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Michael Monahan

Marquette University, michael.monahan@marquette.edu

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The Conservation of Authenticity: Political Commitment and Racial Reality

Michael Monahan

*Department of Philosophy
Marquette University*

The last fifteen years or so have shown an increasing interest in issues of racial ontology within philosophical circles, especially in the United States. Questions regarding the real or “illusory” status of race as a category of being, the necessary and sufficient conditions for racial membership, and the kinds of racialized being possible in the absence of a biological grounding for race have all been treated with great sophistication and depth. In this essay, I focus on one particular approach to these questions, an approach I refer to as “social constructivist.” Speaking as broadly as possible, this approach denies that race is *essential*—that it is the result of some innate property independent of human convention—while at the same time asserting that race has a reality—that it brings with it an ontological *heft* that demands to be acknowledged and taken seriously. It is “real,” but nevertheless socially and historically contingent. Thus, the social constructivist view, according to this rather “thick” definition, would include not only Charles Mills’ approach, but also Lewis Gordon’s and Lucius Outlaw’s, among others. Social constructivism serves as a kind of middle ground between the naive acceptance of racial “essences,” and the denial of racial reality altogether.

Related to questions of racial ontology are issues of racial *authenticity*—the genuineness of one’s racial identity or membership. In the dominant racial discourses in the United States, and especially in the mainstream media, racial authenticity remains a powerful idea.¹ Accusations of *inauthenticity* within this context can be a powerful form of social and political attack. Very few people, regardless of their explicit (or implicit) understanding of racial ontology, care to be thought of as “sell outs,” “oreos,” “bananas,” “Uncle Toms,” or “wiggers.” Since one’s understanding of racial authenticity will be directly linked to one’s understanding of racial ontology, any shift in the latter will bring with it a corresponding shift in the former. This link has not been missed by those philosophers working on issues of racial ontology. Indeed, those who deny the existence of race altogether take

special care to stress the consequent meaninglessness of notions of racial authenticity. What is interesting about this position is the implicit presumption that racial authenticity is completely bereft of moral and/or political value. It is assumed that racial authenticity is worthless, and therefore the fact that a denial of race renders the concept meaningless is understood not only to present no cause for concern, but to be a positive boon of the position. On the other hand, those who endorse a constructivist understanding of race say surprisingly little about the possibility for or meaning of racial authenticity.

I argue here that there can be a meaningful understanding of racial authenticity within a social constructivist racial ontology. The emergent notion differs significantly from the received opinion (which is doubtless an improvement), but maintains a significant impact on our understanding of *how we live* our particular race(s). Contrary to the assumption of those who deny the existence of race, I also argue that far from being a harmful and morally bankrupt concept, racial authenticity has important positive moral and political value. In other words, racial authenticity is both possible and desirable within the context of a constructivist ontology.

Social constructivism, in the broad definition I wish to employ, falls between the extremes of racial essentialism and racial nihilism. By *essentialism*, I mean to refer primarily to the dominant popular view, in which there are innate, natural characteristics and behaviors that constitute racial membership. *Racial nihilism*, on the other hand, is the denial of any racial reality—the claim that race is at best an “illusion.”² Contrary to both of these positions, the social constructivist account of race holds that while there may be no innate, *essential* conditions for racial membership, there are nonetheless potent and real, though historical and contingent, social conditions that generate racial reality. Social ontologies that allow for categories of being which are real and potent yet nevertheless socially constructed and contingent are by no means uncommon. Margaret Gilbert and David Lewis offer examples of this social ontology within the analytic tradition, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of “series being” in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is analogous within the continental tradition.³ All of these provide the means for approaches to *racial* ontology that can be broadly understood as “social constructivist.” Within this understanding, race is contingent, in that it depends on particular social arrangements and institutions, but nevertheless objective, in that one’s racial membership is not simply up to the preferences of any given individual. While the debates concerning both the relative merits and particular features of these different ontological positions continues, I have set it aside in favor of a close examination of racial authenticity within the context of social constructivism.

Racial authenticity is typically understood to be the idea that individuals have some moral or political imperative to *behave* in conformation with some racial ideal or standard. This dominant view of authenticity is unquestionably essentialist. If there are racial essences, then racial authenticity demands that one behave in conformity with their particular racial essence. Racial inauthenticity, in this view, is the intentional or unintentional *failure* to behave in conformity with that racial essence. Thus, there are “real” blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, and so on, and then there are Uncle Toms, sell-outs, and race-traitors. The relative authenticity

of a given agent, within this view, amounts to nothing more than his or her ability to behave in a manner appropriate to her racial membership. Racial nihilism, on the other hand, rules out the possibility of racial authenticity at the same time that it denies the existence of race. If there is nothing it means to be "white," for example, then there can be no meaning to the notion of "authentic" whiteness. If one moves to the social constructivist view, however, racial authenticity becomes problematized in a number interesting ways.

The dominant essentialist approach assumes a kind of correspondence theory of authenticity—to be racially authentic is to behave in a manner that corresponds to one's racial reality. But the reality in question within a constructivist account is, at the end of the day, a fundamentally *political* one. The underlying *facts* of my racial membership are always political facts having to do with formal and informal practices and institutions governing race-marking, racial interaction, allocation of resources, and so on. This is just what it means for race to be socially constructed. The exact necessary and/or sufficient conditions for one's racial membership will vary from theory to theory, but regardless of one's particular view, there will always remain some baseline objective racial membership (or possibly a plurality of memberships) within the constructivist context that is constituted through one's social/political situatedness. My *whiteness*, since it cannot be accounted for in strictly biological terms, becomes instead a term describing my political situation vis-à-vis other agents—those who share my white designation as well as those who do not. This can be understood as the basic thrust of Du Bois' claim that "the black man is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia."⁴ My racial membership, in other words, is not something *in me*, but rather something in *my relationships* with other agents and the larger social context that we share. Given this approach to the "reality" of race, a great deal remains to be said about the possibility of a meaningful notion of racial authenticity, but it becomes immediately clear that the resulting account will differ markedly from the dominant view.

The "correspondence theory" of authenticity must therefore be immediately rejected. Inasmuch as a constructivist ontology denies racial essentialism, authenticity simply *cannot* be a matter of behaving in conformation with one's racial essence. It cannot be the case, in other words, that right or proper ways of behaving black, or white, or Asian exist, and that authenticity is the proper performance of those behaviors. In order to make sense of authenticity in the constructivist context, it must be remembered that to be authentic doesn't just mean to be genuine, but also to be sincere or trustworthy. There is, to be sure, a meaning of authenticity that is synonymous with a kind of metaphysical genuineness, but that in no way exhausts the possible meanings of *authentic*. There is also a kind of authenticity that has to do with emotional genuineness. Statements, or appeals, or promises, for example, can be "authentic," in this way, when they are offered sincerely (in *good faith*). If racial membership is constituted by one's position within the larger political practice of race-marking, racial identification, and racialized interaction, then racial authenticity may be thought of as a matter of understanding, recognizing, and *confronting* that position. Accordingly, one is racially authentic to the degree that one acknowledges, without over- or underemphasizing, the role that race plays

in one's own life and the lives of others. To be inauthentic, then, is not a matter of fooling others so much as fooling one's self. It is not a failure to *correspond* with the underlying facts so much as a failure to be *sincere* with oneself, and with others, regarding the underlying facts of racial reality. Racial inauthenticity is a kind of *evasion* of race as a *real*, though contingent and socially constructed, element of the human condition. It is not about *performing* one's race, but rather about politically (and, as we shall see, critically) *engaging* it.

Within this approach, there are two primary means by which a person may fail to be authentic—either by evading the *contingency* of race (the way in which it is constantly being *socially* affirmed and redefined), or by evading the objectivity of race (the way in which it is a given “fact,” which describes an important aspect of reality).⁵ The first of these, inauthenticity by means of a denial of the contingency of race, is the basic position of the racial essentialist. The essentialist posits some set of universal behaviors that correspond to a particular racial essence and demands that “authentic” individuals take up those behaviors. There is an understanding of “true” blackness, or Asian-ness, and so on, and any person who does not manifest this understanding is suspect in some way. But this fails to take account of the ways in which race is fundamentally context-dependent and subject to reinterpretation. In so doing, it provides the essentialist with ready-made racial identities with which she may conform, rather than struggling with the creation of her own identity. As Naomi Zack rightly points out, the embrace of a racially essentialist identity is a denial of *freedom*.⁶ It is in effect a kind of surrender to ready-made, externally imposed constructions of *self*. Zack's mistake lies in treating all accounts of racial reality as if they were essentialist ones. That is, she offers a very compelling critique of the essentialist ontology, but conflates essentialism with all forms of racial realism. All of this means that for one who embraces an essentialist ontology, there is no need to take stock of one's own role in those *social* phenomena that constitute race, for he or she does not recognize the existence of such phenomena (or at best understands them as *reactions* to the reality of racial essence). This is clearly an inauthentic position within a constructivist account. Thus, one may be the epitome of racial authenticity in the dominant sense—one may be the “blackest of the black,” for example—yet be racially *inauthentic* according to the view I am describing here.

This means that the behaviors of a particular individual as such are not in themselves indicative of authenticity or inauthenticity. What must be understood is the attitude with which they are undertaken—the agent's own understanding and interpretation of her specific behaviors and the way in which they relate to the larger social whole. If an agent behaves in accordance with the dominant understanding of *blackness*, this does not alone indicate authenticity or inauthenticity, regardless of the racial membership of the agent in question. If the agent is undertaking such behaviors *because* he understands them as black, and wishes to project this blackness, then the behaviors are inauthentic, since the agent is reducing racial membership to individual behaviors (in an essentialist way), rather than treating them as socially constituted. Again, this will be true regardless of the actual racial membership of the agent.

This variety of inauthenticity is ultimately a kind of oversimplification, in that it treats the highly complicated and sophisticated social construction of race as if it were a naturally *given* property of individual agents regardless of context. However, it is also in itself a political maneuver, since it is a means whereby one is able to avoid any responsibility for or confrontation with one's own role in the maintenance of race-marking and racial hierarchy. If racial identity and racialized behavior is simply an innate characteristic of human reality (if it is an essence), then individuals play no role in the maintenance and legitimization of racial reality. From a constructivist perspective, of course, this is simply false. Race is a reality, but this reality is a historical and contingent one. It requires the continued participation and support of individual agents. This support may at times be indirect and even unintentional, but if there were no such support, there would be no such thing as race. Racial authenticity, therefore, entails a confrontation with our own role, as individuals and as parts of larger social bodies, in maintaining the reality of race. I will return to this idea later in the essay.

At the other extreme of inauthenticity is the agent who fails or simply refuses to acknowledge the objectivity or reality of race at all. This person accepts the contingency and context-dependency of race, but draws conclusions from this acceptance to which he is not entitled. This view holds that since race is a product of particular social arrangements and practices, it is a mistake to take its consequences seriously in any systematic way. The racial nihilist can be understood as an example of this view. Within a constructivist perspective, this is a kind of inauthenticity in that the agent is refusing to recognize the influence that race plays in her life and the lives of others—she is ignoring the *reality* of race. I cannot be “white,” this reasoning goes, because ultimately there is no such thing as “white.” Nor can I be a racist, because I don’t *see* races. But according to the constructivist, this is all self-deception. The social constitution of race is sufficient to establish the reality and even objectivity (within a specific context) of race, and it is a kind of inauthenticity to deny this reality. One can *be* “black” without there having to be some context-independent black essence, and that membership has a real impact on one’s understanding of self and one’s interaction with other racialized selves.

The picture of authenticity derived from the constructivist understanding of race is, as mentioned earlier, undeniably different from the traditional view. The racially authentic individual is not the one who acts in the way that is “appropriate” to her racial essence, but rather the one who is, on the one hand, aware of and sensitive to her racial membership and the role that membership plays in her life, and on the other hand, aware of and sensitive to the way in which her actions contribute to the political context which generates and maintains racial categories in the first place. There is thus an individual and a political component to racial authenticity. Of course, close scrutiny of either of these moments reveals that they quickly merge, so to speak, into each other. The social aspects of racial ontology mean that my individual obligations are only meaningful from a political perspective, and the political obligations are themselves predicated upon an acknowledgment of the important roles of individual agents. The authentic individual, therefore, must be antiessentialist, for essentialism is a denial of the way in which race is a human

(contingent) product. At the same time, the racially authentic individual must not ignore the all-too-real role of race both on the social and the individual level (to the extent that one can understand these levels to be distinct at all). Traditionally, racial authenticity is a matter of understanding one's *place* within the racial hierarchy, but with this shift in understanding, we can see that racial authenticity is better understood as an understanding of one's *role* within (and in relation to) the racial hierarchy. Rather than seeing racial identity as static and *determined* from the outside, we see that one's race is not *purely* external, but also a matter of how one responds to and acts out those "objective" elements of race, which in turn can influence and alter those elements over time. Race is not simply given, as the essentialists would have it, nor is it entirely up to me, as the nihilists would suggest (to the extent, of course, that they take race to exist at all). Racial authenticity means coming to grips with these two interrelated facts about racial reality.⁷

It would perhaps be helpful at this juncture to point to an example. In the summer of 2000, the *New York Times* ran a series of articles under the rubric "How Race Is Lived in America." One piece from that series, written by N. R. Kleinfield, is particularly relevant. Kleinfield discusses a white subject, Billy Wimsatt, as racially inauthentic, but in a very essentialist sense. According to Kleinfield, Billy left his mostly white private school for a mostly black public school. He began breakdancing, took up graffiti artistry, and of course, there was hip-hop. "Hip-hop," Kleinfield tells us, "had cloaked [Billy] in a new identity."⁸ Shedding his whiteness as much as he believed himself able, Billy gathered up as many signifiers of blackness as he could find, from music (hip-hop), to speech (we later hear his girlfriend complaining that he "talks black" to his black friends), to fashion (fat laces and baggy clothes). In effect, he began to consciously (and conspicuously) *live* blackness, as *he* understood it, to the fullest extent possible, in an explicit attempt to flee his whiteness. In other words, what is wrong with Billy, Kleinfield suggests, is that he is white but behaving as if he were black. Clearly this account is inadequate outside of an essentialist framework, but what can be said about Billy's authenticity, or lack thereof, from the perspective of a social constructivist racial ontology?

Assuming that Kleinfield's portrayal of Billy is accurate,⁹ a strong case may be made for his inauthenticity within the context of a constructivist account of race, paying special attention to the political contours of the racial landscape in the United States. The problem with Billy lies not in his failure to "act out" his whiteness, but in his motivation for and understanding of his performance of "blackness." Kleinfield describes Billy as dissatisfied and disaffected with his whiteness, and attempting to escape that disaffection by "cloaking" himself in blackness. Ironically, in attempting to transcend his race, Billy ultimately winds up living it to the hilt. He takes on the trappings of *blackness*, but it is a vision of blackness from the outside (from "whiteness"). It is the stilted, two-dimensional picture of black *essence* conjured daily in music, film, television, and of course music videos—the majority of which are, with rare exception, firmly in the control of white producers, writers, and directors. Implicit in Billy's claim that his behavior is "black" is the belief that all *genuine* (that is to say, authentic) black people must also behave this way. People like Angela Davis and Derrick Bell, or Thomas Sowell and Con-

doleeza Rice, who do not overtly conform to this vision of "blackness," are effectively rendered invisible from this perspective. They fall outside of the purview of the authentic black person. This in effect establishes a monolithic conception of black essence that denies the real diversity of human experience.

What is more, since this myth of the "real black" is ultimately marketed, supported, and controlled primarily (though certainly not exclusively, and sometimes indirectly) by white people, one has good reason to be suspicious of the motives underlying its continued success within the larger context of (white) America. Consider the following statement by Kleinfeld: "And as hip-hop . . . blossomed into the radiant center of youth culture, Billy Wimsatt and lots of white kids found in it a way to flee their own orderly world by discovering a sexier, more provocative one" (NYT). There is a clear contrast here between the "orderly" white world and the "sexy" and "provocative" black one. In this way hip-hop, and its corresponding conception of blackness, becomes a means by which whites are able to act out those behaviors that are taken to be incongruous with *real* "whiteness." Here Kleinfeld's image of Billy as "cloaked" in a new identity is very significant. The cloak of blackness grants him license to express himself in ways that he feels would be difficult if he took up his "white" identity—blackness grants him, by virtue of its very *essence*, a veneer of aggression, danger, and of course an amplified sexuality. But inasmuch as it remains a mere disguise (cloak) for him, he is able to act out these "sexy" and "provocative" behaviors without needing to abdicate his underlying whiteness—he is able to act "black," without having to *be* "black." This is of course a far safer position. When the appeal of blackness fades, he can always retire his image and return to the "orderly" fold of whiteness. In the end, this sort of identification with "blackness" becomes the contemporary equivalent of black-face minstrelsy. By adopting this cloak of blackness, Billy is able to take up a persona that grants him instant status as dangerous, provocative, rebellious, and sexy. But since this persona is steeped in essentialism, and can be cast off with ease, Billy can eventually recover (re-cover?) his essential whiteness, and all of the benefits it grants.

Billy's appropriation of blackness may thus be understood as self-deceptive. He claims to be seeking solidarity with black people and rejecting white privilege, but by embracing this monolithic and highly commercialized image of "the real black," he is in fact avoiding any meaningful engagement with the underlying realities of race. He need never confront his own whiteness and his role in perpetuating that whiteness, because he is smothered in a veneer of "blackness" which is indirectly, if at all, connected with the lived experiences of black people.¹⁰

Thus, if Kleinfeld's portrayal of Billy is accurate, it may be said that he is racially inauthentic in the first sense—he embraces racial essentialism. That is, his inauthenticity lies not in his behaviors per se, but in the fact that his performance of those behaviors indicates an essentialist understanding and use of race. It lies in his embrace of an understanding of whiteness and blackness that is divorced from the political context that gives these concepts power and meaning. He is failing to acknowledge that his whiteness is not simply a matter of either his skin color or his behavior, but rather is a matter of his political situation. In performing this essentialist ideal of blackness, he is in effect lending legitimacy to the political

and cultural institutions from which racial categories spring. He is not challenging either racism or race itself, but rather implicitly affirming them. The two-dimensional, cardboard cutout views of both whiteness and blackness are taken as given—as accurate reflections of “authentic” whites and blacks. This naive acceptance of racial essence and the corresponding failure to confront the political construction of race constitutes Billy’s inauthenticity.

But this takes for granted the account provided by the *Times*. What if, on the other hand, Kleinfeld’s understanding of racial politics were more sophisticated, and his treatment of his subjects more sympathetic? Suppose Billy is more than just a repressed white kid pretending to be black so that he can “walk on the wild side.” Maybe he has a genuine concern with issues of social justice, and especially racial justice. Maybe his adoption of a hip-hop aesthetic is a demonstration of solidarity, rather than a form of cultural exploitation. Or maybe he simply has a genuine identification with that aesthetic. Similar accounts could be provided for most of his other previously suspect behavior. His patronage of black business, as another example, might be an attempt to support the economic growth and development of black communities, rather than a further effort to *be* black. In short, what if Billy’s behavior is in fact an effort to *challenge* racial essentialism and racial hierarchy, rather than an embrace of it? There are surely incidents described by Kleinfeld that cannot be overlooked. His acceptance of a higher fee for speaking than his black colleague, and his admitted feelings of fear or hostility toward black people on some occasions are surely inconsistent, at best, with his purported concern with racial justice. But at the same time, Billy acknowledges that these are failings, and claims to be working to address them. If he is sincere, it may be said that he is thereby critically engaging his personal relationship to race and racism. He is working to make himself more aware of the real role that he, as an individual *white person*, plays in maintaining and legitimizing dominant notions of race and racialized subjectivity, and taking action to bring about a change in the political situation that generates this reality.

If this admittedly more charitable interpretation is correct (again, I have no definite position one way or the other), then Billy Wimsatt may be understood as in fact racially *authentic*, regardless of Kleinfeld’s own interpretation of his actions. According to this account, Billy is not trying to *be* black, but is instead acting in a manner that calls into question the very idea of racial essence by bringing to the foreground the political construction of racial membership. He is fully aware of both the contingency of race (that it exists solely as a kind of social artifact) and the power that it has over our lives (that it is “real” and potent). He knows that he is “really” white, but that his whiteness is a matter of his political situation (one of relative privilege) and not some innate essence. Thus, he isn’t acting “black,” but rather demonstrating, *because* of his whiteness, that such behavior is only ever conventionally (and, in a deeper sense, erroneously) identified as “black.” Rather than implicitly reinforcing essentialist notions of racial performance, as he was in the less charitable interpretation, Billy may now be understood as *challenging* such notions.

What is more, he understands that the political situation that generates the reality of race is one that is ultimately harmful to humanity in general, and to non-

whites in particular, and that he is thereby, as a beneficiary of this situation, implicated in systematic oppression. The constructivist account of race brings to the fore the extent to which race is a contingent, historical product of particular social and political institutions and interactions, which correspond to the antiessentialist moment of racial authenticity. At the same time, these institutions and interactions are real and powerful, and this reality is contingent upon (though, I would argue, not reducible to) the participation of individual agents within such social/political contexts. All of which adds up to what for many is a rather unsettling fact—all of us who find ourselves within these contexts are, whether we wish it or not, making our own contributions to their continued functioning, whether positive or negative, great or insignificant. In other words, we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, implicated in and responsible for racial reality. This in turn means that one's racial authenticity has an important political component—namely that one must act in accordance with one's larger *commitments* to antiracism and ultimately furthers the goals of racial justice (provided they have such commitments at all, a possibility I discuss further below). To fail to do so is to evade the *reality* of race—it is to take an inauthentic position in relation to one's own role in the continued functioning of race. In other words, Billy's racial authenticity lies, in part, in the fact that he understands the reality of race as a kind of *demand* for political engagement. He cannot escape the effect that race has on his life, nor can he escape his own role in its perpetuation, and any attempt to ignore this becomes an implicit affirmation of it.

An example of the second kind of racial inauthenticity—the failure to acknowledge the reality of race—can be found in some champions of “color-blindness.” This is the person who claims that she cannot “see” races, but only *human beings* in a raceless, universal sense. Just as the inauthentic Billy refused to acknowledge the contingency of race, this individual fails to acknowledge the *reality* of race. She is in effect avoiding an engagement with the role that race plays in her life and the lives of others. She is blinding herself to the important political force that race exerts in a social context which is inescapably *raced*. The problem here is not that she is failing to *behave* in accordance with her “true” race, but rather that she is failing to acknowledge her *political* position in relation to the institutions and practices of race-marking and race normalization. Race, as a powerful social construct, plays an important role in the lives of all agents within a racialized context. Those designated as white benefit from that whiteness (relative to nonwhites, at least) regardless of whether they choose such benefits or are even aware of them. Nonwhites are likewise negatively impacted by their racial designation whether they grasp the extent and shape of that impact or not.¹¹ To claim that race is irrelevant or illusory, even if this is meant as an appeal to some ideally raceless future, may thus be understood as an effort to shield oneself from the *present* (all too present) reality of race. It is at best premature, and at worst simple self-delusion.

Inauthenticity of this sort is particularly important on the intersubjective level. The appeal to color-blindness within a context where there are multiple agents of different racial categories elides the various ways in which race will have a disparate impact on the individual agents. The often subtle, diffuse, yet potent forces

that inform our normative practices along racial lines cannot be challenged, or even adequately grasped, without a sensitivity to race as a real (though contingent) category of being. The determination of who counts as “threatening,” “suspicious,” or “professional,” for example, is a highly racialized practice, and to ignore this reality, regardless of the nobility of one’s motives, is to effectively legitimize it.

This view of authenticity does not mean that the authentic white person must be in a perpetual state of guilt, nor that the authentic nonwhite person must be constantly reciting a litany of victimization, as is often suggested by advocates of racial nihilism. Nor, as I stated earlier in this essay, does it necessarily mean that color-blindness as an ideal is without merit. Racial authenticity, within the social constructivist context, demands a recognition of the present *political and social* reality of race. This means not only being aware of the way race effects one’s own life and the lives of others, but also the way in which one’s own actions relate to that larger political reality. In other words, the racially authentic agent may be committed to a color-blind ideal, but she should be sensitive to the degree to which her actions serve to perpetuate, legitimize, challenge, or critique those larger institutions and practices that generate racial membership in the first place. This means that the idea of just seeing human beings, instead of races, may be a perfectly laudable aspiration or end goal, but to behave as if this goal had already been reached is in fact a very good way to ensure that it remains mere aspiration.

It is sometimes argued by advocates of racial nihilism that an acceptance of the reality of race amounts to an implicit denial of freedom and agency. Race is inherently antifreedom, the argument goes, in that it is an artifact of colonialist exploitation and domination. Consequently, to treat it as if it were real is to accept this domination, and to deny its reality is to affirm one’s freedom and power as an agent. From the constructivist perspective, however, the denial of racial reality is itself a kind of crippling of agency. Constructivism asserts not only that racial reality is contingent, but also that each of us, as social/political *agents*, contributes to that reality. To deny the reality of race, therefore, is to deny our own role in the larger social/political institutions and practices that situate and condition us as individuals—it is a denial of our own agency in relation to the social world. To claim that race is real need not take the form of a simple acceptance of the dominant view of race (which is doubtless saturated with oppressive qualities), as the nihilist argument seems to assume. One may instead acknowledge the reality of race, and strive to make one’s own role in that reality a *critical* one. That is to say, one may use one’s agency to challenge the present reality of race, working either to undermine its existence entirely (which is different from taking a colorblind position in the present), or to preserve the reality, but without the oppressive qualities (there is a great deal to be said regarding the possibility and relative virtues of both of these strategies, but this is not the venue for that discussion). Thus, taking racial reality seriously, and stressing one’s own role in that reality, becomes an important *assertion* of freedom and agency—it makes clear one’s own power as an individual contributor to the larger social whole, and reveals one’s freedom to challenge the existing political landscape.

Ultimately racial authenticity has to do not only with an individual’s *interpre-*

tation of her behaviors and attitudes, but also with her political commitments and actions in relation to those commitments. If that understanding holds that her behaviors are somehow *determined* by race, or that they are completely *independent* of race, then there is a failure to be racially authentic. At the same time, authenticity demands an acknowledgment of one's own continuing role in the maintenance of racial reality, which in turn takes the form of an invitation to assert one's freedom and agency by challenging oppressive manifestations of that reality. The racially authentic person takes seriously the role that race, as a socially constructed, contingent *reality*, plays in his life, and at the same time acknowledges and works to shape the impact his own individual agency has on that reality. The realities of race must therefore *inform*, but never *determine*, his behavior and attitudes toward himself, toward others, and toward the larger social context in which he finds himself situated.

The conditions for authenticity, therefore, are not purely epistemic, though the epistemic aspect is crucial. In other words, it is not sufficient simply to *understand* or *acknowledge* one's racial situation. To stop at mere understanding of the role a *political* phenomenon plays in one's life is to either ignore or accept one's own participation in that phenomenon. If one professes a commitment to human freedom, then racial authenticity will demand a constant *confrontation* with the social processes and institutions that condition and sustain racial reality. I, as an unavoidably political agent, and regardless of my particular racial designation, participate in those practices and institutions that generate and maintain the social reality of race, and its oppressive consequences. For anyone claiming to be a proponent of human freedom, authenticity must take the form of a political *commitment* to racial justice, however one may envision this latter concept. The epistemic moment of authenticity not only reveals the processes that generate racial categories and racial oppression, but also *implicates* one in those processes. To passively accept this implication is either an affirmation of racial oppression, in which case it is a de facto commitment, or it is an evasive stance—an abdication of responsibility for one's own role in the social reality of race and a denial of one's own agency.

Of course, all of this is accurate only under conditions of professed commitment to human freedom. However, what if someone fulfills the epistemic requirements of racial authenticity, but has no pretense toward promoting liberty or justice? Suppose, for example, that someone considers themselves an antiessentialist racist—they recognize and acknowledge the contingency of race and fully embrace not only its reality as a social construct, but also its oppressive effects. This person would therefore have no need to engage in political critique of racial reality, for they explicitly affirm it. Can such a person be rightly understood as racially authentic? And if so, what impact does this have on my claim that racial authenticity has ethical value as a concept?

In order to deal with these important questions, it must first be stressed that the agent envisioned in the example must be understood as explicitly affirming racial oppression. Usually such affirmations are couched in essentialist terms, but it is at least possible to have an agent who holds an authentically constructivist view of race, and yet approves of racial oppression. If the necessary epistemic condition of

authenticity has truly been met, and the agent explicitly affirms racial hierarchy and racial oppression, then that agent may rightly be understood as racially authentic in the absence of a political commitment to racial justice. It should be stressed again that this is a rare individual indeed, since such racism is often steeped in essentialism. The possibility of a racially authentic individual who affirms racial oppression should not be seen as a threat to the moral value of racial authenticity, however. The epistemic moment of authenticity, even for the agent in this example, forces one to make explicit one's political commitments (in this case to racial *injustice*). That is, one cannot fall back on appeals to essentialism, ignorance, or apathy. The racial authenticity of the agent in this example is not one devoid of political commitment, nor does authenticity allow the agent to remain ignorant of that commitment. Racial authenticity forces this individual to recognize and explicitly affirm his commitment to racial oppression, and this movement from a hidden, implicit commitment to an open, explicit one is in itself of moral value. It is in this necessary confrontation with one's political commitments that much of the ethical value of authenticity is to be found.

Ultimately, racial authenticity from the perspective of a constructivist racial ontology can be best understood as a commitment to *critical* confrontation with racial reality. It is critical in two ways: First, in the sense that the authentic agent must critically approach the contingency of race and the ways in which that reality shapes the human condition. Second, in that the authentic agent must turn a critical eye toward her own role in the continuing existence of that reality. One may find it helpful to think of this as a kind of Socratic undertaking, in the sense that it requires an attitude of questioning in relation to those circumstances that we often find most threatening, and that cause us the most discomfort. Racial authenticity means a constant critical reflection on one's relationship to the political mechanisms of race-marking and racialized intersubjectivity. The racially authentic agent is constantly pushing herself not only to better understand her role in this larger context, but to confront that context itself by reapproaching and reassessing her own actions in relation to that context, and by making questions of racial authenticity more visible to others. Racial authenticity is thus at every turn a demand for political commitment. It is an effort to be true to *oneself*—an interrogation of how social reality conditions who we are as individual agents, and our own particular contributions to that reality.

I have already pointed toward some of the aspects of authenticity that render it *desirable* as a concept. To be sure, given its uses and abuses in the past, there is good reason to be suspicious of any attempt to conserve it. Nevertheless, the idea of authenticity that has emerged from this discussion, I argue, is desirable precisely because of its emphasis of critique and political commitment. The standard view of racial authenticity is (rightly) understood by racial nihilists to be undesirable precisely because it demands an uncritical acceptance and performance of racial essences. One may indeed be tempted to dismiss any effort to rescue racial authenticity based on a worry that it will necessarily retain these stifling and conformist tendencies. But the view of racial authenticity as political commitment avoids this admittedly serious problem. The only performative obligation it places on indi-

vidual agents is that of confrontation with racial reality. Rather than encouraging blind acceptance of the racial status quo, it demands a critical (and self-critical) *engagement* with racialized phenomena. Even if one ultimately affirms that status quo, this affirmation must, if one is to maintain authenticity, be made explicit and recognized as an active political commitment (to injustice, in this case). Thus racial authenticity within a constructivist context is not only possible, but also desirable, because it entails an *ethos* of self-critical political engagement with the realities of racial injustice and oppression.

In formal and informal institutional contexts, and also in the way we interact with others on a personal level, our race is *lived* as a constantly evolving, fungible, and contingent social reality. Racial authenticity, understood as political commitment, stands as a demand that one not hide from this reality either by immersing oneself in fixed notions of racial *essence* or by affecting a self-imposed (and self-deceptive) blindness to race. One is racially authentic to the extent that one is never *comfortable* with one's race. I cannot simply accept or deny my racial designation, for I play a role, no matter how small, in bringing that designation about, and my participation in this process, willing or not, stands as a challenge to take up a political commitment in relation to race in keeping with my larger moral and political commitments to justice and human dignity. To fail in this is to deceive no one but myself.

Notes

1. One need only look at recent television shows (*Whoopi*) and films (*Bringing Down the House* and *Malibu's Most Wanted*) for examples.
2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Illusions of Race," in *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 275–90.
3. Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Blackwell, 2002), and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (New York: Verso, 1991).
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), 153.
5. These two strategies correspond more or less to masochism and sadism within a Sartrean schema.
6. Naomi Zack, "Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 99–109.
7. Something should be said at this point about the relation between the notion of racial authenticity being elaborated here and the concept of mixed race. This is a fruitful topic worthy of careful exploration, but the limits of the present project prohibit going into detail. I can minimally say the following. If we understand mixed race itself to be a category, then there are ways to relate to one's mixed race status authentically just as those who have only one racial membership have ways to relate to their status authentically. If we do not understand mixed race to be a discreet category of its own, then the demands of authenticity placed on a mixed race agent will have as much fluidity and flexibility

as his racial designation. Just as different aspects of one's racial background may move to the foreground depending on the particular context, so too will different moments of authenticity manifest themselves according to those shifts in context. Rather than posing a problem for the theory of authenticity I am advocating, the concept of mixed race offers an avenue to explore and elaborate some of the *merits* of this view of authenticity. I will save that particular endeavor for a later work.

8. *New York Times*, July 6, 2000. Henceforth cited in the text as *NYT*.
9. I wish to point out that I take this to be a dubious assumption. Though I have personally never met Mr. Wimsatt, I have received conflicting accounts about him from my own acquaintances who have. For the purpose of this essay, the accuracy of these accounts of Mr. Wimsatt is irrelevant. I wish only to stress that I have no particular reason to either accept or reject Mr. Kleinfeld's account of Billy's character.
10. It should be noted that the main thrust of the preceding critique can be found in much of the literature endorsing racial nihilism. This is a matter of the shared rejection of racial essentialism found in both the social constructivist and nihilist ontologies. What I would like to stress is that this same avenue of critique is consistent with the constructivist account as well—one need not be a racial nihilist to find fault with and reject racial essentialism and its corresponding notion of authenticity.
11. Naturally, there are numerous factors that will impact the position of any given individual. Aside from race, there are benefits and disadvantages associated with gender, class, sexuality, age, and so on.