominant group [17, 17]. The suppression of past atrocities against nonwhite people and the failure to teach younger generations about our racist history contributes to a “collective forgetting” that is “critical to the continuation of [racial] oppression” [17, 17]. Pro-white versions of historical events tend to highlight “white conquest, superiority, hard work, and achievement,” re-writing the stories of black slavery and indigenous genocide, for instance, as feel-good narratives for white people [17, 13]. White social networks are also essential to keeping the white racial frame alive; elements of the frame become “cultural currency” between white people, providing a way of connecting white acquaintances and strangers with the assumption that they share a similar stance on racial issues and reinforcing that stance through mutual recognition [17, 16; 29]. The assumption of shared “understandings and inclinations” between white people is evident in the relative ease with which white strangers interact with one another as compared to the discomfort white people typically display when interacting with a nonwhite person [17, 29]. Additionally, Feagin and his fellow researchers found that the most blatant racism occurs “in the social backstage, where only whites are present,” demonstrating that although many white people today profess to be “colorblind,” white social groups are still the site of much “racist thought, commentary and performance” [17, 123]. The next section

attempts to demonstrate the influence of white sensibility on Haslanger's thought by looking closely at a few passages from *What is Race?*.

3.4 White Sensibility in Haslanger's Work

In this section, I highlight a few passages of Haslanger's writing in *What is Race?* that I believe demonstrate the influence of white sensibility on her thought. In the previous chapter, I discussed Sullivan's concept of 'ontological expansiveness' and how this relates to Haslanger's rejection of any kind of conditions for membership in a cultural group [54, 20][23, 30-31]. I draw on Sullivan's 2014 book *Good White People* again in this section, using her observations about white liberals to point to the particular strategies Haslanger employs (perhaps unconsciously) to separate herself from the negative connotations of whiteness. This is not an argument about Haslanger's intentions or personal politics; she appears to be legitimately concerned with achieving racial justice [23, 34; 166]. The point I am making is that even though Haslanger is anti-racist and well-educated on the systemic nature of racism, she still reproduces in her writing some harmful rhetoric that dissociates her own whiteness from past and present racial atrocities. In one passage, Haslanger rhetorically separates herself from her white ancestors, whose connection to her own life and personal history she explicitly questions [23, 171-172]. Some of her comments also promote the idea of white innocence and goodness, as well as assuming a universal white perspective on racial issues. Highlighting these passages is not intended to demonize Haslanger, but rather to demonstrate how white sensibility infiltrates the thinking even of those white liberal thinkers who explicitly profess a desire to end white supremacy [23, 166].

The first excerpt I highlight comes from Haslanger's second chapter in *What is Race?* and shows her questioning her connection to historical whiteness, including an implicit denial of her connection to white history. In questioning the importance of genealogy to an understanding of race, Haslanger writes:

What does it mean for me to understand "my history"? Is my history the history of White people? Why that history? Is my past reduced to my ancestral background? My maternal ancestors sided with the British in the American Revolution and fled to Canada. Does that tell me anything

about myself (other than the mere fact that this is true of my great-great-great-great-grandfather)? [...] And what of my black children (who, as I mentioned before, were adopted). Is this history not theirs, too? Is their Jewish grandfather's emigration from Poland not part of their history? Is one's history really to be traced by blood? Why? [23, 171-172]

In this passage, Haslanger appears to both distance herself from historical whiteness and attempt to bring her adopted black children into its fold. As Sullivan describes it, distancing oneself from one's white ancestors is one of several strategies middle class white people use to position themselves among the 'good whites' [54, 60]. She writes, "Distancing themselves from their white forebears can seem to be the only responsible way for contemporary white people to (not) deal with their racist history" [54, 60]. However, this practice should be condemned, Sullivan argues, because distancing themselves from white people of the past makes it easier for contemporary white people to think of themselves as absolved of racist behaviour and to deny their complicity in ongoing systemic racism [54, 60]. "Contemporary white people cannot separate themselves from their racial History," Sullivan writes, "because that history is now" [54, 60]. Denying that the history of whiteness is her history absolves Haslanger of responsibility for the atrocities (both past and present) of white supremacy, while 'whitening' her adopted black children serves to rhetorically close the distance between whiteness and blackness, thus denying that blackness is distinct from whiteness in significant ways.

In *The White Racial Frame*, Feagin comments on the importance of being honest about historical white atrocities and their ongoing ramifications when he writes,

White Americans ... have long tried to sanitize this country's collective memories and to downplay or eliminate accurate understandings of our extraordinarily racist history...When such a momentous and bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized by elites and historians, ordinary Americans, especially whites, understandably have difficulty in seeing or assessing accurately the present-day realities of unjust enrichment and impoverishment along racial lines [17, 17; 19].

Feagin argues that these efforts to paint a flattering historical portrait of white people—what he calls "collective forgetting and mythmaking"—have been essential to

justifying white people's unjust enrichment at the expense of nonwhite people in the dominant frame [17, 17]. While Haslanger is not explicitly denying historical racism in this excerpt, nor holding up her white ancestors as exemplars, by questioning the relevance of whiteness to her personal history she is denying her connection to unjust enrichment that continues to benefit white Americans such as herself. Her question as to why her adopted black children's Polish immigrant grandfather's history is not their history seems to ignore the fact that while Jewish Americans have come to be considered at least white-adjacent in most contexts, black people have remained marginalized as nonwhite 'Others.' There is a sense in which the history of Haslanger's white ancestors *is* her children's history, but this sense is not relevant to a discussion of their racial identities and resultant position in the political hierarchy of races.

Secondly, in her closing statement in *What is Race?*, Haslanger describes her vision of an ideal world—one in which race does not exist—and her determined efforts to transform this vision into a reality. As she writes,

In the world I envision “after the revolution,” we will not be bound primarily by narratives about the significance of “blood” or appearance, for I believe these narratives misguide us to focus on relationships that narrow our capacity to live together well. The narratives may be important for now and for long into the future. But I work on a daily basis to prefigure a world in which they no longer limit how we might live in justice [23, 172].

This excerpt exemplifies the aspect of white sensibility that considers whiteness to be a universal perspective with full access to knowledge about our social world and the ability to theorize about the best possible future for all people. In the context of race relations, Sullivan refers to “a paternalistic confidence that “we” good white people fully understand what next steps are needed in critical philosophy of race and racial justice movements more generally” [54, 56]. Haslanger displays confidence in her vision of a post-racial world as the ideal and remarks on her own daily efforts to bring about this future society, presumably despite push-back from less-enlightened theorists who do not yet realize that the continued existence of racial groups prevents us from “liv[ing] in justice” [23, 172]. There is something of the ‘white saviour complex’

in her suggestion that it is her own daily efforts that will create the conditions for such a revolution. Revolutions tend not to have been instigated by those who stand to benefit from maintaining the status quo. It is not the legitimacy of Haslanger's racial justice work that I am questioning here, but rather the hubris of a white person claiming to know the best way of achieving justice for racially subordinated people. The final section of this chapter addresses several theorists' perspectives on the possibility of overcoming white sensibility and the steps that must be taken in order to do so.

3.5 Overcoming White Sensibility

While the pervasive nature of white sensibility and its embeddedness in the minds of individuals and in our collective institutions make it seem extremely difficult to overcome, some theorists have suggested that doing so is possible. In an interview with George Yancy, Judith Butler writes,

Undoing whiteness has to be difficult work, but it starts, I think, with humility, with learning history, with white people learning how the history of racism persists in the everyday vicissitudes of the present ... It is difficult and ongoing work, calling on an ethical disposition and political solidarity that risks error in the practice of solidarity [61, 59].

Twenty years earlier, Richard Dyer wrote, "White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange" [13, 10]. Both theorists point to the importance of gaining an awareness of how whiteness functions to hide itself in plain sight, to disguise itself as 'just the way things are.' Seeing whiteness as a frame with a specific history of racial dominance, one with vested interests in maintaining and justifying the political order of white supremacy, is the first important step away from the idea that whiteness is both neutral and universal. This final section briefly addresses the suggestions of three theorists who do not see the persistence of whiteness in its current form as inevitable and who offer suggestions for overcoming what has alternately been called 'the white racial frame' and 'white sensibility' in this thesis.

3.5.1 Alison Bailey on Whiteness and ‘World-Travelling’

In an interview with George Yancy for the collection *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis*, Alison Bailey invokes María Lugones’ theory of ‘world-traveling’ to discuss how white people can begin to recognize the particularity of whiteness and to get a sense for how whiteness is perceived by nonwhite people [61, 61-71]. ‘World-traveling’ refers to leaving “the locations, texts, values, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemologies where we are at ease” [61, 63]. According to Bailey, white people have an intense desire to “remain metaphysically comfortable” by engaging only in social spaces and with written work that confirms their own worldview [61, 62]. She sees both “privilege-evasiveness and privilege-cognizance,” or the denial of white privilege and the open acknowledgement of white privilege on the part of white people, as motivated by the same drive to remain “insulate[d] from race-based anxiety and stress” [61, 61]. While openly acknowledging white privilege seems like a step in the right direction, Bailey notes that it is frequently accompanied by assertions of white goodness; privilege-cognizant white people typically “engage racial injustice movements *in safe ways* by steering conversations back to our good deeds, quoting people of color, ... white-washing our family histories, and following *BlackLivesMatter* on Twitter” [61, 62](emphasis in original). This sort of safe engagement with racial injustice ultimately does nothing to dismantle white privilege. In order to engage in “meaningful antiracist work,” Bailey believes that white people “need to not be afraid to fall apart,” meaning that we must resist the impulse to respond to racial crisis by “restoring the world to exactly the way it was before” [61, 62-63]. What is needed is transformation rather than restoration, which requires white people to leave behind what they have known and enter the unknown through ‘world-traveling’ [61, 63].

It is important to note the difference between ‘world-traveling’ and ‘ontological expansiveness,’ as the former could be interpreted as encouraging white people to enter the social spaces of other racial groups as a means of educating themselves. Bailey explains that Lugones’ theory “advocates for the practice of leaving “worlds” (e.g., social spaces where you are at ease because you are fluent in the culture, history, and social practices), and hanging out in “worlds” where you are rendered strange” [61, 64]. However, this traveling is not done at random; you must be invited into the new “world,” and you must enter it with “loving perception and playfulness of

spirit,” prepared to be altered by the experience [61, 64]. When done correctly, ‘world-traveling’ reduces arrogance and allows for the development of what Lugones calls “the plural self,” or a sense of how perceptions of oneself can change in different settings and in encounters with people of different races [61, 65]. Developing a sense of our own plurality can help to shake the notion that whiteness is a neutral or innocent identity, since seeing ourselves reflected back through the eyes of a person of colour shows a significantly different picture of whiteness. Discussing the importance these sorts of visceral experiences of self-awareness, Bailey writes,

We can’t think our way out of whiteness. White fragility and the desire for metaphysical comfort mean that we are constantly drawn to spaces where our identities are secure. So, resistance requires a good amount of volition on our part. For white folks to shift, we need to leave those spaces, philosophies, texts, geographies, politics, aesthetics, and worlds that keep us whole [61, 64].

She also notes how important it is “to keep the deep recalcitrant historical embeddedness of whiteness in mind” and “to become mindful of the discursive, embodied, and affective habits [we] deploy to maintain the fiction of whiteness” [61, 65; 68]. The next subsection addresses Sullivan’s proposed solution of white self-love.

3.5.2 Shannon Sullivan on White Self-Love

In *Good White People*, Sullivan argues that white self-love is what is required to solve the problem of white supremacy [54, 10]. In making this argument, she draws on James Baldwin’s 1963 book *The Fire Next Time* in which he wrote that “the Negro problem” in the United States will cease to be a problem once white people learned how to “accept and love themselves and each other” [5, 32]. Summarizing Baldwin’s point, Sullivan writes,

The so-called Negro problem is really a problem of white domination, and that problem is connected to white people’s inability to acknowledge, accept, and even affirm themselves as white. This affirmation is not a way to let white people off the racist hook that they’ve hung themselves on. Love is consistent with and even requires a willingness to be severely, yet

constructively critical of what one loves, and white people are in need of a great deal of criticism [54, 10].

Rather than distancing ourselves from whiteness, as many non- or anti-racist white people attempt to do, Sullivan believes that we must develop “a closer, more intimate relationship with it” [54, 9]. In the introduction to her book, Sullivan claims to have been inspired by Outlaw’s call for white people to “rehabilitate racial whiteness,” the subject of his chapter in Yancy’s 2004 collection *What White Looks Like* [46]. Sullivan explains Outlaw’s argument about redefining whiteness in this chapter as follows: “Outlaw calls for white people to stop waiting for black and other nonwhite people to do all the work. White people need to get off their duffs and begin figuring out what whiteness might mean other than the ongoing domination of people of color” [54, 22]. Learning to love whiteness means coming to terms with the historical atrocities committed in the name of whiteness and deciding to create new meanings that do not reproduce this history. For Sullivan, it also means not policing the boundaries of whiteness to exclude the lower classes or even the overtly racist [54, 42]. She advocates for a form of “radical inclusion” in conversations about racial justice amongst white people, including “white trash, white racists, white supremacists, and other white people who typically have been cast as. . .incapable of shaping a society’s views on race and white racism in helpful ways” [54, 42]. Sullivan argues that there will be no significant progress in dismantling white supremacy if participation in the conversation is restricted to middle- and upper-class white people; the ‘good whites’ will be content with blaming white racism on the ‘bad whites’ and racial progress will stagnate [54, 42]. The next subsection discussing Feagin’s thoughts on how to educate children in order to avoid reinscribing the white racial frame.

3.5.3 Feagin on Educating Children using Counterframes

While Feagin suggests that a “law of social inertia” operates to keep the white racial frame intact, he does not think that it is impossible “to act out of that dominant frame,” noting that many white people periodically do so [17, 38; 199]. Since the frame is largely learned by children from observing their parents, other adults in their lives and by interacting with their peers, early anti-racist education is essential to unseating the white racial frame from its position of authority [17, 92]. As Feagin

writes,

Deframing and reframing education in regard to racism should be an essential part of our regular educational efforts. Deframing involves consciously taking apart and critically analyzing elements of the white racial frame, while reframing means accepting or creating a new frame to replace that white frame [17, 204].

Feagin notes that in his extensive experience with teaching college students, it takes many hours of instruction and dialogue over several months for white students to begin to question racial stereotypes and recognize their role in maintaining racial hierarchy [17, 204]. The earlier students are exposed to a racial counterframe, the better; young children are able to grasp lessons about racism, and most have already been exposed to a great deal of messaging about race by the time they get to school [17, 207]. He suggests that asking older students to keep a diary in which they record “racial conversations and events” that they witness can be an effective means of getting students to acknowledge the racial messaging they are receiving from peers and adults [17, 207]. Central aspects of the racial counterframe that instructors should emphasize include “a strong analysis and critique of white oppression; an aggressive countering of anti-black framing; and a positive assertion of the humanity of all people and their right to real freedom and justice” [17, 205]. Feagin believes that instructors should be candid with students about historical racial injustices while also conveying the message that opposition to racism can come from people of all racial groups [17, 207]. While he thinks that it is important not to exaggerate white people’s role in racial justice movements, he believes that it is everyone’s responsibility to “oppose oppression by challenging the dominant racial frame” [17, 207].

3.6 Chapter 3 Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that assumptions about white neutrality and universality—aspects of white sensibility, which constitutes a dominant discourse in our racially stratified society—continue to affect white theorists’ work on race, and in particular may contribute to the belief that race does not have a cultural dimension. According to standpoint epistemology, white philosophers are epistemically disadvantaged when

it comes to understanding race and are less likely to generate true hypotheses in the field of philosophy of race as compared to philosophers of colour due to their socially dominant position. Even a well-meaning, antiracist, liberal white academic is still a member of the ruling class and will have limited access to the experiences of subordinated people. This is not to say that white philosophers should avoid participating in philosophy of race altogether; as Andrew Farr puts it, “[a] critique of whiteness and the whiteness of philosophy does not imply that the questions raised by white philosophers are not legitimate or important” [14, 156]. However, white philosophers working on questions about the nature of race should be mindful of the fact that their whiteness will skew their perspective in characteristic ways such that they may posit and support particular theories because of biases they are unaware that they possess. In particular, the idea that race is cultural may be difficult to comprehend or accept because white people are conditioned to see whiteness as the norm and other races as deviations from this norm [59, 2][10, 58][13, 1]. As such, white people have a different, limited experience of what it means to be racialized as compared to members of other racial groups. This does not mean that it is impossible for a white person to generate a true theory about race, but it does mean that additional barriers exist. Recognition of the fact that whiteness as a social position means that one’s perception is structured by a frame that aims to maintain white dominance is the best starting point for overcoming white sensibility. Reading and listening to accounts of nonwhite people with an attitude of epistemic humility is also essential to developing counterframes.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The theoretical connection between race and culture has a long history, spanning back to Du Bois' 1897 essay "The Conversation of Races" [36]. The idea that race has a cultural dimension is consistent with the idea that races represent "valuable forms of life to be celebrated rather than eradicated," as Jeffers writes, and with the idea that race could outlive racism [36, 412]. Political constructionists such as Haslanger see racial identities as valuable only in the short term as means of navigating racial discrimination and advocating for improved conditions for racially subordinated groups [23, 30]. Both political constructionists and cultural constructionists aim to end racial hierarchy and white supremacy, but cultural constructionists believe that eliminating the race concept entirely is unnecessary for social justice because we can conceive of eliminating racial hierarchy while preserving racial cultural differences. Further, cultural constructionism holds that preserving these cultural differences is a laudable goal and something we as a society should strive for. In order to avoid advocating for the elimination of cultural diversity along with race, political constructionists must find a way of explaining the cultural differences we observe between racial groups in other terms. Haslanger's attempt to do this with the term 'pan-ethnicities' was not successful, as I have argued. The failure to properly account for these cultural differences and for the cultural dimension of various racial issues in society (i.e., curriculum design in education) makes the political constructionist theory of race weaker than the cultural constructionist theory.

I have suggested that whiteness acts as a barrier to recognizing a cultural dimension of race because white people are conditioned to see whiteness as the human norm and to consider the white perspective to be both neutral and universal. Foucault's theory of 'dominant discourse' has been taken up by many theorists who discuss whiteness to explain how white interests remain in circulation and retain cultural currency. The deeply embedded nature of what Feagin calls 'the white racial frame'

and what Skitolsky refers to as ‘white sensibility’ makes it difficult to recognize how one’s perspective has been influenced by white interests such that unconscious investments in whiteness structure one’s thoughts. Additionally, according to standpoint epistemology, the unique positioning of white people at the top of the racial hierarchy means that their perspective is less reliable than that of members of subordinated racial groups due to a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Members of dominant social groups have a reason to conceal or obscure information that may call into question the legitimacy of their group’s status, while members of subordinated racial groups have an interest in disseminating this information.

Because Haslanger and Anderson are both white and have not offered convincing explanations for their claim that race is not cultural, I have suggested that white sensibility may be behind this denial. Due to political constructionism’s unwillingness to acknowledge the significance of racial cultures, cultural constructionism remains the stronger social constructionist account of race. This implies that preserving race after the elimination of racism is not only possible but preferable, as doing so means preserving racial cultures. Without a political hierarchy of races, race could be understood as a positive aspect of human social life and could be celebrated as a desirable form of human diversity.

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